HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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11 April 2016
Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—
Migration (Africa to the EU)

1. Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle migration from countries in Africa to the EU.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): We are working closely with European and African partners to address illegal migration to the European Union. November’s Valletta summit created a coherent framework and road map for action. As current chair of the Khartoum process, the Government take a leading role in driving forward projects to combat people smuggling and trafficking from Africa, focusing on capacity building, training and communications.

Kelly Tolhurst: Just before Easter weekend, 52 suspected migrants, many of north African descent, were held after two lorries were stopped at the Dartford crossing and in Canterbury. Given that Kent is on the front line of these desperate attempts, can my right hon. Friend outline what additional support can be provided to our region’s police and border guards to prevent these clandestine actions?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I recognise the role that Kent plays in these matters, being on the front line, as she says. There is a dedicated unit in Kent and specialist debriefers to support the police to gather further intelligence to deal with this vile trade, but importantly, of course, we want to stop people from arriving in the UK clandestinely. That is where the work we are doing, particularly with the French Government, on improved security at the juxtaposed controls in Calais and elsewhere on the continent is important, as is the work of the National Crime Agency, Immigration Enforcement and, in particular, the border crime command in dealing with partners across Europe and in Africa to break the criminal gangs and to stop trafficking and people smuggling taking place.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The deal with Turkey was brokered after intense negotiations, which seem to be lacking in respect of north Africa. I hear what the Home Secretary says about the Khartoum process, but the numbers coming from north Africa to Italy have increased by 80% over the last year, and only last night President Obama said that Libya was the worst mistake of his presidency. Does the Home Secretary agree that one way to stem this is to enable international boats to enter Libyan coastal waters to intercept those criminal gangs and stop them duping innocent people into putting their lives at risk?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need to look carefully at what is happening and at what happened last summer for people coming through Libya into Italy, primarily through Lampedusa, but also, now that the spring and summer months are upon us and the weather is better, at what could happen again. It is not just about boats entering Libyan waters—the United Nations has discussed the action that can be taken in relation to these matters. It is also about working upstream. It is about working with the source countries to ensure
that people have less incentive to be moving away—that is where our development aid work is particularly important—and also about working with transit countries to break the model of the smugglers and people traffickers, so that people see that making this dangerous journey does not enable them to settle in Europe.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Home Secretary may remember that at our last Question Time when we discussed this, I asked a specific question about whether we were searching all lorries, and she told me I had misunderstood the situation. I am not sure I have, because we now read that only half the lorries are being searched. Many people are stowing away in lorries; they are arriving here, and they are never sent back. It is making a mockery of our immigration rules, so will she give a direct answer to a direct question: will all lorries now be searched at Calais?

Mrs May: I apologise to my hon. Friend if there was any misunderstanding in the answer that I gave last time round. We do search lorries at the juxtaposed controls. The point of having the juxtaposed controls is that it enables us to do more, but it is a question of using various techniques to try to ensure that we can identify clandestines who may be aboard lorries. One of the challenges we face is that, because of the extra security measures we have taken, particularly in Calais and Coquelles, it is obviously much harder for people to get on lorries at those places. We are now having to work with the French Government—it is not just about searching lorries; it is about working upstream as well—to try to identify places further afield where people may be trying to get on the lorries, so that we can catch them at that stage, rather than relying on searches or techniques that are used at the border.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware that organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children are urging the British Government to do much more to help vulnerable refugees and especially unaccompanied children. She has mentioned the people traffickers and stopping the organised gangs, but there is a very real risk of child sexual exploitation with these vulnerable children travelling across to Europe, so what more are she and the Government doing to make sure this problem is tackled?

Mrs May: We are very conscious of the issues that could arise concerning children, particularly children who are being trafficked and exploited in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests. That is why the expertise of the independent anti-slavery commissioner, Kevin Hyland, is being used. He has already had discussions with people in Calais and he will visit hotspots elsewhere in Europe in the coming weeks to ensure that he can help to identify these issues and share his expertise so that others can identify those who might be exploited or trafficked.

Refugees

2. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What plans she has to relocate or offer asylum in the UK to refugees in mainland Europe.

5. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What plans she has to relocate or offer asylum in the UK to refugees in mainland Europe.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): The Government are opposed to EU relocation proposals, which do nothing to address the underlying issues the EU is facing and simply move the problem around Europe. Our focus should be on securing the external border, returning those with no right to be in the EU and addressing the underlying issues in source and transit countries, so that people no longer feel that they have no choice but to travel to Europe.

Neil Gray: At the weekend, it was reported that the Children’s Commissioner had written to the French Government urging action to speed up asylum claims to help lone children in the Calais refugee camps to reach relatives in the UK. These children must be absolutely petrified and feeling completely isolated and vulnerable—a situation that we would not countenance for our own loved ones. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with her French counterparts in order to stress the critical need to get these poor children safely reunited with their families in the UK?

Richard Harrington: The Home Secretary and her colleagues have had regular discussions with their French counterparts precisely on this matter in order to speed up the process. Indeed, I can report that there has been a significant improvement over the last few weeks in the time it takes to process these applications.

Chris Law: Charity workers at Calais have deep concerns about the 129 missing children, following the dismantling of parts of the jungle. Does the Home Secretary agree that the authorities must do more, and will she make representations to the French authorities urgently to seek these children out and, in particular, to determine with haste which of these children are eligible to come to Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Richard Harrington: I am pleased to report again that there are regular discussions between the Home Secretary and her French colleagues on this matter. The Department for International Development recently announced the provision of a further £10 million-worth of special funding precisely to help unaccompanied children in Europe. Details about how the money will be allocated will be announced shortly.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, far from lagging behind the European Union on this issue, the UK is actually doing far more than any other country in Europe through its massive support for the camps and the refugees in the region, while also resettling the most vulnerable refugees from the camps to the UK?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The Government believe that relocating children around Europe is not the answer. Under our scheme to relocate the most vulnerable people from Syria and the countries around it, 51% of the people being brought over here are children. I hope that Members
on both sides of the House would accept that this is a well measured and well carried-out scheme, which has led to significant improvement in many children’s lives.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Nevertheless, thousands of children are still waiting to be resettled. We have been having this debate for weeks and months. I am ashamed when I listen to debates in the European Parliament about this issue and hear concern and compassion—something that seems to be singularly lacking in this place.

Richard Harrington: The right hon. Lady will be aware, I am sure, that under our resettlement scheme many children have been resettled—more than 50% of those coming here are children, as I have said. I remind her and other Members that the policy of UNHCR is to keep children in the areas around Syria, and it has been very successful in identifying children with the greater families to make sure that they have a good chance of a better life in the future.

Richard Harrington: The right hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are currently looking at reports from the UNHCR on precisely the issue of unaccompanied children, and I hope he will agree that lots of efforts are under way to ensure that that happens.

Mr Speaker: I call Callum McCaig.

23. [904397] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Government expand the current definition of the family unit to include de facto family members and simplify the system so that vulnerable children can come here much more quickly than is currently the case?

Richard Harrington: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are currently looking at reports from the UNHCR on precisely the issue of unaccompanied children, and I hope he will agree that lots of efforts are under way to ensure that that happens.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) is chuntering, from a sedentary position, “It is up to the French.” The hon. Gentleman is welcome to his opinion, but his opinion is not enhanced by his suddenly winking at me as though in self-justification. The hon. and learned Lady is a distinguished advocate, and she must be heard. Even if she were not a distinguished advocate, she would still be heard.

Joanna Cherry: This is not a laughing matter, and it is not “up to the French” when those children have connections with the United Kingdom. That is my point.

In the Grande-Synthe camp, I met a 16-year-old girl who was working hard for exams in a pop-up school in a tent. She had made the journey to northern France on her own. Her father is in the United Kingdom, but owing to the absence of guidance from the French authorities and the failure of our Government to act, she was stuck in limbo and uncertain about her future. Children like her are very vulnerable in the camps. It is time for the Home Secretary to show leadership. Will she give us a commitment that her Department will ensure that those with a legal right to join their families in the United Kingdom are granted that right as a matter of urgency?

Richard Harrington: I shall try to avoid repeating what the chunterers were saying earlier, because the hon. and learned Lady has made a serious point. However, I must reiterate that those children are in France and it is our Government’s policy to ensure that the convention works properly. With that in mind, we have seconded officials not just to France, including Calais, but to other parts of Europe—Athens, Rome and Germany—to ensure that what she has asked for happens and that the process is speeded up significantly.

Joanna Cherry: I am afraid that the Minister’s answer is not good enough. There was no evidence of any Home Office presence in any of those camps, and what is happening to children in the camps is utterly disgraceful. In the Grande-Synthe camp—

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is up to the French.

Joanna Cherry: If I am allowed to speak, I shall try to continue.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) is chuntering, from a sedentary position, “It is up to the French.” The hon. Gentleman is welcome to his opinion, but his opinion is not enhanced by his suddenly winking at me as though in self-justification. The hon. and learned Lady is a distinguished advocate, and she must be heard. Even if she were not a distinguished advocate, she would still be heard.

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Richard Harrington: I shall try to avoid repeating what the chunterers were saying earlier, because the hon. and learned Lady has made a serious point. However, I must reiterate that those children are in France and are predominantly the responsibility of the French Government, with whom we are working very closely by placing officials with them.

The children in question have a clear path. They should claim asylum under the Dublin convention, which they are perfectly allowed to do. It is then the responsibility of the Home Office—the British Government—to ensure that their asylum claims are processed speedily and effectively. If they do have the relationships with families in the United Kingdom that the hon. and learned Lady has been told that they have, I can assure her that the process is very much speedier and more efficient than it used to be.
Cybercrime

3. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the level of cybercrime.

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): While overall crime has fallen by more than a quarter since 2010, it is also changing, as the hon. Gentleman knows. An accurate national picture is critical to informing our response to cybercrime, which is why the Office for National Statistics has now published, for the first time, initial estimates of the number of cybercrimes committed, based on a preliminary field trial. The ONS estimates that there are 2.5 million incidents of computer-misuse crime per year.

Nic Dakin: The Office for National Statistics estimates that there were some 5.1 million incidents involving such crimes last year, which adds about 40% to the baseline figure for crime in the UK. Will the Minister accept that crime appears to be going up, rather than down?

Mr Hayes: I think crime is changing. The hon. Gentleman is right that this is about skills, which is why we established the National Cyber Crime Unit in the National Crime Agency, and about resources, which is why we have put £1.9 billion into this area of work. However, the issue is also about recognising that many such crimes can be prevented through straightforward good practice by citizens.

I think—I know you do too, Mr Speaker—that questions should always have a purpose beyond challenging the Government and should actually deliver positive results for Members. Following the hon. Gentleman's question, I will write to him and to the whole House with details of how he can advise businesses in Scunthorpe and his constituents on how to stop these kinds of cybercrimes.

Mr Speaker: I await that with eager anticipation.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): The west of England is leading the way in tackling cybercrime following the £1.9 billion investment announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last year. Given the atrocities in Brussels last month, will the Minister update the House on how he is working with our allies to tackle cybercrime?

Mr Hayes: What is critical in tackling cybercrime is the partnership between the private and public sectors, which is why the Home Secretary launched a joint taskforce to look at how allies, comrades, friends and others can work together to tackle this issue. It is also important to emphasise that GCHQ states that 80% of such crimes can be prevented by the straightforward good practice that I identified earlier, which is precisely why I take the matter so seriously and why public information is at the heart of what we do.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): For five years, the Government’s alibi has been, “We cut police, but we cut crime.” The Police Minister has told Sky that citizens are more likely to have a crime perpetrated against them online on their computers while they are asleep than in the street. With cybercrime statistics set nearly to double the national crime rate, will the Minister finally admit that, far from the alibi of the past five years being the case, crime is not falling? Crime is changing and the truth is that crime is rising.

Mr Hayes: It is always unfortunate when a shadow Minister prepares a question in advance and does not listen to what has been said immediately beforehand. I said in my first answer that crime is changing. It is falling, but it is also changing and because it is changing we need the additional skills, resources and approaches that I described to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin).

Given that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) made a bit of a hash of his question, I want to help him as much as I can: I refer him to the two sets of guidance that we have just published, which I will happily furnish him with following questions.

Fire and Rescue Service (Funding)

4. Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the effect of changes in the level of funding on the work of the fire and rescue service.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Fire and rescue authorities have delivered significant savings since 2010, and fire deaths and injuries are at near historical lows. Authorities can still work smarter and reduce costs. Between 2009-10 and 2014-15, single-purpose fire authorities' non-ring-fenced reserves rose by 136% to £561 million. Those resources should be targeted at achieving long-term efficiencies.

Jonathan Reynolds: Last year, an on-duty firefighter tragically took his own life at Stalybridge fire station citing a number of workplace pressures, which is part of a pattern of abnormally high firefighter suicides in Greater Manchester over the past few years. As fire and rescue budgets have been severely reduced, the job of a firefighter is clearly now even more demanding. What can the Home Secretary say to reassure me that the Home Office takes seriously the pressures that firefighters face and is working to ensure that firefighters do their job in a safe and well-supported environment?

Mrs May: First, may I send my condolences to the family of that individual firefighter in the hon. Gentleman's constituency? The suicide of any firefighter is a great tragedy, and of course we recognise the pressures and the difficult job that firefighters do. However, the number of fires they are having to be called to has been reducing—as I said, the number of fire deaths and injuries is now at near historical lows—and so the job of being a firefighter has been changing over the years. For example, firefighters are now doing more fire prevention work, which is very valuable work for communities. As we look forward to greater collaboration between firefighters and the police service, we can look to an even better service being provided for communities.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As I am currently on attachment with the Northamptonshire fire and rescue service, as part of the fire service parliamentary scheme, I have had the privilege over the past few months of seeing the increasingly close
way Northamptonshire’s police and fire and rescue services are working together to deliver more effective emergency services, at a far lower cost. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to congratulate both Northamptonshire police and Northamptonshire fire and rescue service on the innovative and enthusiastic way in which they are facing these challenges?

Mrs May: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in doing exactly that, as we see in Northamptonshire a very good example of the benefits collaboration can bring. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims was in Northampton last week to open a joint fire station and police station, which shows the benefits of collaboration, not only in saving money, but in providing a better service to the public.

18. [904393] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Fire services for the six largest cities outside London will have had their budgets cut by half between 2010 and 2020, and thousands of firefighters will have lost their jobs and many fire stations will have closed. Firefighters do a superb job, as we know, but can the Home Secretary say honestly that community safety is not being compromised and that no lives will be lost as a direct result of the cuts?

Mrs May: As I indicated, we have seen a significant reduction in the number of incidents; from 2004-05 to 2014-15, the number of incidents fire and rescue services went to declined by 42%. As I said in response to the question from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), although firefighters do still find themselves being called to fires, a lot of their work is also about other services to the community. They are doing an excellent job but we want to see how that can be done even better and how they can work better in collaboration with the police, as we have seen in places such as Northamptonshire.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Cuts to the fire and rescue service have already cost us 6,700 front-line firefighters and cuts to the police have already cost us 12,000 front-line police officers. As the Home Secretary knows, reserves can be spent only once and there are significant, real cuts to come. With the public less well aware of the extent of those cuts, can the Home Secretary say how the Home Secretary’s comments support those who are maintaining these services?

Mrs May: Yet again, the Labour party goes down the road of thinking that the only thing that matters is the number of police officers or firefighters available. The hon. Lady talks about full-time firefighters, but that is not just the number of people we have, but how we are spending the money and how we are deploying our resources. That is where the efficiencies we have seen and the collaboration we see will result in not just savings, but a better service to the public.

Asylum (Unaccompanied Children)

6. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What support her Department is providing for local authority provision for unaccompanied children seeking asylum. [904380]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Home Office provides financial support to local authorities by meeting reasonable additional costs for those local authorities taking on responsibility for the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The Immigration Bill will underpin arrangements to secure more equitable dispersal between local authorities.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer, but given the number of cases where people over the age of 18 are pretending to be children, what can local authorities do to ensure that their limited resources are being best directed to very vulnerable children?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I also thank those in Northamptonshire for the work they are doing to deal with the pressures they have experienced and for the way in which they have approached this through the discussions and round-table meetings that have taken place. Clear age-assessment tests are undertaken to ensure that support is provided to those who require it and not to those who do not. Let me add that I will be writing to all local authorities this week with an update on progress on the national transfer scheme to aid the more equitable dispersal.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can the Minister say how much money from the overseas budget has been used to help local authorities to resettle asylum seekers?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman is asking not about unaccompanied asylum-seeking children but a broader question about the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. We have set out the different funding mechanisms available to those who are resettled and some of that is fundable through overseas development aid. That is how we are ensuring that appropriate support and welcome are given to the people arriving.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I think the Minister would agree that we can perform our duty as a country only if all areas take up their responsibility, so it is good to hear his answer. May I ask him about education support? Vulnerable children should not lose their chance of a future, so how will local authorities with experience of helping asylum-seeker children support those with less experience of educating those children?

James Brokenshire: We have had discussions with the Department for Education and the Local Government Association about the voluntary dispersal arrangements we want to see, underpinned by the Immigration Bill currently in the other place. We are continuing the dialogue on precisely how elements of that are implemented and on how we can learn from the expertise of authorities that have had greater involvement in these matters.

24. [904399] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): During the recess, Scottish National party MPs visited the Calais and Dunkirk refugee camps and
witnessed unaccompanied children being forced to share bed space with unrelated adults. That is clearly a troubling and serious matter. Does the Minister think the Government are doing enough to support those children? Surely it is time to step up to the plate and do more.

James Brokenshire: We are working closely with the French Government. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees said in answer to a previous question, we have had a secondee working in the Ministry of the Interior in France to speed up the process in relation to children identified as having links to family here in the UK. Equally, the French Government are putting greater support in through a charity to raise awareness and identify children better to give them the help they require.

Mr Speaker: It is good to see the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) back in his place.

Recruitment (Overseas Workers)

7. Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues on the effect of changes to immigration rules on recruitment of overseas workers.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Home Office works closely, at ministerial and official levels, with interested Departments on all significant changes to migration policy. The reforms we have announced have been collectively agreed. May I too welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place?

Mike Gapes: May I thank all colleagues who sent me messages during my involuntary absence? I'm back.

Will the Minister explain how it is that his Department is proposing a £35,000 salary threshold, which will have a detrimental impact in many areas where we have shortage occupations? Can he explain why the initial priority list of jobs did not include NHS nurses? I was treated by nurses from all over the world, including some from European Union countries, and I know that in London there will be a major recruitment problem. Already, we cannot provide enough nurses for our NHS and, if we take away recruitment opportunities from NHS trusts in London and elsewhere, we will have major shortages.

James Brokenshire: It is great to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place, and clearly fighting fit.

In essence, the £35,000 threshold applies to gaining settlement, allowing people to extend their time in the UK. We took considered advice from the Migration Advisory Committee at the time it was set, back in 2011, and employers have had five years to prepare for the change. Occupations on the shortage occupation list, including nursing and other shortage skills, are excluded from the requirement. We have carefully considered the independent advice from the MAC on that important matter.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Has the Home Office assessed the impact of the changes on the Scottish economy? Is it not the case that the new arbitrary target, combined with the abolition of the post-study work visa, prevents Scotland from attracting and retaining the brightest and best the world has to offer? Why have this Government prioritised narrow political interests over measures to grow our economy?

James Brokenshire: I am afraid that the hon. Lady has got it completely wrong. The Government have made it clear that the UK remains open for business. I would gently say to her that we take advice from the expert Migration Advisory Committee, which has advised against different salary thresholds in UK countries and regions. Our thresholds are based on UK-wide data, and salaries in Scotland are slightly higher than the UK average. Advancing the point that she makes might lead to higher salary thresholds in Scotland.

Police and Crime Commissioners

8. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing levels of crime.

9. Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing levels of crime.

11. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing levels of crime.

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

Mark Menzies: In Fylde, concerns have been raised about the police and crime commissioner spreading resources away from rural areas. What assurances can the Home Secretary give me that police and crime commissioners will be accountable to the Government for failure to spend adequately in rural areas?

Mrs May: One of the changes that has been brought about as a result of the introduction of police and crime commissioners is a greater focus in some areas on rural crime. The national rural crime network, for example, has been set up, and I pay tribute to Julia Mulligan, the PCC in North Yorkshire, for being a leading light in developing that. It is an issue that I discussed with Chris Salmon, the PCC in Dyfed-Powys, and farming representatives when I was in mid-Wales a few weeks ago. We can now ensure, in some police areas, that PCCs put the right focus on rural crime, but to do so the right PCC needs to be elected.

Gareth Johnson: Police and crime commissioners provide crucial accountability in the criminal justice system. They ensure that the public have a direct input in how their local streets are policed. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is now time to widen the scope of the work of PCCs to see where else in the criminal justice system they can make a contribution?
Mrs May: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and he is absolutely right. We used the title, “police and crime commissioners”, when we set up the office, precisely because we thought that they could have a wider role. I am pleased to tell him that the Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary and I have commissioned work to look at precisely the issue that he has raised. What else can PCCs do in the criminal justice system, and what further responsibilities can they take on in the interests of providing better services to the local community?

Graham Evans: In Cheshire, crime is down, and John Dwyer, the police and crime commissioner, has managed to get 2,000 police officers on the beat. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need a Conservative PCC in Cheshire to keep crime down and keep our communities safe?

Mrs May: I commend the work that has been done by John Dwyer as the first PCC for Cheshire. He has done an excellent job in getting, as my hon. Friend said, more police officers and in managing the budget well. As my hon. Friend said, crime is down, and a Conservative PCC in Cheshire after the 5 May election will continue to do an excellent job and provide an excellent service for local people.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary aware that, in areas such as mine in north Wales, the police and crime commissioner has had to put up the precept at more than the rate of inflation to compensate for Tory Government cuts? Is it a fair use of taxpayers' resources to compensate for cuts imposed by central Government?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well that we are protecting police budgets when the precept is taken into account, which is in sharp contrast to proposals from his Front-Bench team, who want to cut police budgets by 10%.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary might know that we are very pleased with our police and crime commissioner in West Yorkshire, but has she picked up from PCCs the problems with intelligence gathering in particular communities that are impenetrable owing to their language and culture? Police have real difficulty penetrating organised gangs.

Mrs May: There are obviously challenges in relation to dealing with certain communities with organised gangs where, as the hon. Gentleman says, there may well be language difficulties. Police and crime commissioners are finding many innovative ways around that. Looking at their recruitment policies and at how volunteers and special constables in particular can be used to ensure that the language skills are available is a very good idea, which has been adopted by some PCCs around the country.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On Friday, the South Yorkshire PCC announced the loss of 850 police staff because of Government cuts. Also last week, the National Crime Agency’s application to the Home Office for support for Rotherham’s 1,400 victims of child abuse was rejected. How are we meant to bring down child sexual exploitation when the Government are cutting police resources?

Mrs May: I indicated earlier that overall the Government are protecting police budgets when the precept is taken into account. We have also made money available to the national policing lead precisely in relation to the issue of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, and ensured that the National Crime Agency has the resources it needs to be able to do that job. The hon. Lady has an excellent record in dealing with this issue. Her constituency has faced particularly challenging times as a result of child sexual exploitation, and I can assure her that I and other Ministers involved take the issue very seriously indeed. That is why we have taken steps such as setting up the Goddard inquiry, and why we have made money available to the national policing lead in order to better co-ordinate the work that is done in this area.

Unaccompanied Child Migrants

10. Fiona Maclaggart (Slough) (Lab): What recent assessment has she made of the risks of trafficking or exploitation to unaccompanied child migrants in France who intend to seek asylum in the UK; and if she will make a statement.

Karen Bradley: The French and UK Governments have put in place a programme, run by the non-governmental organisation France terre d’asile, to identify and help potential victims of trafficking in the camps around Calais. As has been said in previous answers, unaccompanied refugee children in France should claim asylum there. That is the best way to ensure that they receive the protection and support they need. It also provides a legal and safe route to the UK for those with close family in the UK.

Fiona Maclaggart: But as we know from the earlier questions to which the Minister referred, there are 129 missing children, who are obviously those most at risk of such exploitation. I had a very welcome letter recently from her colleague, the Immigration Minister, about the situation of children in the camps. He said that these cases are being given priority so that the children can “receive the protection and support they need and are reunited as soon as possible with any close family members in the UK.” How many have been reunited?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Lady knows that we are not giving a running commentary on numbers, but I can assure her that the work is taking place and that any unaccompanied asylum-seeking child in France should claim asylum there with the support of the NGOs, and if they have family in the UK, we will reunite them.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): In view of the clear link between trafficking and forced prostitution, and following the French Government’s change last week to their prostitution laws, criminalising sex buyers but not the vulnerable women involved, and similar changes in Sweden and Norway years ago which reduced trafficking substantially, do Ministers agree that that should be considered in this country?
Karen Bradley: I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in this issue and we have discussed the point outside the Chamber. I am aware also of the Home Affairs Committee’s current inquiry into the matter, and I look forward to seeing the evidence.

Online Crime

12. Stephen McPartland (Stevanage) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle (a) criminal gangs and (b) paedophiles operating online. [904387]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): This Government have committed to spending £1.9 billion on cyber-security over the next five years, including for tackling cybercrime. Our response to online child sexual exploitation includes law enforcement agencies taking action against online offenders, finding and safeguarding victims, and working with the internet industry to remove illegal images.

Stephen McPartland: We await the new child sexual exploitation response unit, which will be established any day now. Can the Minister assure the House that the new unit will result in a step change, not just bringing abusers to justice, but working with parents, communities and schools to provide children with the skills, understanding and confidence to keep themselves safe online?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the response unit, which will deliver significant benefits by assisting local areas experiencing particular issues and/or high volumes of child sexual exploitation cases, by offering a range of support, including advice from expert practitioners who have first-hand experience of tackling child sexual exploitation.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): Going missing can be an indicator that a child or young person is being exploited by organised gangs to traffic drugs across county lines. What more can be done to ensure that police forces work together and share information on missing children in order to combat the criminal exploitation of young people?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady, who has incredible expertise in this area, is absolutely right; we need police forces to take this seriously and recognise that a missing child is a child who is being exploited while they are missing. There is therefore a fantastic opportunity for intelligence gathering and safeguarding those children to stop them going missing in future.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): One of the proposed measures for tackling criminal gangs and paedophiles online is the Investigatory Powers Bill, which will start its line-by-line scrutiny tomorrow. One of the main concerns that we have outlined about the Bill as currently drafted is the proposed test that judges would undertake when considering applications for warrants to use the most intrusive powers, specifically the reference to judicial review. Lord Judge, the former Lord Chief Justice and current Chief Surveillance Commissioner, told the Bill Committee in oral evidence just before Easter that judicial review was “not a sufficient test” to apply and that the Government should look at this again. Given that someone of his seniority who is held in such respect feels that the test is not good enough, will the Government reconsider the Bill’s wording in relation to judicial review?

Karen Bradley: The hon. and learned Gentleman has great expertise in this area, but I am not sure that I necessarily agree with his comments. There is a double lock, and it is about necessity and proportionality, but he is right to make the point that the Bill is incredibly important when it comes to protecting children, as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children pointed out in oral evidence to the Committee considering the Policing and Crime Bill.

Violence against Women and Girls

13. James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to tackle violence against women and girls. [904388]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Our new violence against women and girls strategy, published last month, sets out an ambitious programme of reform, backed by increased funding of £80 million, to make tackling these crimes everybody’s business, to ensure victims get the support they need and to bring more perpetrators to justice. We have also introduced a new domestic abuse offence to capture coercive control, and we have consulted on new measures to protect victims of stalking.

James Berry: Last month, True Honour, an honour-based violence charity led by my constituent Sarbjit Athwal, and of which I am proud to be a trustee, was recognised with charity status. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on her Department’s progress in tackling honour-based violence?

Mrs May: First, I commend True Honour, the charity in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and Sarbjit Athwal for the work they do in this area. It is an incredibly important issue. Of course, the Government have already significantly strengthened the law on forced marriage and female genital mutilation. We have issued a range of materials to support professionals, including new statutory multi-agency FGM guidance, and our forced marriage and FGM units are carrying out ongoing outreach programmes. It is very important that we help people to identify where young people may be subject either to forced marriage or to female genital mutilation and to take appropriate action.

Serious and Violent Crimes

15. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the level of the most serious and violent crimes. [904390]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Violent crime is 25% lower than it was in June 2010, according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. Our new modern crime prevention strategy includes actions to tackle a range of crimes, including violent and knife crime.

Karen Bradley: The hon. and learned Gentleman has great expertise in this area, but I am not sure that I necessarily agree with his comments. There is a double lock, and it is about necessity and proportionality, but he is right to make the point that the Bill is incredibly important when it comes to protecting children, as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children pointed out in oral evidence to the Committee considering the Policing and Crime Bill.
Alex Cunningham: Noureden Mallak-Soodmand is a convicted violent Iranian criminal who was transferred to my constituency upon release from prison because the paperwork needed to deport him could not be sorted out. He is now back in prison after brandishing a cleaver and threatening to decapitate people in Stockton. Can the Minister tell me when I will get full answers to my parliamentary questions on which authorities in Stockton, if any, were told about this dangerous man in our area?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will know that I cannot comment on the specifics of the case. If he will forgive me, I will write to him.

Topical Questions

T1. [904340] Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): In 25 days’ time, the public will go to the polling booths to vote for elected representatives in local authorities, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and for the mayoralty of this great city. We have a great tradition of democratic accountability in this country, and I am proud that on 5 May that principle will be extended to policing. For the first time since we introduced them in 2012, the public will be able to hold their local police and crime commissioner to account for their record in office. It is easy to forget what went before PCCs: the unelected, unaccountable and invisible police authorities, which no one knew existed. Today, a majority of the public know about their PCCs, and PCCs have been associated with greater clarity of leadership and heightened accountability by the Home Affairs Committee. Even the Labour party, which until recently opposed PCCs, and the Liberal Democrats, who did everything they could to sabotage the first elections, support the role and have nominated candidates in May’s elections. PCCs have worked hard over the past three and a half years to keep their communities safe, so I hope that the House will join me in congratulating the first PCCs on their successes and encouraging the public to hold them to account in the most powerful way possible on 5 May: at the ballot box.

Mr Reed: Levels of violent crime and domestic abuse remain unacceptably high in Croydon, and the borough was of course hit hard in the 2011 riots, so it is very worrying that it is about to lose a third of its remaining neighbourhood police bases, on top of 83% of its police community support officers—reductions that are much higher than the average in London. Will the Home Secretary therefore meet me to discuss real public concerns that these cuts will damage the fight against crime in Croydon?

Mrs May: To repeat what I said earlier, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government have protected police budgets over the comprehensive spending review period, when precept is taken into account, which is in sharp difference to what the Labour Front Bench suggested—cutting them by 10%.

T2. [904341] William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware that I am participating in the police parliamentary scheme, seeing at first hand her excellent work of Greater Manchester police. What is being done to ensure that there are adequate and safe levels of community policing in my constituency?

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): I congratulate all hon. Members who take part in these parliamentary schemes. I would also recommend the fire scheme and the armed forces scheme. With the Chancellor’s help, we have managed to protect budgets, subject to the precept. For anyone interested in neighbourhood policing, I would say that those who have a Conservative police and crime commissioner and a Conservative mayor have more chance of having more officers on the beat.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): In the aftermath of the attacks in Brussels and Paris, the security of the UK border is uppermost in people’s minds. However, we are a fortnight into the new financial year, and the Home Secretary is still refusing to answer questions on the budget for Border Force. A whistleblower says staff were told three weeks ago to expect front-line cuts of 6%, although, since media reports of that came out, we hear that the Home Office has been back-pedalling. I hope the Home Secretary is backing down, because our borders cannot face cuts on this scale. I therefore invite her to clear the issue up today: what is the 2016-17 budget for Border Force, and is it up or down on last year?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman has written to me on this subject, and I have responded to him. The Home Office’s budget was published under the comprehensive spending review as normal last November. As with the rest of the Government, individual allocations within Departments are not routinely published. However, what matters—he is right—is that we have a secure border, and that is why we have a transformation plan with Border Force and why we have changed Border Force over the last few years from the dysfunctional United Kingdom Border Agency we inherited from the last Labour Government.

Andy Burnham: It will not have escaped the notice of the House or anybody watching that the Home Secretary has not answered the question. We know that financial transparency and this Government do not go well together, as we are about to hear, but what are the Government trying to hide? I hope the delay in publishing the budget is due to the fact that she is listening to us and backing down on those 6% cuts.

Let me turn to another area where the Home Secretary is moving under Labour pressure: police bail for terror suspects. I have called on the Government for months to close a loophole that has allowed individuals on bail, such as Siddhartha Dhar, to leave the country for Syria. I welcome the fact that the Government last week indicated that they are prepared to move on the issue, but I am worried that they are not going far enough. Does the Home Secretary agree that passports and travel documents should be surrendered as a condition of release from police custody? Will she work with Labour to amend the Policing and Crime Bill to that end?
Mrs May: We have been looking at this issue for some time, and we have decided that we will bring forward an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill. However, it is important that the police continue to have a degree of operational judgment about the conditions they wish to put in place in relation to bail. The type of bail the right hon. Gentleman is talking about is pre-charge bail—a situation where somebody has not yet been charged with an offence. Decisions will be taken, as they were in the case of Siddhartha Dhar, by individual police officers as to the conditions that should be applied, and that should continue to be the case.

Rehman Chishti: [904343] How many of the approximately 800 British citizens who have joined militant groups in Syria have returned, and how many of them are back in communities?

Mrs May: Around half of those who have travelled to Syria have returned to the United Kingdom. Obviously, the sort of action it might be necessary to take against individuals is considered on a case-by-case basis. That includes considering the sorts of activities in which they may have been involved in Syria and whether any intervention is necessary.

Mr John Hayes: The motives of terrorists, paedophiles and people traffickers may differ, but their means are the same, and they take advantage of the internet. The Bill will provide the police and security services with powers that are necessary to keep us safe. Powerful new measures, steely determination and an iron will mark all that we do.

Patrick Grady: [904344] Anyone from Malawi who wants to visit the UK has to apply online with a credit card. Given how few people in Malawi have access to electricity, let alone the internet or banking...
facilities, what steps is the Home Office taking to make sure that people who have a legitimate request can apply?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has raised that issue with me previously, and I am happy to continue to discuss it with him and with the all-party group. Clearly, agency and other mechanisms are available, but we will continue to ensure that we have a high-quality visa service.

T9. [904349] Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): It is right for the police to be given more powers in relation to the use of Tasers, stop-and-search and the Investigatory Powers Bill, but with greater powers should surely come greater responsibility. Therefore, will the Home Secretary confirm to the House that proper safeguards will remain in place to ensure that the police continue to have the support of the general public?

Mrs May: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance, in relation to the Investigatory Powers Bill and, crucially, the double lock authorisation that will be available for the use of the most intrusive powers; in relation to the work that we have done in introducing the “best use of stop-and-search” scheme, to ensure that stop-and-search is properly used and properly targeted; and in relation to the work that we have done with Chief Constable David Shaw to identify rather better how Tasers and other restraint are being used. The police need those sensitive powers. What people want to know is that they are being used properly, and the Government are ensuring that that is the case.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Over the past 12 months, a further 39 uniformed police officers and PCSOs have been lost from Enfield’s streets, while violent crime, including assault and possession of a dangerous weapon, has increased by 13%. Ten days ago, there was an attempted drive-by shooting in my constituency. That situation in a London suburb is totally unacceptable and very frightening for residents. There can be no doubt that the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing is putting public safety at risk. What does the Minister intend to do about this situation?

Mike Penning: What we intend to do, with the help of the Chancellor, is to make sure that the Metropolitan police has got the funding that it asked for, not to cut funding by 10%, as the Labour party requested. Neighbourhood policing is an operational matter for the commissioner and the Mayor, but I repeat what I said earlier: looking at the statistics, we can see that if we want more police on the beat, we should vote Conservative.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): As part of special branch, Hampshire marine unit provides vital crime prevention along our coastal borders and within the marine environment of the Solent and the Isle of Wight, through operations such as Project Kraken. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that vital crime prevention service is protected under current reforms?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend raises an important point and describes the variety of tasks that our police forces carry out, and the variety of skills and operational capabilities that they need. I am very conscious of the marine capability requirements in Hampshire. It is, of course, an operational matter for the police to determine how they spend their budget and what they use it for. Crucially, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has ensured that we can protect police budgets, when precept is taken into account, over the next four years.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Two weeks ago, when four of my colleagues and I were in Calais, the French authorities tear-gassed the Calais camp simply because a protest was going on outside it. Does the Home Secretary approve of such measures, and if not—if she agrees with me that measures should be proportionate to the situation and that refugees must be treated humanely—will she contact her French counterpart and express the concerns of this Parliament?

James Brokenshire: I was in Calais last week having discussions with the French authorities about those issues, and the very clear message was that those who are there should claim asylum. That is the best and most effective way for them to get the help that they need, and that is the clear message that needs to come from this House.
Panama Papers

3.34 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Panama papers.

Dealing with my own circumstances first, yesterday I published all the information in my tax returns not just for the last year, but for the last six years. I have also given additional information about money inherited and given to me by my family, so people can see the sources of income I have: my salary, the benefit in kind of living in No. 10 Downing Street, the support my wife and I have received as Leader of the Conservative party, the renting out of our home and the interest on the savings that I have. Since 2010, I have not owned any shares or any investments.

The publication of a Prime Minister’s tax information in this way is unprecedented, but I think it is the right thing to do. But let me be clear: I am not suggesting that this should apply to all MPs. The Chancellor has today published information on his tax return, in a similar way to the shadow Chancellor and the First Minister for Scotland. This begs the question of how far the publication of tax information should go. I think there is a strong case for the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, and for the Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor, because they are people who are or who wish to be responsible for the nation’s finances. As for MPs, we already have robust rules on Members’ interests and their declaration, and I believe that is the model we should follow.

We should think carefully before abandoning completely all taxpayer confidentiality in this House, as some have suggested. If this were to come in for MPs, people would also ask for a similar approach for those who ask us questions, those who run large public services or lead local government, or indeed those who edit news programmes or newspapers. I think this would be a very big step for our country. It certainly should not take place without a long and thoughtful debate, and it is not the approach that I would recommend.

Let me deal specifically with the shares my wife and I held in an investment fund or unit trust called Blairmore Holdings, set up by my late father. The fund was registered with the UK’s Inland Revenue from the beginning. It was properly audited, and an annual return was submitted to the Inland Revenue every year. Its share price was listed in the Financial Times. It was not a family trust; it was a commercial investment fund for any investor to buy units in. UK investors paid all the same taxes as with any other share, including income tax on the dividends every year.

There have been some deeply hurtful and profoundly untrue allegations made against my father, and if the House will let me, I want to put the record straight. This investment fund was set up overseas in the first place because it was going to be trading predominantly in dollar securities, so like very many other commercial investment funds, it made sense to be set up inside one of the main centres of dollar trading.

There are thousands of these investment funds and many millions of people in Britain own shares, many of whom hold them through investment funds or unit trusts. Such funds, including those listed outside the UK, are included in the pension funds of local government, most of Britain’s largest companies and, indeed, even some trade unions. Even a quick look shows that the BBC, the Mirror Group, Guardian Newspapers and—to pick one council entirely at random—Islington all have these sorts of overseas investments. To give one further example, Trade Union Fund Managers Ltd, based in Congress House, has a portfolio of over £50 million of investment in the trade union unit trust, with 3% of its net assets based in Jersey. This is not to criticise what it does; it is to make the point that this an entirely standard practice, and it is not to avoid tax.

One of the country’s leading tax lawyers, Graham Aaronson, QC, has stated unequivocally that this was “a perfectly normal type of collective investment fund”.

This is the man who led the expert study group that developed the general anti-abuse rule—so much debated and demanded in this House—which Parliament finally enacted in 2013. He also chaired the 1997 examination of the 1997 examination of tax avoidance by the Tax Law Review Committee. He has said that it would be “quite wrong to describe the establishment of such funds as ‘tax avoidance’” and, further, that “it would be utterly ridiculous to suggest that establishing or investing in such funds would involve abusive tax avoidance”.

That is why getting rid of unit trusts and other such investment funds that are listed overseas has not been part of any Labour policy review, any Conservative party policy review or any sensible proposals for addressing tax evasion or aggressive tax avoidance.

Surely, it is said, investors in these funds benefit from their being set up in jurisdictions with low or no taxes. Again, this is a misunderstanding. Unit trusts do not exist to make profit for themselves; they exist to make a profit for the holders of the units. Those holders pay tax, and if they are UK citizens, they pay full UK taxes.

It is right to tighten the law and change the culture around investment to further outlaw tax evasion and discourage aggressive tax avoidance, but as we do so, we should differentiate between schemes designed to artificially reduce tax and those that are encouraging investment. This is a Government—and this should be a country—who believe in aspiration and wealth creation. We should defend the right of every British citizen to make money lawfully. Aspiration and wealth creation are not somehow dirty words. They are the key engines of growth and prosperity in our country and we must always support those who want to own shares and make investments to support their families.

Some people have asked, “If this trust was legitimate, why did you sell your shares in January 2010?” I sold all the shares in my portfolio that year because I did not want any issues about conflicts of interest—I did not want anyone to be able to suggest that, as Prime Minister, I had any other agendas or vested interests. Selling all my shares was the simplest and clearest way that I could achieve that.

There are strict rules in this House for the registration of shareholdings. I have followed them in full. The Labour party has said it will refer me to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I have already given her the relevant information, and if there is more she believes I should say, I am very happy to say it.
They have already agreed to exchange taxpayer financial information overseas territories that function as financial centres. With it and to investigate wrongdoing.

We need to go further, however, and today I can tell the House that we have now agreed that they will provide UK law enforcement and tax agencies with full access to information on the beneficial ownership of companies. We have finalised arrangements with all of them except for Anguilla and Guernsey, both of which we believe will follow in the coming days and months. For the first time, UK police and law enforcement agencies will be able to see exactly who really owns and controls every company incorporated in those territories: the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, the Isle of Man, Jersey—the lot. That is the result of a sustained campaign, building on the progress that we made at the G8, and I welcome the commitment of the Governments of those territories to work with us and implement those arrangements.

The House should note that that will place our overseas territories and Crown dependencies well ahead of many other similar jurisdictions, and also—crucially—ahead of many of our major international partners, including some states in the United States of America. Next month we will seek to go further still, using our anti-corruption summit to encourage consensus not just on exchanging information, but on publishing such information and putting it into the public domain, as we are doing in the UK. We want everyone with a stake in fighting corruption—from law enforcement, to civil society and the media—to be able to use those data and help us to root out and deter wrongdoing.

Next, we will take another major step forward in dealing with those who facilitate corruption. Under current legislation it is difficult to prosecute a company that assists with tax evasion, but we are going to change that. We will legislate this year for a new criminal offence to apply to corporations that fail to prevent tax evasion. We will be going beyond the offence to apply to corporations that fail to prevent tax evasion, but we are going to change that. That will place our overseas territories and Crown dependencies well ahead of many other similar jurisdictions, and also—crucially—ahead of many of our major international partners, including some states in the United States of America. Next month we will seek to go further still, using our anti-corruption summit to encourage consensus not just on exchanging information, but on publishing such information and putting it into the public domain, as we are doing in the UK. We want everyone with a stake in fighting corruption—from law enforcement, to civil society and the media—to be able to use those data and help us to root out and deter wrongdoing.

Let me turn to the Panama papers and the actions that this Government are taking to deal with tax evasion, aggressive tax avoidance and international corruption more broadly. When we came into office, there were foreign investors not paying capital gains tax when selling their UK homes, private equity managers paying a lower rate of tax than the people who cleaned their offices, and rich homebuyers getting away without paying stamp duty because houses were enveloped within companies. We have put an end to all those things. In the last Parliament alone we made an unprecedented 40 tax changes to close loopholes, raising £12 billion. In this Parliament we will legislate for more than 25 further measures, forecast to raise £16 billion by 2021. No British Government, Labour or Conservative, have ever taken so much robust action in this area.

Through my chairmanship of the G8 at the summit at Lough Erne in 2013, I put tax, trade and transparency on the global agenda, and sought agreement on a global standard for the automatic exchange of information over who pays taxes and where. Many said it would never happen, but today 129 jurisdictions have committed to implementing the international standard for exchange of tax information on request, and over 95 jurisdictions have committed to implementing the new global common reporting standard on tax transparency. Under that new standard, we will receive information on accounts of UK taxpayers in all those jurisdictions. In June this year, Britain will become the first country in the G20 to have a public register of beneficial ownership, so everyone can see who really owns and controls each company.

This Government are also consulting on requiring foreign companies that own property or bid on public contracts to provide their beneficial ownership information, and we are happy to offer technical support and assistance to any of the devolved Administrations also considering such measures.

As the revelations in the Panama papers have made clear, we need to go even further. So we are taking three additional measures, to make it harder for people to hide the proceeds of corruption offshore, to make sure that those who smooth the way can no longer get away with it and to investigate wrongdoing.

First, let me deal with our Crown dependencies and overseas territories that function as financial centres. They have already agreed to exchange taxpayer financial account information automatically, and will begin doing so from this September. That never happened before I became Prime Minister and got them round the Cabinet table and said, “This must happen.” We need to go further, however, and today I can tell the House that we have now agreed that they will provide UK law enforcement and tax agencies with full access to information on the beneficial ownership of companies. We have finalised arrangements with all of them except for Anguilla and Guernsey, both of which we believe will follow in the coming days and months. For the first time, UK police and law enforcement agencies will be able to see exactly who really owns and controls every company incorporated in those territories: the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, the Isle of Man, Jersey—the lot. That is the result of a sustained campaign, building on the progress that we made at the G8, and I welcome the commitment of the Governments of those territories to work with us and implement those arrangements.

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Next, we will take another major step forward in dealing with those who facilitate corruption. Under current legislation it is difficult to prosecute a company that assists with tax evasion, but we are going to change that. We will legislate this year for a new criminal offence to apply to corporations that fail to prevent tax evasion. Finally, we are providing initial new funding of up to £10 million for a new cross-agency taskforce to swiftly analyse all the information that has been made available from Panama, and to take rapid action. That taskforce will include analysts, compliance specialists, and investigators from across HMRC, the National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office, and the Financial Conduct Authority.

This Government will continue to lead the international agenda to crack down on tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. That battle is important and must be combined with the approach that we take in this country—low tax rates, but taxes that people and businesses pay. That is how we will tackle these issues and build a strong economy that can fund the public services we need. That strong economy, creating jobs and rewarding aspiration is the true focus of this Government—something that would never be safe under the Labour party—and I commend this statement to the House.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement—it is absolutely a masterclass in the art of distraction. I am sure that he will join me in welcoming the outstanding journalism that went into exposing the scandal of destructive global tax avoidance that was revealed by
the Panama papers. Those papers have driven home what many people have increasingly felt: that there is now one rule for the super-rich, and another for the rest. I am honestly not sure that the Prime Minister fully appreciates the anger that is out there over this injustice. How can it be right that street cleaners, teaching assistants and nurses work and pay their taxes, yet some at the top think that the rules simply do not apply to them?

What has been revealed in the past week goes far beyond what the Prime Minister has called his “private matters”, and today he needs to answer six questions to the House, and—perhaps equally importantly—to the public as a whole. First, why did he choose not to declare his offshore tax haven investment in the House of Commons Register of Members’ Financial Interests, given that there is a requirement to “provide information of any pecuniary interest” that might reasonably be thought to influence a Member’s actions? The Prime Minister said that he thinks he mishandled the events of the past week. Does he now realise how he mishandled his own non-declaration six years ago, when he decided not to register an offshore tax haven investment from which he has personally benefited?

Secondly, can he clarify to the House and to the public that when he sold his stake in Blairmore Holdings in 2010, he also disposed of another offshore investment at that time? In particular, were any of the £72,000 of shares that he sold held in offshore tax havens?

The “Ministerial Code” states that “Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise, between their public duties and their private interests, financial or otherwise,” and that all Ministers “must provide...a full list...of all interests which might be thought to give rise to a conflict,” including close family interests. So did the Prime Minister provide the permanent secretary with an account of his offshore interests and if not, did he not realise that he had a clear obligation to do so, when part of his personal wealth was tied up in offshore tax havens and he was now making policy decisions that had a direct bearing on their operation? For example, in 2013 the Prime Minister wrote to the President of the European Council opposing central public registers of beneficial ownership of offshore trusts. So, thirdly, does the Prime Minister now accept that transparency of beneficial ownership must be extended to offshore trusts?

The Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca registered more than 100,000 secret firms in the British Virgin Islands. It is a scandal that UK overseas territories registered over half the shell companies set up by Mossack Fonseca. The truth is that the UK is at the heart of the global tax avoidance industry. It is a national scandal and it has got to end. Last year, this Government opposed the EU Tax Commissioner Pierre Moscovici’s blacklist of 30 un-co-operative tax havens. That blacklist included the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands. So my fourth question is: will the Prime Minister now stop blocking European Commission plans for a blacklist of tax havens? It turns out that Lord Blencathra, the former Conservative Home Office Minister, was absolutely right when he wrote to the Cayman Islands Government in 2014 to reassure them that our Prime Minister was making a “purely political gesture” about cracking down on tax havens at the G8. It was designed, he said, to be “a false initiative which will divert other member states from pursuing their agenda.”

Last June, Treasury officials lobbied Brussels not to take action against Bermuda’s tax secrecy. According to the European Union’s transparency register, the tech giant Google has no fewer than 10 employees lobbying Brussels. Bermuda is the tax haven favoured by Google to channel billions in profits. Conservative MEPs have been instructed on six occasions since the beginning of last year to vote against action to clamp down on aggressive tax avoidance. This is a party incapable of taking serious, internationally co-ordinated action to tackle tax dodging. Across the country and on the Opposition side of the House, there is a thirst for decisive action against global tax avoidance scams that suck revenues out of our public services, while ordinary taxpayers have to foot the bill. It undermines public trust in business, politics and public life. It can and must be brought to an end.

We welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement today about new measures to make companies liable for employees who facilitate tax cheating, but it is also too little, too late. In fact, it was announced by the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury a year ago. People want a Government who act on behalf of those who pay their taxes, not those who dodge their taxes in offshore tax havens. Yesterday, my hon Friend the shadow Chancellor set out a clear plan for transparency. He is a Member of this House who has spent all his time in Parliament exposing tax havens and tax avoidance. His paper included a call for an immediate public inquiry into the Panama papers revelations to establish the harm done to our tax revenues and to bring forward serious proposals for reform.

I say gently to the Prime Minister that a tax taskforce reporting to the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, both members of a party funded by donors implicated in the Panama leaks, will be neither independent nor credible. So will the Prime Minister back a credible and independent public inquiry into the abuses revealed by the leaks?

Our task transparency plan called for a specialised tax enforcement unit to be properly resourced, which is key. Since 2010, there have been only 11 prosecutions over offshore tax evasion—a situation that the Public Accounts Committee described as “woefully inadequate”. Having slashed resources and cut 14,000 staff since 2010, will the Prime Minister today guarantee that resourcing to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will increase in this Parliament?

We support real action to end the abuses that allow the wealthy to dodge the rules that the rest of us have to follow. We need to ensure that trust and fairness are restored to our tax system and our politics and to end the sense and the reality that there is one rule for the richest and another for everybody else. The Prime Minister has attacked tax dodging as immoral, but he clearly failed to give a full account of his own involvement in offshore tax havens until this week and to take essential action to clean up the system, while at the same time
blocking wider efforts to do so. There are clear steps that can be taken to bring tax havens and tax dodging under control—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a Minister standing at the Bar shrieking in an absurd manner. He must calm himself and either take a medicament if required or leave the Chamber.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I suggest that the Prime Minister’s record, particularly over the past week, shows that the public no longer have the trust in him to deal with these matters. Do he and Conservative Members realise why people are so angry? We have gone through six years—yes, six years—of crushing austerity, with families lining up at food banks to feed their children, disabled people losing their benefits, elderly care cut and slashed and living standards going down. Much of that could have been avoided if our country had not been ripped off by the super-rich refusing to pay their taxes.

Let me say this to the Prime Minister: ordinary people in the country will simply not stand for this any more: they want real justice; they want the wealthy to pay their share of tax just as they have to pay when they work hard all the time.

The Prime Minister: Let me first join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating the journalists who have broken this story about this huge cache of information from the Panama papers. What matters now is that that information is shared with the tax authorities, including here in the United Kingdom, so that action can be taken.

The right hon. Gentleman accused me of a distraction, but I have to say that the biggest distraction today has been waiting for the right hon. Gentleman’s tax returns, which we finally got published at about 3.35 pm, after this statement had begun. How incredibly convenient that no one can scrutinise them.

Let me answer each and every one of the questions that the right hon. Gentleman asked. First, he asked whether we would resource HMRC with the right amount of money. We have put £1.8 billion into various initiatives since 2010 to make sure that it has the resources to find this money. That is the first point. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked me about my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I have compiled with every aspect of that Register, and even before the Labour party’s complaint arrived at the commissioner’s door, I provided her with all the necessary information.

Thirdly, the right hon. Gentleman asked when I made the sale of these shares. I sold the Blairmore shares in January, and I sold everything else in June. Next, he asked me whether I shared a list of these shares with the Cabinet Secretary. It was quite difficult because I had sold them, but I sat down with the Cabinet Secretary and went through all my interests, all my connections, all my friendships and all my family, as all Ministers are advised to do. This was a proper conversation with the Cabinet Secretary that I conducted in that way.

Fourthly, the right hon. Gentleman asked why we were not extending the arrangements relating to the beneficial ownership of companies to the beneficial ownership of trusts. The reason is that we want international action to take place, and the very clear advice that I received was that if we included trusts in our initiative, we would not get any international action. This Government have done more than any other to lead the world and make co-operation happen.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the tax taskforce. HMRC, the National Crime Agency and others will investigate all the information coming out of Panama, and they have operational independence. If they find people to prosecute, they prosecute them; if they find information of illegality, they act on it. They are independent operationally, and that is exactly what they will do. They will report to the Home Secretary and the Chancellor because we want to make sure that radical action is taken, but they have total operational independence.

Let me now answer the right hon. Gentleman’s last question, which concerned the action that we have taken in respect of the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies. No Government have done more to encourage them to take part in exchanging information, reporting tax information, and making sure that they give us the information on beneficial ownership. The leader of the Labour party has suggested that we should force them. How is he going to force them? What is he going to do? Have we finally found a potential Prime Minister who wants to give the Falkland Islands back to Argentina and invade Gibraltar? Is that what it has come to?

What we have seen are the Labour party’s true colours when it comes to inheritance tax. If you want to pass your home to your children, Labour will tax it. If you want to help your children, Labour will tax that. We have seen Labour’s true colours. It is the enemy of aspiration and the enemy of families who want to support each other, and that is the real lesson of today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call the Chair of the Treasury Committee, but he is toddling out of the Chamber.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Well, if you would like to call me, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from Mr Tyrie. Get in there, man.

Mr Tyrie: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that it will be worth waiting for.

Mr Tyrie: It is very good of you to give me the floor, Mr Speaker.

I do not think that the Prime Minister has done anything wrong, except, possibly, to comment on the Jimmy Carr case. Tax evasion is illegal and should be very vigorously pursued, if necessary with criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Tax avoidance is not illegal. If the Government or Parliament do not like it, there is no point in moralising. Does the Prime Minister agree that to deal with tax avoidance we need reform to
close the loopholes, and vigorous tax simplification to ensure that there are fewer of them?

The Prime Minister: I am very glad that my right hon. Friend was detainable before leaving the Chamber. I think that he is absolutely right. Tax evasion is illegal, and tax avoidance, if the Government disapprove of it, should be legislated against. That is the approach that we have taken. However, as I have said before and am happy to say again, there are some practices of very aggressive tax avoidance that I think do merit proper questions and then legislative action. To be fair to Jimmy Carr, as soon as it was pointed out that he was in a scheme to reduce his income artificially, he immediately changed his arrangements. He made that very clear, and I pay tribute to him for doing it.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Let me begin by welcoming the Prime Minister’s statement and the new measures that he has announced to deal with tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. I also welcome the publication of his tax information, and, indeed, his apology for the way in which he has handled it.

It is estimated that between $21 trillion and $32 trillion of private financial wealth is located, untaxed or lightly taxed, in tax havens around the world. Illicit cross-border financial flows are estimated at more than $1 trillion per year, which is 10 times more than the global foreign aid budgets combined. The Panama papers leak is so large that if one printed the files, the final document would be 650 million pages long. It is right that a special taskforce has been set up to go through the leaked information, and the Prime Minister was right to say that charges will hopefully follow if criminality can be proven.

The public are indignant here and around the world. People are rightly angered by the rules for normal taxpayers being different from those for a small ultra-rich elite, but we must ask ourselves whether the scale of the problem has been taken seriously, because it has quite patently not been thus far, domestically or internationally. The UK bears a particular responsibility given that the UK and its overseas territories and dependencies collectively sit at the top of the Tax Justice Network’s financial secrecy index.

In Scotland, we are confronted by the reality of a small number of landowners owning huge swathes of the country, many through tax havens. From Perthshire to Jura and across Scotland, land is owned through many as possible. On Cabinet Ministers, I think that the official Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts, we are likely to lose £7.3 billion of tax revenue to multinational territories be available and when? Will it be publicly available? If not, why not? Will the Prime Minister prioritise bilateral tax treaties with Panama and other tax havens as part of global efforts towards better co-ordination against tax avoidance, and will he regularly update this House on progress? Lastly, given that the UK Cabinet agrees Government policy on tax rules, potential loopholes and arrangements with tax havens, will he ensure that all his Cabinet colleagues confirm whether they have ever benefited through offshore financial dealings?

The Prime Minister: First of all, let me agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is no doubt that some bad things are happening in some of these jurisdictions and countries in terms of the hiding of assets and wealth and the avoidance of tax. That is why we want our authorities to go through everything that they can to recover that money. However, just because those bad things are happening, we should not condemn the unit trusts that many investors, such as, as I have said, local government pension funds, trade union pension funds and—who knows—even the pension fund of this House, might well use as a totally legitimate way of investing and then paying tax. I want to make that point.

The right hon. Gentleman also said that we need as many criminal charges as possible. I of course agree with that, but we should not do down the civil action and civil penalties that Revenue and Customs can use. It has 1,100 cases going through and can charge up to 300% of the money.

On whether we have taken this agenda far enough, I would say that this is the first country in the G8 or the G20 to make tax and transparency the No. 1 issue at a G8 or a G20 summit. No one had done it before. We have now done it and it is permanently on the agenda and we see permanent improvements.

I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman is being fair on the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories. For years, there was a reputational and potentially real problem. They have done a huge amount to address that. They are now better placed than other similar jurisdictions. As I said, there are states in the United States of America that have less disclosure and transparency. Let us not be unfair on the Crown dependencies and overseas territories, which we—certainly on this side of the House—are proud to have as part of our family of nations.

As for Scottish trusts and transparency, we are happy to work with and help the devolved Administrations in every way we can. We are also happy to work with and are working with European partners on trusts. My point is that we would not have made any progress on beneficial ownership if we had included trusts in that debate in the G8, but we did make progress for the reason that we gave.

The right hon. Gentleman asked to whom the information about beneficial ownership in the Crown dependencies and overseas territories will be available. It will initially be available to law enforcement agencies, including, crucially, our own. These places are not producing public registers yet. I want them to, but let us be frank: only about three countries in the world, including Britain now, have these public ownership registers. If we had tried to push that on to the Crown dependencies straightaway, we would not have got nearly as far as we have got today. On tax treaties, I am keen that we sign as many as possible. On Cabinet Ministers, I think that the current rules for registering Members’ interests are right, but, as I have said, in the case of Prime Ministers and Chancellors we are going further.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): According to the official Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts, we are likely to lose £7.3 billion of tax revenue to multinational
companies over the ensuing five years because they will sue us in court and get the European Court of Justice to overturn the taxes we wish to impose, and there is another £35 billion at risk. What can we do here to make sure those companies pay their fair amounts, which this Parliament wants but the ECJ does not?

**The Prime Minister:** We took a whole series of actions in the Budget, and of course we have the diverted profits tax, which is a tremendous weapon for making sure these companies pay their tax in the jurisdictions where they are rightly earning the money. This tool of being able to exchange tax information and having a common reporting standard, which is what we set in train in 2013, will make the biggest difference.

**Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** One of the main benefits of the journalism that uncovered the Panama papers was that it shone sunlight on areas where some people did not want it to go. The Prime Minister makes great play of saying that his Government have done a great deal to improve corporate transparency, but this is nowhere near enough. When is he going to step up and make sure that corporates publish their tax information so that everybody—the public—can see where tax is being paid?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not saying that we have a perfect record, but this Government have done more than any previous Government to make this happen. I will answer the hon. Lady very directly: of course our system is based on full disclosure by companies to the Revenue but with a basic deal of taxpayer confidentiality between companies and the Revenue. That is the way our system and most other systems work. That is why the common reporting standards and the exchange of information between tax jurisdictions is so important, to make sure that these companies are telling the truth to us and to other jurisdictions. Only when that happens will we be able to recover the money.

**Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con):** The beneficial ownership register that comes into place in just over six weeks’ time, plus the announcement the Prime Minister has made on Crown dependencies and the new criminal act, will do much to deal with tax evasion. If the House will forgive me, let me say that it will do far more to ensure that the proceeds of crime and of terrorism cannot be laundered through this jurisdiction, which is to be welcomed. I think I should do a little ticking off here, because I know, personally, that we would not have got the agreement with the Crown dependencies without his personal intervention and without his being very tough, and he should be congratulated on that. Just fancy, it was actually delivered without a single shot being fired or the Leader of the Opposition putting boots on the ground!

**The Prime Minister:** What my right hon. Friend will remember from his time in government—he is doing a brilliant job as my anti-corruption lead—was that we got the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories around the table in the Cabinet room, on the same day as the trooping of the Colour. I believe, and said, “We have to make these changes. You don’t have to go all the way to publishing registers, although that is what we would like, but you have got to make this information available.” As he says, that will mean not only more tax paid, but greater ability to uncover corruption.

**Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab):** May I ask the Prime Minister some questions about his welcome announcement on Crown dependencies? First, have the British Virgin Islands, Bermuda and the Cayman Islands agreed to compile a register of beneficial ownership? Secondly, will HMRC have access to that register? Thirdly, if he does not succeed in getting those territories to publicly publish those registers, will he use his powers, through the Privy Council, to order the tax havens to publish them?

**The Prime Minister:** Basically, we have been asking the Crown dependencies to do three things: one is to exchange tax information, the second is to have a common reporting standard, and the third is to establish registers of beneficial ownership. They have now done all three, so the answer to the right hon. Lady’s first question—have they agreed?—is yes. We still need agreement from Guernsey and from Anguilla, but we hope that that will come in the coming days. The answer to her second question—will our Revenue have access to their register?—is yes, it will. The answer to her third question—will we force them to have public registers?—is we think they should; we think that is the right way to go. But let us be clear: very few countries in the world—I think Spain, Britain and possibly one or two others—have public registers of beneficial ownership. Our Crown dependencies and overseas territories will now be far in advance of most other countries, so instead of attacking them, we ought to praise them and thank them for what they have done.

**Sir Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** Should not the Prime Minister’s critics just snap out of their synthetic indignation and admit that their real point is that they hate anyone who has even a hint of wealth in their life? May I support the Prime Minister in fending off those who are attacking him, thinking particularly of this place, because if he does not, we risk seeing a House of Commons that is stuffed full of low achievers who hate enterprise and hate people who look after their own family and who know absolutely nothing about the outside world?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s support. We have a system for Members’ interests which was put in place at the end of 13 years of Labour Government. I think we should maintain that system. I do not want us to discourage people who have had a successful career in business or anything else from coming into this House and making a contribution. That is why I have said that for Prime Ministers and Chancellors, shadow Prime Ministers and shadow Chancellors, it is a different set of arrangements.

**Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** Does the Prime Minister recall that in the time after he became Prime Minister in the coalition, when he was dividing the nation between strivers and scroungers, I asked him a very important question about the windfall he received when he wrote off the mortgage of the premises in Notting Hill and did not write of the mortgage of the premises the taxpayers were helping to pay for in Oxford?
Mr Dennis Skinner

I did not receive a proper answer then. Maybe “Dodgy Dave” will answer it now—[Interruption]—and by the way—[HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw!”]

Mr Speaker: Order. I must ask the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I do not require any assistance from some junior Minister—an absurd proposition! I invite the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the adjectives he used a moment ago. He is perfectly capable of asking his question without using that word. It is up to him, but if he does not wish to withdraw it, I cannot reasonably ask the Prime Minister to answer the question. All he has to do is withdraw that word and think of another.

Mr Skinner: Which word?

Mr Speaker: I think he knows—the word beginning with D and ending in Y that he used inappropriately. Withdraw—it is very simple.

Mr Skinner: I know what you are talking about, Mr Speaker. This man has done more to divide this nation than anybody else, and he has looked after his own pocket. I still refer to him as “Dodgy Dave”—[Interruption.] Do what you like! [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, I must ask the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.]

Mr Skinner: Not a chance!

Mr Speaker: Very well.

The Speaker ordered Mr Skinner, Member for Bolsover, to withdraw immediately from the House during the remainder of the day’s sitting (Standing Order No. 43), and the Member withdrew accordingly.

Mr Speaker: Needless to say, no reply is required to that question.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Well, it is a shocking scandal: we now know that the Prime Minister divested himself of all his shareholdings before he became Prime Minister and has paid his taxes in full.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): Exactly—shocking.

Sir Edward Leigh: Shocking. However, there is a wider question that I would like to put to the Prime Minister, and it follows the question from the Chair of the Treasury Committee. As long as we have the longest tax code in the world after India, will not hard-working families always use legitimate ways to try to minimise their tax bill? Some of us have been arguing for years for a flatter tax system to merge rates. Let me give the Prime Minister a suggestion. The best way to stop people avoiding the payment of inheritance tax—that iniquitous tax—it is to abide by our manifesto commitment and abolish it.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support. We met our manifesto commitment on inheritance tax, which was to exempt the family home. My hon. Friend is right that we need to simplify, but there are things moving in different directions. We want to simplify taxes, but when we see abuses occurring, we sometimes need to write new tax code to make sure that those abuses cannot be used, which can lead to complications. However, I am well aware of his general point, and I think he is right.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister now answer a question that both he and the Chancellor refused to answer a few years ago, and confirm that they both benefited personally from their cut to the top rate of tax? On the day that universal credit cuts mean that part-timers could be over £1,000 a year worse off, does he think that the several thousand pounds a year from which they both benefited is fair?

The Prime Minister: The information is contained in my tax return, which is in the House of Commons Library, and everyone can go and look at it. The key point is not only that since we reduced the top rate of tax from 50p to 45p we have not only raised more revenue, which we can spend on the public services that the right hon. Lady supports, but that the richest 1% in the country pay a higher overall percentage of income tax at 27%.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend clarify again the fact that tens of millions of our fellow citizens benefit from tax-exempt investments, as most pension schemes do not pay tax on their investment income, which directly benefits hard-working people saving for, and receiving, pensions?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. I would reinforce the point that many millions of our fellow citizens own shares, and many people choose to make their investments through unit trusts, which are a relatively safe form of investment because they share the risk. Many unit trusts are listed in other countries—many of them now in Dublin—and they are set up in that way not to avoid tax but to make sure that the revenues are returned to the unit trust holder who then pays tax, which is the key point.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Prime Minister accept that the revelations last week that he intervened personally in 2013 to water down the effects of EU transparency rules on trusts damages his efforts to portray himself as some kind of champion of fair tax? Will he now commit to fully supporting EU transparency rules, including country-by-country reporting by corporations showing exactly how much profit they make and where?

The Prime Minister: Let me be absolutely clear with the hon. Lady. There were no EU proposals—the whole thing was based on a British proposal or initiative to encourage all countries to have registers of beneficial ownership. The EU then joined in and suggested extending it to trusts, and we pointed out that if that happened no one would take it up because trusts, as she knows, are set up for all sorts of reasons: the care of a disabled child, support for a local school—any number of things that are perfectly reasonable under English common law. The advice I had was that if we went for beneficial
ownership of companies and trusts, the move that we have made, which is genuinely helping to change the world in that regard, would have completely failed.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend encourage the Leader of the Opposition to write to him to set out in detail the allegations he makes against him, either of breaking the law of propriety or the rules of this House? Having listened carefully to the Leader of the Opposition, I fail entirely to comprehend what he is going on about.

On a separate issue, I am glad to see my right hon. Friend stand up for the overseas territories. He will know that when I was Attorney General, I had quite a lot of dealings with the Attorneys General of the overseas territories in encouraging them to change their transparency rules. In fact, they showed themselves to be properly responsive to those representations. He may also agree with me that the overseas territories are entitled to provide financial services and not to be damned for trying to ensure the wellbeing of their own citizens.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. What we have tried to do with the overseas territories is to say that there is a perfectly legitimate business of providing financial service, but they, like us, should be doing it on the basis of high standards, not low standards. I think that is an argument that they now accept and are carrying out, and we should thank them for it. As for the first half of my right hon. and learned Friend’s question, I listened to the right hon. Gentleman, and I am not sure I want to read all about it again in a letter because I do not think there is much to answer.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): One could be forgiven for believing that the only virtue was transparency, but privacy and equality are both important virtues that we value in this country. Does the Prime Minister agree that given the many thousands of opinion formers, policy formers and decision makers in this country paid publicly through private service companies, if we are to set any principle, it should be that with public finance comes public transparency—who is paid what by us, the taxpayers? If we can establish that principle first, we can have a wider discussion about transparency.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the first half of the hon. Gentleman’s question: there is a value in privacy. That is why I think we need a balance between what is disclosed and what is not disclosed. I have tried to set out the way forward today. On the hon. Gentleman’s point about private service companies, the Chancellor had something to say about that in the Budget. There is a case, particularly where public money is involved, for making sure that people declare these arrangements in the proper way. The changes that the Chancellor has spoken about will make sure that whether someone chooses to have a private service company or chooses to be self-employed, the amount of tax that they pay will be much more similar.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement that there will be a new criminal offence applying to corporations that fail to prevent their representatives from criminally facilitating tax evasion. That reflects the failure to prevent bribery offence which already exists under the Bribery Act 2010. There are nearly 40 other economic crimes listed in the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which are susceptible to deferred prosecution agreements. Will my right hon. Friend have discussions with the Ministry of Justice and the Law Officers to make sure that we can add not only the tax offence that he refers to but those other economic crimes, so that they can be dealt with under the “failure to prevent” system?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has much expertise in this area. I think the point he is making is that as we set out these economic crimes—the Home Secretary has led the charge to ensure that we address this issue properly—we make sure that they are properly publicised, properly understood and then properly prosecuted. We need to make sure that the National Crime Agency and the Serious Fraud Office work together in the way that I know he was keen to see when he was doing that job.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that he is leading on international efforts to crack down on tax evasion, so can he explain why he wrote to the then European Council President Herman Van Rompuy in 2013 and asked him to water down the impact of EU transparency rules by treating trusts differently from companies in anti-money laundering rules, despite warnings that such a move could create loopholes for tax dodgers?

The Prime Minister: With great respect to the hon. Lady, I have answered that question several times, most recently to the leader of the Green party. We were keen to get progress on the beneficial ownership of companies, and if we had accepted proposals to include trusts, that would have got completely bogged down and would not have made nearly the progress that we have made. We have got every G7 country and most G20 countries signing up to having action plans on beneficial ownership of companies. If we did that with trusts, my advice was that the whole thing would have slowed down to a trickle and we would not have got all the international co-operation and all the extra money that we are going to raise.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As far as I am concerned, it is perfectly clear that neither the Prime Minister nor his father has done anything wrong at all. In his statement my right hon. Friend said that we must defend the right of every British citizen to make money lawfully. That is something that I agree with wholeheartedly, but it is slightly at variance with the description of people who have done just that as morally repugnant. Will the Prime Minister give us a promise that from now on he will uphold the rule of law and the view that the rule of law is what is important in this country, and not question the morality of people who act lawfully with regard to their tax arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support, and I agree with what he says about the importance of enabling people to make money within the law; he is completely right that the rule of law is what matters overall. The simple point that I have often made, and which I will continue to make, is that of course it is tax evasion that is illegal, not tax avoidance. There are many ways that people avoid taxation, not
least by putting money into a pension or an ISA, or by other perfectly legitimate ways of planning for their future, that of their family and all the rest of it. However, we have sometimes seen very aggressive measures—I mentioned some of them in my statement—such as putting properties in company envelopes in order to avoid paying stamp duty, where it is sometimes difficult for the Government to catch up quickly enough with the huge changes taking place. I think that a bit of leeway on that is necessary, but my hon. Friend is right: it is the rule of law that matters.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister not realise that there is a world of difference between the vast majority of our constituents who pay their tax in the usual way, it being deducted at source or by other means, and the very rich tax spivs who use tax havens for obvious reasons? That is why the accusation is made about them and the people I have referred to.

The Prime Minister: Of course there is bad practice, not least in some of these jurisdictions, and that needs to be dealt with. That is what tax transparency, the sharing of information, the registers of beneficial ownership and all the rest of it are about. The other thing to recognise that happened last week is that the £11,000 personal allowance came in, so people can now earn £11,000 before having to pay any income tax at all. That completed our work of taking 4 million of the lowest paid people in our country out of income tax altogether.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): The Prime Minister has paid his taxes and behaved perfectly properly, and I commend him for standing up to those who have sought to besmirch his father’s reputation and memory. Will he remind us how much extra money has come into the Exchequer as a result of his Government’s closing the loopholes that were set up under 13 years of Labour government?

The Prime Minister: The point is that we raised an extra £12 billion in the last Parliament, and we want to raise another £16 billion in this Parliament, stretching out to 2021 the figures that I gave. Also, by having a lower rate of corporation tax, we have actually seen more corporation tax come in. Low tax rates, but tax rates that people pay—those are our watch words.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We have heard that the rule of law is paramount. The Government control what is legal and illegal in tax law. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that the law will make offshore tax dodging in all its forms illegal?

The Prime Minister: Evading tax is already illegal, whether it is done in the UK or elsewhere. The point that I have been making is that we need to have this information sharing and the ability to look at information in these jurisdictions, in order to see whether people have been evading tax, and that is what we are now getting. But we should not use that to say that it is wrong for people, trade unions, companies or pension schemes to invest in unit trusts listed in other countries, because that is a perfectly normal way of investing.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on bringing transparency to the office of Prime Minister by publishing his own tax return? Does he have any thoughts on whether that should be extended to former Prime Ministers, many of whom still receive public money? Personally, I would be very interested to see a tax return of one Mr T. Blair.

The Prime Minister: I have no proposals to make in that regard. I am not claiming to have some perfect record, but on becoming Prime Minister I cut the Prime Minister’s pay by 5% and froze it for the Parliament, I rejected the Prime Minister’s tax allowance of £20,000 a year, and I reformed the Prime Minister’s pension so that it is now contributory for the first time. As Mr Speaker knows, the Speaker, the Lord Chancellor and the Prime Minister have all given up the great offices of state pension that used to give half their salary in perpetuity—

[Interruption.] Opposition Front Benchers say that that was done by the Labour party, but it was not actually brought in until I became Prime Minister. I did it. All those steps have been taken, which I think was the right thing to do.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer be clarifying the tax situation of his family company, Osborne and Little, which he holds shares in, but which has paid no UK corporation tax in seven years?

The Prime Minister: The Chancellor’s family firm is exactly the sort of manufacturing small firm we want to encourage in our country. For many years, I gather, it has not been making a profit, but I am glad that the company is doing well and now paying a dividend—that is something we should welcome. Its tax matters are entirely a matter between the company and the Inland Revenue, and that is the way it should be.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I join other Conservative Members in welcoming the Prime Minister’s statement this afternoon. When he meets world leaders in London this May for the first global anti-corruption summit, will he press them to agree actions to expose corruption, wherever it exists?

The Prime Minister: It is good that we are having this summit. As I am writing in a document that will be released before the summit, no country, no politician—no one—can claim that they have a perfect and unblemished record in this regard; all countries are battling against these problems, as we did in the House of Commons with the problems of expenses and all the rest of it. However, I want to encourage people, and the Prime Minister of Afghanistan and the President of Nigeria are contributing, and they are admitting that their countries are rife with corruption and it needs to be dealt with. The problem is that, if nobody actually stands up and talks about these issues and sets out the action plans for delivering on these issues, nothing will get done.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): At the last count, 36,364 properties in London were owned by offshore companies—that is one in 10 in one London borough and 7% in another London borough. We should
know who owns those properties. Many believe that this is about dirty money from countries such as Russia and from the middle east. This is driving up costs, with a 50% increase since 2007. What is the Prime Minister going to do about dirty money propping up the London property market?

The Prime Minister: The first thing, which we have already done and which has had a huge impact, is to say that, if a company owns a property in a so-called envelope structure, so that we cannot get to the name of the person who owns that property, they have to pay an annual stamp duty charge of something like 15%. That has been a massive money raiser, providing money to spend on public services, and a huge disincentive for that sort of behaviour. However, I want to go further; as I said in my speech in Singapore, we need to have more information about who owns what in our country.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for his very clear statement? This afternoon, I received a furious email from Martin in my constituency, who said he watched the “Murnaghan” show on Sky News yesterday. He was shocked that the Shadow Chancellor, who said he watched the “Murnaghan” afternoon, I received a furious email from Martin in my constituency, who said he watched the “Murnaghan” show on Sky News yesterday. He was shocked that the person who owns that property, they have to pay an annual stamp duty charge of something like 15%. That has been a massive money raiser, providing money to spend on public services, and a huge disincentive for that sort of behaviour. However, I want to go further; as I said in my speech in Singapore, we need to have more information about who owns what in our country.

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. Let me answer it in full, because I think it is very important. Do I think it is okay to own shares in a unit trust that is registered in another country, whether it is in Dublin, or not, should be exposed in Parliament. For a Shadow Chancellor deliberately misled viewers...His ignorance, whether deliberate or not, should be exposed in Parliament. For a Shadow Chancellor to be so blatantly misleading is not acceptable. The Marxist Moron’s political motivations are obvious but not an excuse.”

He adds that the Prime Minister “could not have paid inheritance tax even if he wished to as the policy is levied on the estate”—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. As the Clerk has just pointed out to me, however, this is all very well, but it is nothing to do with the responsibility of the Prime Minister. [Interruption.]
Order. Do not argue with the Chair—that is not a wise course of action. The Prime Minister is not responsible for what the shadow Chancellor has said. I say that to the hon. Lady kindly but with some authority in these matters, believe me.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): No one in this House should have to feel that family members are being attacked unfairly, and, in that, the Prime Minister is absolutely correct. May I tell him, though, that it is not clear to me what he believes about holding shares in offshore trusts in tax havens? Does he think that that is perfectly okay, in which case, why would his holding them have been a conflict of interest, or does he think that tax havens are a problem that needs fixing, in which case, why did he have such shares in the first place?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. Let me answer it in full, because I think it is very important. Do I think it is okay to own shares in a unit trust that is registered in another country, whether it is in Dublin, Guernsey or elsewhere? Yes, I do. That is why trade unions, companies and pension funds hold such shares. Many people in our country hold unit trusts because—here is the key point—the unit trust does not exist to make money for itself; it makes money for the unit holders, and if the unit holders live in Britain they pay British tax, British income tax, British capital gains tax and all the rest of it. That is why these arrangements have been in place for many years and no Labour Government, Labour policy review or Conservative policy review has ever thought of getting rid of them. It is important that they are administered and run in the proper way. That is my answer to the hon. Lady’s first question.

The hon. Lady’s second question was why, if I thought there was nothing wrong with a holding like that, did I sell my shares because there might be a conflict of interest. I sold shares in every company that I owned, because I thought there were two options: you can either put things into a blind trust, as Ministers in Labour and Conservative Governments have done. There is nothing wrong with that—it is a very good way to go about it—but I thought it may be even simpler and more straightforward to just sell everything, because then I would not own any shares. So, if any of the companies in which I had previously had a shareholding had any dealings with the Government, there was no way that, even if somebody could look inside a blind trust, they could find any conflict of interest. That is why I sold the shares. I happen to think it was quite a sensible thing to do.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the only irregular thing about the summary of his tax return is the fact that he voluntarily and privately forsook the £20,000 prime ministerial tax-free allowance, which was enjoyed by many of his predecessors, including those from the Labour party? Instead, he rightly focused on increasing the personal allowance so that millions of low-income earners could avoid paying tax altogether. Will he pledge to continue that policy?

The Prime Minister: I am very glad to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We have the target in our manifesto of a £12,500 personal tax allowance and we want to meet that. What I did as Prime Minister was the right thing, not least because, as it says in the information from my tax return, there is support for me and my wife from the Conservative party in terms of some of the costs and issues of travel and other things that you have to deal with as the leader of a party. I thought that was a better way of doing it—not taxpayers’ money, but party money, on which I pay a tax charge.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Is it the right thing to do to claim expenses to live in a grace and favour apartment while at the same time making a big profit out of your own main home?

The Prime Minister: I am a little bit baffled by the hon. Gentleman, because he announced over the weekend that he was going to refer me to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, so one of my office pitched up there this morning with all the information necessary, only to hear that the hon. Gentleman has not actually yet made a complaint. I hope he will find the time later to do what he said he was going to do.

I think the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood. I am very lucky to live in No. 10 Downing Street—actually, Nos. 11 and 12 Downing Street, to be precise. As a result, I receive a benefit in kind, which is calculated at, I think, some £7,000, and I pay a tax on that benefit in kind for living in the house. It is not a subsidy I am getting: it is a benefit, which I am very grateful for, and I give the taxman money in respect of it.
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I tell the Prime Minister that he should not be ashamed that he had the good fortune to be born into a well-off family, and that it is not a sin for his parents, quite naturally, to want their savings to be cascaded down through the generations? He has nothing to be ashamed about, but may I warn him that, no matter how much information he wants to divulge, nothing will satisfy some of those on the Labour Front Bench?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful for what my hon. Friend says. I think there is a point at which you have to say that I have published the information that I think is relevant—I have gone back over the last six years—and that is the limit of what I am going to release. Some people say, “Well, what about your wife’s tax return and your mother’s financial affairs?” I really think that there comes a time when we should say that we have a register of Members’ interests. Prime Ministers and Chancellors and Opposition leaders and shadow Chancellors have done more than that, and we should rely on the register of Members’ interests to police the rest of our affairs.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Given that more than half of the companies implicated in the Panama leaks are registered in UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies, does the Prime Minister regret telling this House in 2013: “I do not think it is fair any longer to refer to any of the overseas territories or Crown dependencies as tax havens”?—[Official Report, 9 September 2013; Vol. 567, c. 700.]

Could he try to rebuild some of the public trust he has lost in the last week by making sure that, particularly in terms of publishing information about beneficial ownership, Crown dependencies and overseas territories follow the UK’s example, and will he take concrete action by putting that at the centre of his own anti-corruption summit next month?

The Prime Minister: The reason why I made that statement in 2013 was that we had got the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories, for the first time, to share automatically tax information with the United Kingdom Government. That is something that did not happen under the last Labour Government. It is something that we achieved. It was a different approach. Now—the hon. Gentleman is right—we want to go further, and the announcement today set out that not only will they share that information and follow the common reporting standard, but they will give us access to their information about beneficial ownership.

Just so the hon. Gentleman knows how different things were under the last Government, the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, in response to questions about the overseas territories, said this: “The negotiation of tax information exchange agreements with other jurisdictions, including the UK, is essentially a matter for the Crown Dependencies themselves”—[Official Report, 19 May 2009; Vol. 492, c. 1370W].

He was saying, “Nothing to do with me, guv; it’s up to them.” That is the Government that we replaced. We took a different approach, and we have made a lot of progress.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Forgive my lack of voice. May I say that I totally understand the Prime Minister’s predicament and his instinct to protect his father? I would have done exactly the same. His father did nothing wrong whatsoever.

The Prime Minister mentioned the long and thoughtful debate that is to come. May I say most gently that, when public figures get into trouble, there should be no more knee-jerk reactions, and that a long and thoughtful debate should be had to avoid unnecessary consequences for everybody else?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. He makes an important point, which is that we should try to make decisions about these things calmly and rationally after debate. I felt, after all the questions that I was being asked, that the right thing to do was to publish the information, but I could not have made it clearer today that I do not want to see that as some precedent that every Member of this House, or indeed every member of my Cabinet, has to follow. We should think very carefully. We have always had a system in this country based on full disclosure to the Revenue but taxpayer confidentiality. Some other countries have complete publication of all tax returns and all tax information. That has not been our way. We have had a different system, and I do not think that we should give it up lightly.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It saddened me that the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) seemed to suggest that, if someone was not a millionaire, they were a low achiever. Speaking as a low achiever—[Laughter] The biggest multinational company earns more in a single week than the incomes of all MPs combined. The Prime Minister has spoken before about transparency, and he did so again today. Many of us across the House, from all parties, want to make sure that the country-by-country information that multinationals will be obliged to provide to HMRC will be put in the public domain. Will he or a Minister meet me and other members of the Public Accounts Committee to discuss that proposal?

The Prime Minister: I have always thought of the right hon. Lady as a high achiever. She certainly put the boot into my predecessor more effectively than I ever did. I remember that very well.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Michael Howard?

The Prime Minister: No, not that one. The point about country-to-country reporting is that what we are trying to achieve, as I said in my opening statement, is a common reporting standard, so that companies report to tax authorities in the same way; and the sharing of that information, so that we can see whether company A is paying x amount of tax in one jurisdiction and y amount in the other, and if that is not right, we can do something about it. That, at the moment, is the most powerful way of achieving what we want to achieve. There are those who say that we need to go even further in public declarations of tax. That is a very interesting argument, but let us not make the best the enemy of the good. We have got a very solid way now of making sure that these companies pay tax properly, and I want to see that completed.
Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that any course of action designed to reduce tax that does not constitute tax evasion must, by definition, be legal, even if some may regard it as aggressive tax avoidance? It is up to this Parliament to legislate to make such courses of action illegal.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Where there is aggressive avoidance taking place that is clearly against the spirit of the law, Parliament should act. As I have said many times, that is what the Chancellor has done, and that is what HMRC advises us about. I think that sometimes there are occasions when the tax avoidance is so aggressive that it is right to warn those taking part in it that legislation will follow, and therefore they should not take part in the scheme in the first place. That often happens.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): The Prime Minister has described the tax arrangements being discussed today as standard practice and normal. Assuming we are still all in this together, will he issue guidance—perhaps in the form of a leaflet to every UK household—so ordinary taxpayers can find out how they, too, can benefit from offshore tax havens?

The Prime Minister: The point is that there are many people in our country—I think there are now over 12.5 million shareholders—who hold shares in things such as unit trusts. There is plenty of information about them, and they do not need any from me. The point is that, if you invest in one of those and you are a UK taxpayer, you must pay UK income tax and UK capital gains tax, just as you would if you buy a share in any other organisation.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I would not recommend doing this, but, having read back through Hansard over the 13 years of the previous Labour Government, I could not find a single occasion on which the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) raised any of these issues. The closest he came was when he described the Labour Government’s decision to use Orders in Council to take control of the Turks and Caicos Islands as “mediaeval” and “extremely undemocratic”, but he now advocates that policy for all territories. Is it not fortunate that after 2010 we had a Government who actually took up this agenda?

The Prime Minister: I am interested to see that the right hon. Gentleman has conducted a U-turn because recently he has been suggesting taking control of these territories. I can now see a use for the nuclear submarines as they head off towards the Isle of Man, and as the Corbyn invasion force begins to mass to take over this territory. It is much more sensible to get them to do the things they ought to be doing.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Why does the Prime Minister think so many companies are registered in Panama in the first place, not in London or New York?

The Prime Minister: The reason why a lot of unit trusts register in different countries—a number of them have been named; right now, many of them are registering in Dublin—is that they want to be able to market their services not simply to UK residents, who pay UK taxes, but to other people. That is why, if we look at the Inland Revenue and the way it arranges this, it actually wants to make sure that UK fund managers can be involved and pay their taxes in the UK, and we can build the investment industry that this country can rightly be proud of.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his open and frank statement today? In the mind of any reasonable person, he has completely exonerated himself. Will he confirm that, under HMRC rules, all supporting documentation for a tax return should be retained for seven years? Since the Leader of the Opposition was late supplying his tax return, should he be fined?

The Prime Minister: There is obviously no fine for the fact that the right hon. Gentleman did not come to the House having already published it, although it was disappointing that we got it at 3.35 pm, when I was on my feet. Obviously, the matter of fines for late production of tax returns is a matter for HMRC.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): In 2013, the Prime Minister’s colleague Lord Blencathra was found guilty of an egregious breach of the Commons and Lords rules for misleading a Committee of inquiry in 2011 and for taking £10,000 a month as payment for lobbying for the Cayman Islands. He had no punishment from his party, and was allowed to get away with it, with a brief apology to the House of Lords. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether, if in future any parliamentarian in his party uses and prostitutes his privileged position in order to make a private gain, he will act and discipline them?

The Prime Minister: The point is that we now have rules in the House for the declaration of Members’ interests; we have a policeman, as it were, in terms of making sure that they are properly carried out; and we do have punishments, including expulsion, for misdeclarations and misbehaviour. I am not as familiar with the situation in the House of Lords, but I think it has been moving in the same direction and that is all to the good.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): While the conversations about Panama are no doubt interesting to Opposition Front Benchers, one reality check is that most of my constituents who are struggling to get on to the property ladder actually benefit from inheritance as a result of a lot of the tax changes that happened during the previous Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time to reform inheritance tax further to help more people, mainly those of my age, to get on to the property ladder?

The Prime Minister: There is a role for making sure that people can pass on the family home exempt from inheritance tax. That is why we have set out steps during this Parliament to make sure that can happen, completing what was set out in our manifesto.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The public would be more inclined to take the Prime Minister at his word when he says that he wants to clamp down on tax...
avoidance had his Government not appointed Edward Troup as executive chair of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in 2012. This is someone who said:

“Taxation is legalised extortion and is valid only to the extent of the law.”

Will the Prime Minister say what source of money he got to pay Mr Troup? Does someone with those views belong in HMRC?

The Prime Minister: Edward Troup is a dedicated public servant who does a very good job for HMRC. As reports in the papers this morning pointed out, he had a commercial career at Simmons and Simmons, one of the most respected City legal practices there is. Frankly, it is a good thing if we can attract people from private practice into HMRC to make sure that we collect all the money we should.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Will the Prime Minister assure the House that any future changes to taxation will do nothing to diminish the aspiration of working families, so that those families who want to do the right thing—provide for their future, save for their retirement and pass something on to their children—can continue to do so?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our reforms to inheritance tax and pensions are enabling people to take and spend more of their own money as they choose. People are also able to pass that money on to their children and to help with those key purchases such as the first home or the first car, helping young people with their families. Having all of that wealth cascading down the generations, and helping people to do that, is absolutely part of our goal.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome, of course, the Prime Minister’s announcement that people will be criminalised if they assist with tax evasion, particularly as that was announced by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Liberal Democrat Danny Alexander. Will the Prime Minister revisit other Liberal Democrat proposals put forward in coalition to see whether they can also play a significant role in dealing with the really difficult issue of tax evasion?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly true that the coalition Government achieved a lot in this area. That agenda was led and driven by myself and the Second Lord of the Treasury, in particular at the G8 and the G20, but at the time we had the full support of our coalition partners.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, and I listened carefully to the Leader of the Opposition. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that the Leader of the Opposition seemed to forget—possibly he is unaware—that aspiration, determination and the prospect of eventual financial reward are ingredients of our strong economy, leading to jobs and incomes for many? Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should condemn the politics of envy, and will he stick to the politics of opportunity and aspiration?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want an aspiration and enterprise society, in which we set low tax rates and encourage people to make the best of themselves, for their families. That will build not just a stronger economy but, in my view, a stronger society.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister referred to his anti-corruption summit. Will he tell us which countries will be represented there? Will an invitation be extended to either President Putin or some of his corrupt cronies, and those who fund the RT propaganda channel, to explain the $2 billion held in Panama by that corrupt regime?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has been restored to rude health. I welcomed him earlier, and I know that the Prime Minister will welcome him.

The Prime Minister: I am glad to see the hon. Gentleman back in his familiar place. It is fair to say that the guest list for the anti-corruption summit is still being worked on. The point is that we will ask people not on the basis that they run perfect countries or perfect Governments but on the basis of whether they will commit to public declarations on things like open beneficial ownership registration, sharing tax information, and making sure that when assets are looted we can confiscate them and restore them to the people they belong to. If countries want to sign up to that, we will be encouraging them to come and do just that, however imperfect their record may have been in the past.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): My mother spent 32 years working in an ICI factory. She is 81 and, like the Prime Minister’s mother, she has lost her husband and wants to hand some of that money down to the next generation. Some remarks from over the past few days must have been deeply hurtful to the Prime Minister, and I urge him to tell the House what message we want to send to millions of people in our constituencies who want to do the right thing by the next generation.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s remarks, and I am sure that my mother will be too. She said that like me, she is developing a thicker skin with every week that goes past. He is right to say that many people want to pass down wealth, assets and help their children in all the ways they can. That is not something we should be ashamed of; it is something that we should actively encourage, because it can help to build the strong society that we want in our country.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): The Prime Minister acknowledged in his statement that under current legislation it is difficult to prosecute companies that assist with tax evasion, and I and many others—including the right hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier)—would add fraud and corruption to that list. The Government promised in their manifesto to extend the new corporate offence to deal with all economic crime, not just tax evasion. Will the Prime Minister commit today to reviewing urgently the current position, and to extend the offence of tax evasion to incorporate fraud and corruption?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an interesting suggestion that I will consider carefully. We have announced our proposal, and identified an opportunity in the Gracious Speech to include that measure in a future Bill. At that time we can consider an extension and a tidying up of the offences so that they can be used in the same way, and I will look carefully at what she suggests.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we have had a full exchange and must now move on to the second statement.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Britain’s steel industry.

We are all familiar with the perfect storm of factors that led to the global price of steel collapsing during 2015, but for all the economic challenges that we face, the real tragedy is a human one. Over the past 11 months I have visited steelmaking communities across the UK. They are very different plants in very different places, but one thing that unites them is the pride and dedication of the highly skilled people that I met. All they want is to carry on doing what they do so well, and I am doing everything I can to help them do that.

I will speak first about Port Talbot. Since becoming Business Secretary I have been in frequent contact with the senior management of Tata, which included several meetings with the group’s chairman last year and this. Several weeks ago, Tata told me in confidence that it was seriously considering an immediate closure of Port Talbot—not a sale, a closure. That could have meant thousands of hard-working men and women already out of a job, and thousands more facing a very bleak future. I was not prepared to let that happen, and in the days that followed, I worked relentlessly to convince Tata—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The statement must be heard. The record shows that the Chair always facilitates a full and thorough interrogation, and although the Secretary of State would expect nothing less, he is entitled to the courtesy of being heard.

Sajid Javid: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

In the days that followed, I worked relentlessly to convince Tata that it was in everyone’s interest to keep the plant open and find a new buyer. I also made it clear that the Government are totally committed to supporting and facilitating that process. That work has paid off. Last month Tata announced its intention to sell the plant and its wider UK assets, rather than to close it. Since then, I have continued to meet its executives here and in Mumbai, and I was joined in that by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Wales and the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise. We have secured assurances that Tata will be a responsible seller and allow appropriate time to find a buyer.

The formal sales process begins today. I have been in contact with potential buyers, making it clear that the Government stand ready to help. That includes looking at the possibility of co-investing with a buyer on commercial terms, and we have appointed EY as financial advisers on behalf of the Government. Commercial confidentiality means that I cannot go into detail about ongoing discussions. However, I will update the House as soon as it is appropriate to do so. Let me also take this opportunity to thank the First Minister of Wales for all his hard work so far. His support in these talks has been invaluable.

I shall turn now to Tata’s long products division. I am sure that all Members will join me in welcoming today’s news of a conditional agreement between Tata and
Greybull. That agreement will protect jobs and minimise the cost to taxpayers. We have been closely involved in the sales process from day one, including making a commercial offer on financing if required, and we will continue to work with those involved to make sure that this deal gets done.

Moving on to Scotland, on Friday we saw Liberty House receiving the keys to two Tata mills, in Motherwell and Cambuslang. That is a great result for the people of Scotland, and the Scottish Government deserve thanks for helping to secure it.

Since January, the global price of steel has started to recover but it is still a long way from its pre-crisis peak. So there has been some positive news for Britain's steelmakers, but our support for the industry and the supply chain continues. The Steel Council, which met for the first time early last month, is bringing together Government and industry to find solutions. We have also been working closely with the unions, and let me take this opportunity to thank Community in particular for its positive and constructive approach.

We have also taken action on power, and £76 million has already been paid to steelmakers to compensate for high energy bills. We expect to pay more than £100 million this year alone. We have also taken action on procurement. New rules will make it easier for the public sector to buy British, and we are leading calls for EU action against unfair trading practices. We voted in favour of anti-dumping measures on wire rod and on steel pipes in July and October last year, and we voted in favour of measures on rebar and cold rolled products in February this year. These measures are already having a real effect, with rebar imports down 99%. However, we are still looking at ways of improving the EU tariff mechanism so that we can help the steel industry without harming other sectors, and I am happy to hear any suggestions from hon. Members on that front. Let me be very clear on this: we have repeatedly demanded and voted for tariffs on unfairly traded Chinese steel and we will continue to do so.

I would love to stand here today and declare that this crisis is over, and to say that not one more job will be lost in Britain's steel industry. That is not a promise that I or anyone else in this Chamber can make, but this Government action, then we say, “About time.”

Since the House rose for the Easter recess, the problems in the UK steel industry have turned into a full-blown existential crisis, and the Government and this Business Secretary have been found wanting. When I met workers at Port Talbot on 18 March, it was obvious that the mood was darkening, and they were increasingly worried about the likely outcome of the Tata board meeting on 29 March in Mumbai. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) was so concerned that he flew to Mumbai with the general secretary of the Community union to meet Tata directly.

Where was the Business Secretary at this crucial moment? Was he fighting tooth and nail to ensure the future of a UK foundation industry? He was not. We all now know that he was on his way to Australia to fulfil a few pleasant engagements down under, outrageously leaving his junior Minister to take all the flak back home. It is this laissez-faire approach—this incompentence, this inaction—that has characterised his response to the crisis from the beginning. He has claimed he was caught unaware by Tata’s decision to sell its entire UK steelmaking operations, putting at risk up to 40,000 UK jobs, but Labour Members have been warning for months that there was a gathering emergency and that it was coming to a head. Labour MPs have raised steel issues no fewer than 200 times since the general election a year ago and we have been fobbed off with warm words and no effective action month after month. The Business Secretary’s indifference destroyed the prospect of future steelmaking in Redcar, an act of industrial vandalism that will not be forgiven in the north-east for a very long time.

The Government have been accused of “floundering” and issuing “contradictory and meaningless statements”, and that is by one of their own Back Benchers, the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Since the steel crisis made the front pages, we have had a sudden shift from torpor to hyperactivity. From an ideological disinclination to get involved because of their free market dogma, there appears at last to be a recognition by the Government that this could be an existential moment for the whole of the UK manufacturing base. I welcome the long overdue admission from the Government that it is their duty to help to find a future for UK steelmaking. I just hope it is not a case of too little, too late. If the Business Secretary is now finally telling the House that he has suddenly overcome his ideological distaste for Government action, then we say, “About time.”

Given that the Scunthorpe deal took nine months, can the Secretary of State tell the House how long Tata is willing to keep the Port Talbot plant operational while a buyer is found? Will he confirm that it is the Government’s intention to ensure that any sale is of integrated operations? Does the Secretary of State agree that if jobs and skills are to be retained in the industry,
it is crucial that the UK retains the capacity to make as well as recycle and process steel? What steps will be now take, therefore, to ensure that the blast furnaces at Port Talbot will remain in operation under a new owner? What support are the Government willing to make available to assist in securing a successful sale to a responsible owner?

If he has not already done so, will the Secretary of State undertake today to contact all those in the current customer base and reassure them that the plants have a viable future and will remain open for business, so that they can be confident enough to continue placing orders? What is the Government’s plan B for UK steelmaking if no responsible buyer can be found in the timeframe immediately available? The Business Secretary has previously ruled out temporary nationalisation, but his junior Minister has not. Which is it?

On the dumping of Chinese steel, will the Secretary of State now urgently reconsider his opposition to the repeal of the lesser duty rule? Will he do so especially in the light of the tariffs that the Chinese have provocatively imposed on some EU-produced specialist steel?

Finally, on procurement, the coalition Government scrapped the defence industrial strategy, which made British jobs and industries the first priority in all decisions on Ministry of Defence contracts. With a £178 billion MOD budget for defence equipment over the next 10 years, will the Government now change that and ensure that this investment supports the British steel industry?

Sajid Javid: It is a shame that the hon. Lady has taken this attitude. Instead of working together, she seems much more interested in taking cheap political shots—at the process, rather than the substance. I suggest she learns from her friend the First Minister of Wales, who has been nothing but constructive and positive in his approach.

The hon. Lady talks about Labour’s long-running concern for the steel industry, so let us look at the facts. During Labour’s last term in office between 1997 and 2010, 40,000 jobs were lost in the British steel industry, with output more than halved. During those 13 years, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) mentioned the word ‘steel’ twice in the House of Commons, while the current Leader of the Opposition did not mention that word once during that period. The hon. Lady talks about an industrial strategy. We have dozens of sector councils and we set up the steel council. We are interested not in picking winners, but in what actually works. Since 2010, manufacturing is up, exports are up and employment is up. For example, our auto and aerospace industries, both users of British steel, are having their best years ever. I suggest that the hon. Lady spend a little less time obsessing about whether this support is called a strategy or a policy and spend a little more time celebrating the stunning success of British industry.

The hon. Lady asked about the actions we have taken so far. Action has been taken on energy costs and compensation for energy-intensive industries, which will now be moving towards a policy of exemption. We have provided flexibility on emissions regulations, and we have changed procurement policies, which now apply to all parts of the public sector. We have taken action on unfair trading, which the hon. Lady has asked for. A total of 37 measures are in place at the moment, 16 of which concern China. When it comes to trade measures, we are interested in measures that actually work. If we look at the measures on rebar, we find Chinese imports down 99%; on wire rod, they are down 90% and on seamless tubes and pipes, they are down 80%.

In determining what works, we will be driven by the evidence. The evidence is clear that so far, the way in which the EU has acted works, but we want it to act faster. As I said in my statement and say again, we are not interested in rewriting the whole rulebook for trade; when it comes to steel, we are interested in taking action that works. If the hon. Lady and others have suggestions that are focused on steel, I will of course listen.

The hon. Lady asked about the support that the Government are willing to provide in order to secure a sale. The Government have been working on this for weeks. Because the decision by Tata was commercially very sensitive, we were not able to discuss it in Parliament earlier. As I have made clear, the Government are looking at a number of areas, including power supply, pensions, plant and infrastructure. In doing so, we will work with the unions, the trustees of the pension plan and the Welsh Government to come forward with the best offer we possibly can.

The hon. Lady asked about nationalisation. Let me be clear: we have not ruled anything out. I have been clear about that. We are also clear, however, that the best steel operators in the world are commercially and privately run and that nationalisation is rarely the answer. We are working towards finding a commercial buyer to ensure the long-term future of Port Talbot and all the other parts of Tata Steel.

I could not be clearer in saying that steelmaking is a vital industry for the UK. It is important for our economic security and our national security. I do not want to live in a country that relies on importing all its steel. None of us wants to do that. That is why we will do everything we can to secure a future for steel, because the hard-working men and women in this industry deserve nothing less.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Tata is an excellent company that has made a great success of Jaguar Land Rover, turning
it into one of the finest car companies in Europe, something that defeated every Government when it was a nationalised industry? Does the fact that Tata cannot make a go of British steel not demonstrate the seriousness of the problems that my right hon. Friend is facing?

Will my right hon. Friend continue to reject the simplistic solutions that are on offer, such as tariff wars on China regardless of whether there is dumping, subsidy competition with Italy in breach of the EU rules on which we have always insisted, and nationalising Tata on the basis that we just carry on paying for the losses, pouring billions of pounds into the liabilities at the taxpayer’s expense, and seek to prevent anything from changing? Given that we all want to see the good news in Port Talbot that we have just seen in Scunthorpe, will my right hon. Friend continue to search for a reputable, sensible investor who understands steel, has a proper business plan, and can give a credible future to the best products of parts of this business, which could no doubt have a long-term future if we had the right business plan for it?

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. and learned Friend, who speaks with a great deal of experience. Tata—beyond steel, but, of course, including it—has shown itself to be a responsible investor in this country. When I have talked to the workforce, the unions and others at Port Talbot and elsewhere in the Tata group, they have had nothing but good things to say about Tata, its responsibility and its values.

I agree with what my right hon. and learned Friend said about tariffs and being careful to strike the right balance. I also agree with what he said about nationalisation. The way forward must involve a commercial operator: that is how the best companies in the world are run, and that is how we want to see British steel companies being run.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I thank the Business Secretary for giving me advance sight of his statement.

I welcome the news that Tata appears to have found a buyer for its operations in Scunthorpe. I hope that that will prove to be good news, and I hope that the same can be done for Port Talbot and other sites, although there is concern about possible erosions of workers’ terms and conditions as a result of the deal. Let us be clear, however, that this has happened in spite of the Government’s shameful approach to the crisis. They have done as little as possible—as little as they thought they could get away with. The fact that the Business Secretary was literally on the other side of the world at the height of the crisis provides a perfect metaphor, and a perfect personification of the Tory approach to the steel industry.

That contrasts starkly with the proactive, professional and diligent way in which the Scottish Government approached the crisis facing the Scottish plants at Clydebridge and Dalzell. Nicola Sturgeon said that her Government would leave no stone unturned to save a crucial industry, and that is exactly what happened. Liberty House has now bought the sites to maintain a crucial industry in Scotland, and I welcome the Business Secretary’s commendation of those efforts.

SNP Members stand in solidarity with the steelworkers of England and Wales. We hope that the UK Government will now work more proactively and co-operatively with EU colleagues on anti-dumping measures, energy costs and other issues that face the industry, so that there can be a long-term future for a crucial part of the manufacturing sector. Imagine what could have been achieved had the Prime Minister spent the last year touring European capitals and pressing for action on steel, rather than testing the patience of European counterparts and colleagues with his EU referendum gamble.

Will the Business Secretary now publish details of all meetings, phone calls, visits and correspondence involving the steel industry in which he, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and other members of the Cabinet have engaged with EU and international trade counterparts in the last year? If he has done the work that he claims to have done, he has nothing to hide, and publishing those details may well repair his tarnished reputation.

Sajid Javid: As I said in my statement, I commend the Scottish Government for what has been done in respect of the two mills in Scotland, but I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that the scale of the problem in the rest of the UK is a great deal larger, and I hope he can find it within himself to appreciate the challenge that the industry faces throughout the UK in particular.

I think that the hon. Gentleman is wholly wrong to suggest that the Government have not taken action already in providing help for the industry. I gave a number of examples in my statement, but the action on energy prices is making a big difference, and the action on procurement is also making a difference. I urge the hon. Gentleman to work with his colleagues in Edinburgh to see whether they can change their procurement rules to help not only Scotland, but the UK.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at finding a long-term, cheap energy solution for Port Talbot, which is crucial? What constraints is the European Union placing on aid to the steel industry?

Sajid Javid: I can give that commitment to my right hon. Friend, who speaks with a great deal of experience both of Wales and of business. He is right to identify energy as an issue. I do not believe that the constraints are coming from the EU, and we have demonstrated that there is action that we can take, but there is more that we can do. My right hon. Friend has good ideas and I look forward to discussing them with him further.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): To secure a long-term, sustainable, profitable future for the British steel industry, the focus needs to be on developing high-value, niche downstream products in particular sectors or for particular technologies, collaborating closely with customers in product development and design. Parts of Tata Steel, such as the Hartlepool pipe mill and facilities in Corby, do that, but they are not part of the potential sales process with Greybull Capital or Liberty House, so how will the Secretary of State ensure that the downstream capability in Hartlepool and elsewhere is maintained while a potential buyer is found?

In the Secretary of State’s response to the shadow Business Secretary, he mentioned sector groups. What specific work has he facilitated with industrial strategic
sector groups, such as the Automotive Council and oil, gas and offshore wind industrial councils, to ensure closer collaboration with customers and the supply chain in order to provide a great future for British steel?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his approach to this matter, in particular through his chairmanship of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. He is right to say that Hartlepool, Corby and other parts of the downstream steel business are where the high-value product is. Tata has made it clear in its approach to the sale that it will not cherry-pick. It knows that the downstream process is important to any potential buyer, so it will ensure that any buyer can purchase the whole group, which is an important commitment that we have managed to secure.

The long-established sector councils cover many different sectors. I mentioned earlier the automotive and aerospace sectors, both of which use British steel. We are working with them on the general supply chain to see how British products, including steel, can be used. We will continue that work.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the best support that we can give the steel industry is a long-term vision that supports a good-quality, private sale with an attractive Government support package and to encourage customers to buy in this country?

Sajid Javid: I know from my hon. Friend’s work on the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee that she takes an interest in this. She is absolutely right that none of us wants to be back in this situation in one, two or three years from now. We want to find a long-term buyer that will invest in the business. That requires Government support and we are ready to work with that buyer.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Before I start, I want to pay tribute to the 13 steelworkers who are in the Public Gallery today along with the outstanding general secretary of the Community union, Roy Rickhuss. I also want to join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to Carwyn Jones, who has been doing a fantastic job. What a contrast to the British Government. Within days, Carwyn Jones had put £60 million on the table, so he is someone who is actually closing the gap—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said when the Secretary of State was speaking that he should be heard with courtesy and the same goes for the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). It is not appropriate for people to yell “shame” at an hon. Member who is asking a legitimate question. Learn it.

Stephen Kinnock: I hope that the UK Government will take note of the fact that the Welsh Assembly Government so rapidly put £60 million on the table.

The Secretary of State asked for some focused suggestions and questions, so here are three for him. First, what are the Government doing to secure the customer base—key clients such as Honda, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover? I hope he and his colleagues are picking up the phone to those customers and ensuring that we retain the integrity of the order book. Secondly, on the blast furnaces, I would like to follow up on what was asked by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State. Does the Secretary of State believe that the blast furnaces in Port Talbot should continue as an integral part of the UK steelmaking industry? Thirdly, can he explain why the British Government continue to block the scrapping of the lesser duty rule? The entire industry and the European Commission repeatedly tell us that by scrapping that rule we would give the anti-dumping measures real teeth to deal with the dumping of Chinese steel. Perhaps the reason is that the UK Government would rather cosy up to Beijing than stand up for British steelworkers.

Sajid Javid: First, let me say that this is obviously a very difficult situation for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. I am working with him, and I stand ready to work in any way I can to help him and to listen to what he has to say. The meeting I have already had with him was very useful, but I look forward to many more as we jointly try to help with this situation. He asked three questions, one of which was about the customer base. One of the most important things we can do—and we are doing it—is provide confidence that we can help to find a buyer that will secure the long-term interest of the steelworks, because that is what the customer base is going to want. We are in touch with many parts of the customer base—I talked earlier about the auto and aerospace industries—and providing that confidence is going to be key to reassuring them that they do not need to look elsewhere.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the blast furnaces, which I went to see in action just last week. They are hugely important, but I do not think I am in a position to say exactly what the structure of the business should be going forward. We will work with all parties to make sure that we can secure as many jobs as possible and that steelmaking continues. Lastly, he asked about the lesser duty rule. I point out to him that it has been the long-standing view of the previous Labour Government and this Government that in general the lesser duty rule gets the right balance in terms of the interests of industry and consumers. The last two British Trade Commissioners that were sent to Brussels, both appointed by Labour and both Labour peers, strongly supported that rule. As I said earlier, what I am interested in is what actually works to help the industry and what we have seen so far is that the tariffs imposed actually work, leading to massive reductions in Chinese imports.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Labour’s Front-Bench interest in steel production is a new phenomenon; in the last Parliament, the current Leader of the Opposition mentioned steel three times, but only in relation to Trident. Given the recent grandstanding by certain elements of Welsh Labour, does my right hon. Friend agree that this contributes absolutely nothing to assisting the many Tata Port Talbot steelworkers who live in my neighbouring constituency of Gower?

Sajid Javid: I was pleased that my hon. Friend and I were able to talk in the past few days to discuss his constituents’ concerns. I agree with what he said, but I would like also to take this opportunity to reassure him that we will work closely with him and other Members to bring confidence to constituents that we truly are doing everything we can to help.
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There is a real danger that the Secretary of State is at times presenting the idea that everything has been done and that he has done everything in his power. Let us look at the issues facing the industry as a whole. On energy, we still see prices that are 89% higher than those of European competitors. On procurement, the Ministry of Defence is not even keeping records of where its steel comes from; and on tariffs, he says he will do everything, but, as we have just heard, he will not take action to scatter the lesser duty rule and to change it, and this country is being seen as the ringleader on this in Europe. What is he going to change in those industry fundamentals that will prevent us from seeing crisis after crisis after crisis in the steel industry?

Sajid Javid: Let me pick up on one of the three important issues affecting the industry that the hon. Gentleman has identified—energy costs. One reason why those costs are higher for energy-intensive industries in Britain—in fact, it is the key reason—is the Climate Change Act 2008, which he would have supported and which was introduced by the last Labour Government. [Interruption.] The Conservatives did support it, but ever since we have been working on mitigating some of the problems it created for industry. I would have thought the hon. Gentleman supported that.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): We should be under no misapprehension that the future of the global steel industry will be brutally competitive for many years to come. If my right hon. Friend is successful in finding safe harbour for the Motherwell, Scunthorpe and Port Talbot steelworks, that will be a significant accomplishment, but he must do that while upholding the lesser duty rule. The rule underpins free trade and it secures jobs in many other sectors of our economy. Regarding tariffs, some hon. Members have talked about the Americans imposing a 200% tariff, but that that was done solely because the Chinese, on that one issue, provided no information in defence. By the way, in that same instrument, the Americans put a 50% tariff on UK steel manufactured by Tata.

Sajid Javid: I always listen carefully to what my hon. Friend has to say. He is a respected member of the BIS Committee and he has deep experience in business. He is right to highlight tariffs. The concern for any Government is always to strike the right balance in taking action where there is clear evidence of dumping or unfair trading, but not going any further than that, because the people who pay the cost are consumers. Such measures are like a tax; they are hardly progressive and the poorest are hit the hardest.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Steelworkers watching this debate—including those from Llanwern and Orb in Newport, who have travelled here today as they have many times to press the Government for more action to help the industry—are asking that their businesses, with full order books and assets such as the Zodiac line in Newport, remain saleable in this crisis; that the Government act on the pension fund; and that there is a long-term industrial strategy to give potential buyers confidence. The Secretary of State’s statement has not made clearer what practical measures he will take to do that. Please will he expand on that now?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise her and her constituents’ concerns. I reassure her that we are looking at everything. I think she is aware of much of the action we have taken, but I am sure she understands that there is no magic wand here. No Government can make these problems go away overnight. These are international challenges—just in the last few days we have heard about problems in the US, Australia and many other developed economies. If she respects that, she will work with us on trying to find long-term solutions.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I commend the Government on their plans to roll out guidance on procurement practice to the entire public sector. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that UK steel companies are aware of all the bidding opportunities and how they can get in the best possible place to win the contracts?

Sajid Javid: We were the first EU country to change our procurement rules to take advantage of new flexibility to take into account economic and social factors. We have now extended that to the entire public sector—not just central Government. We are working on the visibility of the pipeline. We have £300 billion of infrastructure planned over the next five years—a huge amount of British business for British steel—and we are working with the industry and groups including UK Steel to ensure maximum visibility.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, the Secretary of State and even the Prime Minister said they were doing everything they could to keep steelmaking on Teesside. Despite knowing for months that SSI was in trouble, nothing was done. Three thousand jobs were lost, 175 years of steelmaking were gone and a town was dealt a devastating blow. So when the Secretary of State says again that he is doing everything he can to help, why should the workers of Port Talbot and anywhere else in the country believe a single word he says?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has fought hard for her constituents and is still doing a lot to help workers who lost their job. I and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise have met her and we will continue to work with those who have lost their job—of course we will—but she will also know that the situation at Redcar is not directly comparable with that at Port Talbot and Tata Steel. The business was not viable after hundreds of millions of pounds of investment and no commercial buyers were coming forward. I know it is difficult news, but the hon. Lady knows that. If we look at today’s news about Tata long products, however, we see that it is possible to find a commercial buyer.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I have no doubt that the Business Secretary is focusing on the key issues for potential investors in Port Talbot, including the pension fund and energy costs. As for a bright, long-term future for steel from Wales, may I encourage him to have early discussions with the Chancellor and the
Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change about an announcement on the chair of the marine energy review, particularly regarding the proposed tidal lagoons in south Wales, which would be an enormous boost, both to morale and in practice, to the producers of steel in south Wales?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Energy is a big issue, and will remain so for all our energy-intensive industries. The tidal lagoon is an important issue. We have begun a feasibility study, and my Department is in discussions with the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Treasury on that very issue.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): May I make it absolutely clear to the House that this is an issue relating not just to Wales or Port Talbot? It is a UK problem, and the Secretary of State will agree that it is a national issue. The 900 steelworkers in my constituency whose jobs are on the line expect him to guarantee that he will do whatever it takes to give them the future that they deserve. There was an optimistic note in what he said. He mentioned co-investment. Will he explain to the House what that is, and whether it guarantees that the Government are willing to intervene and do whatever is necessary to save our industry?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: this is a UK-wide problem. We have discussed Scotland and, of course, Wales, but it also affects south Yorkshire, Corby and many other parts of the UK so she is right to bring that to the attention of the House.

On co-investment, I said that to demonstrate that when I say that we will look at all options, we really will do so. It is possible—I do not know at this point, because the sale process has only just formally begun—that someone might come forward and ask for investment or funds from Government in lots of different ways. That has to be done on commercial terms, but that demonstrates how far the Government can go to make sure that this deal is successful.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be only too aware that customer confidence, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), is crucial. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that he, his ministerial colleagues and officials are doing all that they can regarding existing customers for British steel to assure them entirely and conclusively that the British Government are committed to a long-term future for British-made steel in this country, and that they can feel safe and secure about placing future orders?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. He is absolutely right to point out the confidence that customers and, equally, the supply chain need. Suppliers need confidence that there is a long-term business, so we are working with both suppliers and customers to provide that reassurance.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): To help prospective buyers, may I ask the Secretary of State whether the UK Government will take on the pension liability of £15 billion for 130,000 Tata workers and former workers, and will they redress the imbalance caused by the reduction of the workforce over many years, as more people now take money out of the scheme than pay into it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of pensions. I have said before that it is likely that any buyer who comes forward will want some kind of pension solution. It will be a challenge, but I can reassure her that we are looking carefully at that. We are in discussions with pension trustees, and we want to come up with something that will back the members and help to find a buyer.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I am proud of British manufacturing, and I was proud last night when Yorkshire golfer Danny Willett pulled on his green jacket at Augusta, as the cloth in that jacket was woven and dyed in my constituency, on the outskirts of Huddersfield. I am also proud of the HS2 infrastructure project. Will the Business Secretary confirm that he will do everything he can, with the full support of the House, to put British steel at the heart of the transformational HS2 project?

Sajid Javid: I am sure the whole House congratulates Danny Willett on his victory. On my hon. Friend’s question about HS2, projects by National Rail have used 98% British steel and Crossrail has used 95% British steel. Aircraft carriers procured by the Government have used over 90% British steel, and we will do everything we can to make sure that British steel is used in HS2.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In his statement the Secretary of State admitted that UK Government Ministers knew in advance about Tata’s intentions for Port Talbot, and a Welsh Government Minister recently boasted in the Financial Times that the Welsh Government knew before Christmas, yet neither Government were present at the crisis meeting in Mumbai when the fate of the plants was determined. That does not contrast particularly well with the decisive action of the Scottish Government, who nationalised Tata’s operations in Scotland to facilitate a private sale. Is it a case, once again, of the Welsh economy and the Welsh workforce being let down by a careless Tory Government here in Westminster and by a complacent Labour Government in Wales?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman’s comments could not be further from the truth. The meeting in Mumbai that he refers to was a board meeting to decide whether to accept the decision that was being made by the executive management of Tata Steel from the CEO downwards. If the British Government had waited for that meeting and just turned up at that time, it would have been too little, too late. Action was required weeks before that, so when we first heard about closure, we took action. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that a sales process that has the ability to secure the workers’ future is far better than outright closure.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Last week I had a meeting with constituents in Suffolk who are heavily involved in the steel industry. We spoke about now, but we also spoke about the future and how to use innovation more effectively in the sector. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my constituents with a view to
extending research and development credits to the steel sector to support the 21st-century steel industry that Members across the House have been talking about?

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. In some parts of the UK where steel plants are based there are enhanced credits and capital allowances through enterprise zones. She makes an interesting suggestion about R and D tax credits that could help the industry more widely, so of course I will meet her.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): When the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box, he has to be careful about what he says. In his statement he referred to the £80 million promised to Redcar. I would dispute that figure in relation to what has been delivered in our area in the past six months. Today in our all-party parliamentary group meeting the Secretary of State did not rule out the option of Tata potentially remaining in situ at all steel sites, not just in relation to strip products. What types of co-investment plans can he put forward to the House so that we can discuss on the Floor of the House the options available for UK steel?

**Sajid Javid:** I know that the hon. Gentleman means well and has fought hard for his constituents, but I am sure he understands that in trying to secure a deal, it would not be in the interests of such a deal if the commercial terms were discussed on the Floor of the House. When buyers approach us or approach Tata, many aspects will be commercially sensitive. Some potential buyers will not even want to reveal that they are in discussions, and we must respect that or we risk losing a deal. I hope the hon. Gentleman can respect that too.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Surely the only way to secure a long-term future for the British steel industry is to stop Chinese dumping. The Americans have imposed a 266% tariff on Chinese products. The British Government cannot do so because we are in the EU. Does the Business Secretary agree that it would be in the interests of the British steel industry if the Government imposed a 266% tariff now and worried about the EU later?

**Sajid Javid:** I know what my hon. Friend means by that, but I think that what he is really interested in, as I am, is tariffs that actually work. The right level to have imposed higher tariffs, but if they are too high they will hurt the rest of industry and consumers and they will cost thousands of jobs down the supply chain. Where the EU has imposed tariffs, driven by evidence, the results have been a massive fall in imports. In steel, for example, a 13% tariff led to a 99% fall.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The European Commission wants to move away from the lesser duty rule. Quite simply, the problem is that when it is in place the duty that can be imposed will always be far less than the margin of the dumping. Can the Secretary of State be clear: was the Eurofer spokesman right when he said that the UK Government were “certainly the ringleader” in blocking its reform?

**Sajid Javid:** The first thing to say about the lesser duty rule is that the duty that it leads to is either one that stops the dumping or one that right the injury caused to industry. That is how the tariff is actually calculated. Again, all the evidence suggests that it actually leads to results, and what the hon. Gentleman really wants is results. He is absolutely wrong to suggest that it is the British Government who are blocking this. He will know that no single Government can block it, because a blocking minority at least would be needed. As I have said, if he has a suggestion that is particularly targeted at steel, I am willing to listen.

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): My right hon. Friend quite rightly began his statement by saying that the collapse in the global steel price is a human tragedy. Will he update the House on the measures that are being taken to support workers in our steel communities?

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. Where there have been job losses—we talked about Redcar earlier—the Government have worked with local councils and others to try to secure further investment for the area, both domestically and from abroad, to try to replace those lost jobs. We have introduced other measures, such as skills training, reskilling workers so that they are ready to take new jobs. There are probably many more things that we can do. We are often led by the local areas, because each area is different, and we will continue to do that. That will be a priority.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The Secretary of State needs to realise that this crisis affects the whole UK steel industry, not just Port Talbot. We need action that will give us the time—time is key here—to find a secure future for all the UK plants.

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that time is key. That is why I was keen to meet Tata last week in Mumbai and to try to get those reassurances. I believe that I have got those reassurances. Again, ultimately the control of time will be with the seller, but I have every reason to believe that Tata will be a responsible seller.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and commend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise for her tireless work in keeping me and my neighbouring colleagues in north Lincolnshire up to date about the Scunthorpe situation. I also commend the workforce at Scunthorpe for the extremely responsible approach that they have taken. Will my right hon. Friend elaborate on how he will ensure that public sector infrastructure and construction projects actually use British-manufactured steel?

**Sajid Javid:** I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the news today about Scunthorpe and Tata long products. That is 4,000 jobs secured, which is obviously hugely welcome news and a vote of confidence in the British steel industry. He asks about the pipeline and procurement and how we can ensure that more of it is British. The changes that we have already made to procurement rules, where economic and social factors can be taken into account, will help to achieve just that. At the same time, with the large industrial infrastructure projects
down the line, we can also help by giving steel manufacturers a lot more visibility, and that is exactly what we are looking at through the steel council.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Business rates on plant and machinery are effectively a tax on investment, and they have comprised a very significant element of the cocktail of costs that have so seriously undermined the steel industry. It was rumoured before the last Budget that plant and machinery would be made exempt. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that was so and explain why it did not happen? Will that be reconsidered in putting together a package for any future buyer of Port Talbot?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of business rates, because that has come up time and again from the industry, so it is right to look at it. One of the issues is that a change in business rates could be a rather blunt instrument, especially in the steel industry; if we look at the total cost of making that change and at just how little of that would flow down to industry, there might be better and more focused ways of doing that. Having said that, where there are large steel operations, such as Port Talbot in Wales, there might be something that could be done. As he will know, business rates are devolved, but we are talking about this issue with the Welsh Government.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State acknowledge a few minutes ago the part that high electricity prices—caused in part by the Climate Change Act 2008—have played in the unfortunate situation with steel and other energy-intensive industries. I am very concerned that the carbon price floor in the UK, at £18.08 per tonne, adds to the £5.30 per tonne in the EU, placing a burden on UK energy-intensive industries that is four and a half times that of our European neighbours. I know that he has done a lot to alleviate this burden with direct assistance, but does he agree that now might be a good time to look again at reducing the carbon price floor?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right that energy costs are a very important issue for the industry, especially when compared with these in other countries in Europe. He is right to point out the action that we have taken, with compensation now moving to exemption. There are other ways to help, and we are actively looking at them. One way is to look at more renewable power sources, which are exempt from many of the costs—a colleague mentioned the tidal lagoon earlier. There are certainly other ways that we can help, and we are looking at all those options.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I have submitted two freedom of information requests and numerous written parliamentary questions to see the Secretary of State’s secretive BIS 2020 plan. Well, now we know why he has wanted to keep the plan secret, because it proposes cutting more than 4,000 jobs and 40% of the Insolvency Service’s staff, who have been working flat out since the steel crisis began to unfold. These proposals go far beyond what the Chancellor has asked the Secretary of State for from his Department. Given the deepening crisis, will the Secretary of State go back to the drawing board and rethink those ill-thought-through plans that will make his job so much harder?

Sajid Javid: Mr Speaker, I am not sure what that has to do with steel.

Mr Speaker: Well, that is a matter—[ Interruption. ] Order. That is a matter of interpretation, and the right hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled so to interpret.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome the steps that my right hon. Friend is taking in the face of very challenging global trends in the steel sector. I am also very grateful for the work that he has been doing to help pharmaceutical science across the UK to be repurposed and revitalised in the face of very challenging global trends. Does he agree that there are lessons there that could be passed on to the steel sector?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend. Where jobs are sadly lost in any industry, especially on a large scale, we should look at ways of regenerating the local area. We talked earlier about the sad loss of jobs in Redcar. One of the pieces of work that Lord Heseltine is leading on is how we can attract more inward investment and what tools we can use to regenerate such areas and create more jobs.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): May I pay tribute to all the people who have worked hard in the Scunthorpe area and elsewhere to put in place the sale subject to contract that we have today? I pay particular tribute to the trade unions, the workforce, the management team and the suppliers, in addition to Tata and Greybull—it has taken a lot of hard work over nine months to get to where we are today. In his statement, the Secretary of State referred to “a commercial offer on financing if required”. My understanding is that there are three subjects to contract that need dealing with, and one of those is financing. Will he make it unequivocally clear that the Government will do everything necessary to make sure that that is not a barrier to the deal going ahead, and will he also tackle the other UK-based issue of the caveat that is still in place?

Sajid Javid: Let me join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the news about Tata long products and Scunthorpe; it is very encouraging, and I am sure it will bring some relief to him and his constituents. I also join him in congratulating not only Tata and Greybull on working together to secure a deal, but the unions, the pension trustees and the others involved in making it happen. He asked specifically about financing, and the Government’s involvement in it. As I mentioned earlier, we have been involved in the transaction from day one, and we have put on the table an offer of Government financing on commercial terms. That offer stands; should it need to be drawn down, it is clearly there to help make this deal happen.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Having taken part in a cross-party visit to the Corby site last week—I am grateful to the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise for coming along as well—I am very confident in the plan that has been drawn up to secure the site’s future. However, implementing it will require not only time but investment, and the business rate system at the moment penalises that very investment. What will the Secretary of State do to put a stop to that and to send a crucial sign of confidence from the Government?
Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for how he has approached this issue, which is hugely important to him and his constituents. I hope the Business Minister’s visit last week helped to build confidence and to show that the Government are looking at a variety of ways to help. My hon. Friend mentions business rates, which are an important part of costs, and we have looked at them before. All I can say at this point is that we will continue to keep all taxes under review, particularly in the steel sector, to see what other ways we can help.

Steve Rotheram: The Secretary of State has spoken about looking at all options in regard to saving jobs, so will he assure the House and steelworkers that if he does develop a co-investment package to save jobs, he will include the unions at every stage of its development?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that. Again, let me say that the approach of the unions has been very constructive and positive, and it is absolutely key. I highlighted earlier the involvement of the Community union—probably the union I have had most to do with on this issue—with Tata strip. The people who run the union, and its members, understand that there is a role for everyone, and we will of course share information with them.

Craig Williams: May I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement today? More broadly, may I also thank my right hon. Friend. The Secretary of State for Wales and the Labour First Minister in Wales for working constructively with the Community union and for looking at everything we can do for Tata Steel in south Wales? The Government are absolutely right to support anti-dumping measures at EU level with our EU neighbours and partners. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that those measures are starting to have a very real effect?

Sajid Javid: First, let me, too, commend the First Minister in Wales for his constructive approach. Let me also commend Andrew R. T. Davies, the leader of the Conservative group in Wales, on how he has approached this issue, with Tata strip. The people who run the union, and its members, understand that there is a role for everyone, and we will of course share information with them.

John Woodcock: Why can the Secretary of State not just admit that there is a secret deal, which everybody knows about, and that the Chancellor has promised to pull his punches on any effective action against steel dumping so that investment from China keeps flowing into this country?

Sajid Javid: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman gets that idea from. I talked earlier about the action that we have led. The UK Government have led the way, asking the EU to work even faster. Back in November, for example, I called for—and went to—an extraordinary meeting of the Competitiveness Council so that it could take more action. That will not change.

Ben Howlett: I appreciate all the work the Secretary of State is doing to work with steelworkers, and he should be commended for that. I also welcome the fact that he is already looking at what more can be done to relocate some of the employees who might end up needing to find new jobs. As he will know, we have a shortage of engineers and manufacturers in the west of England. Given that I was at Rolls-Royce last week, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has worked with that company and other companies before to relocate employees who have lost their employment, will he make a commitment today to do the same if employment is lost at Tata Steel in Wales?

Sajid Javid: I am very positive, and I think that if all of us—the Government, the unions, Tata, the Welsh Government and others—work together, we can have a successful conclusion. Of course, my hon. Friend is right to think about the possibility that, even then, we could have some job losses. In such cases, we will do everything we can, first, to regenerate the area, but also to make sure that where there are skills shortages in nearby areas—certainly those within travelling distance—we can be clever and bring the two issues together.

George Kerevan: May I press the Minister further on pensions, particularly the legacy pensions paid under the British Steel pension scheme? If companies taking over Tata assets are unwilling—wholly or in part—to take over the existing funding of the pensions, or if Tata’s main board in India is unwilling, as seems likely, to maintain the fund at its necessary strength, will the Government step in? If that is precluded under current EU rules, will they upfund the national Pension Protection Fund to ensure that it can step in?

Sajid Javid: We are looking at options and potential solutions around pensions if there is a buyer that, as I think is likely, does not want to take on some of the legacy costs. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I do not think EU rules are an issue here. There are other challenges, of course, but we are looking creatively at solutions. I would not want to say too much about that now, but I want to reassure him that this issue is front-of-mind as we deal with this challenge.

Suella Fernandes: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his team on acting decisively and quickly to do all they can to safeguard this national industry? Does he agree that part of the solution lies in bringing forward some of the large infrastructure projects that are planned in, for example, the transport sector? Will he update the House on what future opportunities there are in that regard?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have set out an infrastructure pipeline of more than £300 billion in investment—the largest in any five-year period—and many of the projects have been announced. With the changes in procurement rules and those investment plans, we can make a difference like never before and do everything we can in every project to make sure that British steel is used.

Jo Stevens: I am sure the Secretary of State’s civil servants in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have been working extremely hard to try to safeguard the 40,000 Welsh steel and supplier jobs that are at immediate risk, just as the staff at the Insolvency Service were critical in ensuring that...
the Redcar workers got their redundancy payments. Will he therefore reassure my constituents that the hundreds of BIS jobs losses at the critical Insolvency Service in Cardiff, which were outlined in his McKinsey report, will not happen, adding to the misery of Welsh workers?

Sajid Javid: What I can assure the hon. Lady of is that any job reductions that are, sadly, taking place in BIS or any other Department—there are more Departments involved in this than just BIS, although, of course, we are the lead Department—will not have an impact on our ability to help and to handle the steel crisis.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The UK-wide impact of the issue was demonstrated by last week’s statement by the Torbay Tourism Association, which indicated the likely impact on the bay of job losses in south Wales, given the number of people we welcome from that area each year. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that it is vital that the Government keep all options on the table so that an attractive option can be made available to a purchaser of the plants under threat, and our steel industry can have a long-term and viable package?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the fact that the jobs at risk are not just the obvious ones in the steel industry itself; there is a knock-on impact on tourism, as he has said, and on other jobs in the supply chain, which was mentioned earlier. I reassure him that we are genuinely looking at all options, and we will absolutely continue to do so.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the issue of pensions is at the front of his mind. Will he reassure me further by saying what guarantees on pensions he is seeking from Tata as part of the sale, and can he guarantee that none of the pensioners in my constituency who have given their lives to Tata over many years will be worse off as a result of the sale?

Sajid Javid: What I can tell the right hon. Gentleman is that Tata is fully aware of its obligations, both legal and otherwise, on the pension scheme. I hope it will say more about that when it publishes its information memorandum. I am very much focused on making sure that the challenges of the pension scheme do not become an issue with regard to finding and securing a buyer. That is why we are talking to the trustees, to try to work together to make sure that the members’ interests are looked after and, at the same time, that we have the best chance of securing a sale.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State’s newfound robustness in his attitude towards China, can he assure us that he will no longer block the EU’s attempts to ensure that China is not granted market economy status, which would not only affect the steel industry to the tune of thousands of jobs, but cost up to 2,500 jobs in my own constituency?

Sajid Javid: The decision on market economy status is for the EU collectively to make. I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that any country, including China, that wants market economy status has to earn it. To do so, China says it is cutting overcapacity, and I think that the EU would want to see evidence of that. Let me further reassure her that even when countries such as Russia do have market economy status, that does not stop the EU taking defensive action, including on dumping.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Secretary of State rightly gives credit to the Scottish Government, and I am proud to say that Scottish steel has a bright future, thanks to the diligence of our First Minister and Fergus Ewing, our Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism. What lessons have been learned from the process in Scotland, and will a solid commitment be given today to provide proper support in the interim period until an alternative operator can be found for plants in England and Wales?

Sajid Javid: As I have said, I am very pleased about the fact that the mills in Scotland have been saved and that those jobs have been secured, but I hope the hon. Lady will agree that the reason those mills have a very bright and secure future is the strength of the British economy. Had Scotland been independent, I think the outlook would have been very different. The hon. Lady wants reassurance that we will do everything we can for steel businesses in other parts of the UK, and that is exactly what we will do.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Tata Steel has invested hundreds of millions of pounds in Port Talbot in recent years. Along with Swansea University, it has developed multi-layered steel that generates its own electricity and that therefore has a negative carbon footprint when it clads buildings. Will the Secretary of State consider the possibility of minority equity shareholding in Tata Steel, to show that we are all in it together and to get a margin from Government procurement? At the very least, will he match Tata Steel on any offer he gives to prospective buyers, including help with the pension funds?

Sajid Javid: I know that the hon. Gentleman has worked hard on this issue and he has suggested some other good ideas. When I visited Port Talbot for the third time last week, I saw the power plant as well as the blast furnaces. I saw how they worked together and also learned about some of the recent investment that has taken place and the efficiency it provides. He is absolutely right to highlight that. On the question of whether we would consider investing alongside others, I said earlier that we would look at co-investment. I am trying to make it clear that no option is off the table.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Labour has repeatedly called for an industrial strategy to support UK steel and manufacturing. Given the current crisis, which has grown under the Secretary of State’s watch, does he agree that that is now essential?

Sajid Javid: We have an industrial strategy. People can choose to focus on the semantics—they can call it an industrial strategy or an industrial policy—or they can actually look at the results. As I said earlier, one of the reasons that manufacturing output, sales, employment and exports are all up in the last five years is that this Government have a successful industrial policy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of Tata long products jobs in design consultancy in York will be saved on completion of the Greybull
Capital project. However, we are concerned about the wider productivity plan, in particular with regard to wider support for the supply chain and maintaining confidence in it. What is the Secretary of State doing to support that?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has had some recent discussions on this issue. I think the hon. Lady is aware of that. She is right to raise the issue of productivity more generally. I do not think it is an issue of productivity in our steel industry. If we look at the output of our workers in the British steel industry, we will see that they are second to none in terms of their productivity. We should take this opportunity to commend the hard work of those men and women. Productivity more generally in the UK economy has been a long-running issue. The supply chain is one of the ways to deal with that, especially with regard to import substitution. I think that is where steel has a big role to play, because there are still too many steel imports and I think that a lot of that steel can be purchased here at home.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Given the issue’s importance to the UK economy, the Government ought to have recalled Parliament in the same way that the Welsh Assembly was recalled to debate this very important topic. Given that the Chinese have the capacity to destroy British steel through a double whammy of dumping cheap steel from China and placing exorbitant tariffs on British steel in China, will the Government think again about their approach to the European Union’s lesser duty rule? Will they also have a serious think about granting market economy status to China, which would be unacceptable, given the current situation with British steel?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to tariffs, what I am interested in is what actually works. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to study the results—to look at the action the EU has taken and then to look at the result of that action. He will find that, in almost every case, there has been a reduction in imports of more than 80% and sometimes, as I mentioned earlier with regard to rebar, some 99%. As I have said, and I will say it again, if the hon. Gentleman has a particular idea that is focused on steel—because that is the real issue in British industry right now, and that is what I and he want to focus on—I am willing to listen to him.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): More than half of UK steel exports go to the European Union. Does the Secretary of State, who is now a fervent Eurosceptic, think, agree that exit from the European Union would be devastating to the industry?

Sajid Javid: Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that we have to do everything we can to help British industry and British manufacturing, and I think that the long-term interest of the British economy is to remain in the EU.
in 1998; in addition, there were two Government leaflets
during the Scottish referendum in 2014. Government
publications of that kind, and the distribution of a
Government leaflet, are entirely lawful. Special rules
limiting all Government publications and communications
will apply in the last 28 days of the referendum campaign
under the provisions of the Political Parties, Elections
and Referendums Act 2000.

The text of the leaflet is 16 pages in length. It will be
delivered to households in England from 11 to 13 April,
ahead of England’s local election purdah, and to households
in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland throughout
the week commencing 9 May, to avoid disrupting the
pre-election period in those parts of the United Kingdom.
The total cost will be £9.3 million, which is equivalent
to 34p for each household in the country.

The Electoral Commission will shortly announce the
designation of the two overall campaign groups, ahead
of the 10-week official campaign period that leads up to
polling day. Those two groups, in addition to having a
higher spending limit of £7 million apiece, will each be
entitled to the publicly funded delivery of a leaflet of its
own, which will be sent to every household or to every
elector, as the campaign group chooses. That benefit
will be worth up to £15 million each for the designated
leave and remain campaigns. The two campaigns will
also be entitled to campaign broadcasts on television,
the use of certain public rooms and a public grant of up
to £600,000. That is in addition to the Electoral
Commission’s own leaflet to every household, in which
each campaign will be given a page.

Whether the United Kingdom should remain in or
leave the European Union is a huge decision for this
country. It is right that it should be a decision for
the British people as a whole. Equally, it is right that people
have the facts in front of them and understand the
reasons for the Government’s recommendation before
they go to the polls.

6.25 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank the
Minister for his statement and for giving me early sight
of it.

It is perfectly reasonable for the Government of the
day to set out their position and the facts about our
membership of the EU, just as the Labour Government
did in the 1975 referendum when they published their
famous red, white and blue leaflet. Indeed, the Government
have an obligation to explain their view, not least because
this is the biggest political choice the British people
have an obligation to explain their view, not least because
that has come at a price. That price has included acceptance
for example, of the losses we have lost control of our borders,
even though, as the Government’s leaflet helpfully explains:

“The UK is not part of the EU’s border-free zone—we control
our own borders which gives us the right to check everyone,
including EU nationals, arriving from continental Europe”—
in the way that I was checked this morning?

Will the Minister confirm that, if we left the EU, in
order to retain full access to the single market, we would
need to continue to make a contribution to the EU
budget, allow free movement of workers and abide by
rules made by the remaining member states, and that that
is what Norway has to do to get access to the largest
single market in the world? Can he further confirm to
those who advocate a trade deal like that which Canada
has with the EU that the negotiation of that deal took
seven years, and that the agreement excludes important
sectors from free trade?

The truth is that those who advocate Brexit cannot
say what the UK leaving the EU would look like. Many
Conservative Members have spent decades wanting Britain
to break away from Europe, but still they cannot tell us
what it looks like. Rather than spending their time
attacking the Government’s booklet, perhaps they would
do well to work out what it looks like and share that
with the rest of us before 23 June.

Has the Minister seen a leaflet entitled “The UK and
the European Union: The Facts”, which has been posted
to many households? It claims to be a neutral document
sheding light on the complex issue of the EU referendum,
but only when we get to the very small print on the back
do we discover that it has, in fact, been produced by
Vote Leave. Does he agree that there should be greater
transparency, and a much bigger typeface, in such
publications so that the public can discover just who is
behind all this?

Labour is campaigning for Britain to remain in Europe
because of the jobs, growth, investment and protection
for British workers and consumers that depend on our
continued EU membership. Leaving would put all that
at risk and diminish Britain’s influence in the world. We
are clear: Britain is better off in Europe.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her
words of support. On the specific questions she posed, I
can certainly confirm that, since we are outside the
Schengen no borders area, we can and do apply border
checks to people seeking to enter this country, including
EU nationals and, as she said, UK nationals as well.

It is indeed the case that, where other countries—the
hon. Lady cited Norway—have sought and obtained
access to the European Union’s free trade single market,
that has come at a price. That price has included acceptance
of the principle of freedom of movement for workers,
an obligation to pay into the European Union’s budget
and, critically, an acceptance that the country concerned
will implement European Union rules, including on
product standards, without being present at the table,
having a say or having a vote on how those rules should
be made. Part of the Government’s case is indeed that
the interests of British business and the interests of jobs
and growth in the United Kingdom are served by our
having a role in leading and shaping the direction of the
Mr Lidington: What the leaflet we are dealing with this afternoon does is explain the Government’s case in plain English. It can readily be understood by people who have not studied every detail of European Union treaties for the past several years. It explains that in clear language, but it is not over-egging the pudding. It is phrased and the argument is expressed in an extremely sober manner, and I hope people will find that argument persuasive.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister accept that this leaflet is not so much “Project Fear” as “Project Slightly Worrying”, because it has been dumbed down, but is it not an abuse of public money and an insult to the electors, and does he not realise that it will drive many more people to vote to leave?

Mr Lidington: I return to what I said earlier: there is clear evidence from the independent polling research—its methodology has been published by the company concerned on its website—that more information is wanted by the British public. That research finding bears out what I and, I suspect, many other hon. Members on both sides of the House are finding anecdotally in conversations with constituents. I now spend time virtually every day signing replies to Members of Parliament, who have enclosed letters from constituents saying they feel they do not yet have enough information on which to make an informed decision and would like to have some more.

I hope that people will look carefully at what the Government are arguing, that they will look at the arguments put forward by the two campaign groups, to a decision about what they believe to be in the best interests of the United Kingdom as a whole. That is how the Government are approaching this matter.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Minister will try as hard as he can to bluster, but the reality is that the public will see through it and realise that this leaflet is deeply unfair. On one fact—“Over 3 million UK jobs are linked to exports to the EU”—the Government have deliberately conflated trade with countries in the EU with EU membership. He knows very well that it is not necessary to be a member of the EU to trade with the EU. With this leaflet, the public know that the Government—the Prime Minister, in particular—now realise they are on the wrong side of the argument and will lose on 23 June.

Mr Lidington: I think the hon. Lady really wishes that the Government should be neutral in this debate. The Government are not neutral. We are advocating that the British people should vote in favour of continued membership of the European Union. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor, other Ministers and I consistently said that, when the time came for the referendum to be held, the Government would express
our view clearly and make our recommendation known, so we are delivering on what we have said to the British people.

As regards the hon. Lady’s question about one particular element in the leaflet, the footnotes that support each of the statements have themselves been published online by the Government, and she and other hon. Members are welcome to check the source material.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): The weakness in my right hon. Friend’s case is that this “Dodgy Dossier: the Sequel” does not actually contain facts; it contains opinions, assertions and suppositions. Not only is it a waste of public money, but in effectively doubling the remain campaign’s budget, the Government have betrayed any sense of fairness in the process of the referendum and, with the content of the leaflet, have abdicated their responsibility to tell the truth on the issues. It is bad enough getting junk mail, but to have Juncker mail sent to us with our own taxes is the final straw.

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), the source materials for the various facts and arguments presented in the Government’s leaflet have themselves been published. We are being completely transparent about the basis on which we are making those arguments to the British people.

As I said earlier, we are following the precedent set in many other referendum campaigns in this country. We are doing nothing that will stop the two campaign organisations putting their case to the British people, in due course, with as much vigour as they choose. In the final 28 days of the campaign, the Government’s ability to communicate or publish at all on these matters will be severely limited not just by purdah guidance but by statute law itself. I reject the notion that this leaflet is somehow unfair. The Government are taking responsibility for presenting their case and recommendation to the British people on a decision that will have enormous consequences not just for those voting this year but for future generations.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Ten years of uncertainty; economic security at an end; household prices will go up; and world peace and stability questioned—does the Minister agree that these so-called facts are the very ones that are disputed, and for that reason this document should come with a very significant and heavy health warning? The British people believe in fairness and fair play. It is the fundamental unfairness of this document that, in the words of Lord Lawson, is “a scandal”, and the Minister should Resile from it.

Mr Lidington: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the detailed notes on the various statements made in the leaflet. He quoted Lord Lawson at me; he and others representing Northern Ireland might ponder Lord Lawson’s view, expressed over the weekend, that in the event of a British departure from the European Union, border controls would need to be established on the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The hon. Gentleman might also wish to consider the serious adverse impact on Northern Ireland businesses of a British departure from the European Union.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend must accept not only that any reasonable person would regard this leaflet as propaganda—as is already being said in all the national newspapers and in blogs right the way across the land—but that it is unfair to the British taxpayer, who is having to bear the burden of the leaflet’s cost. Will he please explain to me personally why he has broken the undertaking that he gave to me on the Floor of the House when debating the 2015 Act? I had put forward an amendment calling for accuracy and impartiality, and when I said I would withdraw my amendment if he was prepared to say that that would be the case, he said that information would “certainly” be accurate and impartial. This leaflet is not. Will he explain to the House why he has broken that undertaking?

Mr Lidington: I reject that assertion. My hon. Friend’s intervention on 8 December last year was specifically about information brought forward under the terms of the Lords amendments that have subsequently been incorporated into the 2015 Act, and, as I said earlier, this leaflet is outwith the scope of the obligations under that Act. I also refer him, as I have referred other hon. Members, to the fact that the Government have published the factual and statistical evidence upon which each of the statements made in the leaflet is based. Now, if my hon. Friend wants to go away and challenge some of those findings—the statistical surveys or the independent reports that we cite in those footnotes—he is free to do so, but I believe that the Government have acted reasonably and responsibly in presenting their case clearly to the British people.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am very pleasantly surprised that the Government have decided to issue an EU leaflet. Does the Minister agree that, in publishing the leaflet, they are simply responding to the huge public appetite for more information, which will enable the comprehensive demolition of many Euromyths—for example, that the European Union stops the recycling of teabags or prevents children under the age of eight from blowing up balloons—that are peddled by some of the Brexitters?

Mr Lidington: I hope that when people have read both the information that the Government have published and other available information they will judge, as Ministers have on behalf of the Government, that membership of the European Union makes the United Kingdom stronger, safer and better off than it would be outside it.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): This really is a crass move by the Government. It will hugely galvanise those who want to leave the European Union and will do nothing to bring people onside for the remain campaign. It is also in total breach of the guidelines set out by the Venice Commission, which make it very clear that if there is to be a balanced presentation, the view of the opposing side should be expressed. Will the Minister make £9 million available to the leave campaign?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, we judge that the benefit to the leave campaign—and, for that matter, to the remain campaign, once both are designated—of a publicly funded leaflet distribution will be of the order...
of £15 million, which is significantly more than the sums we are talking about this afternoon. Those two campaign bodies will be free to campaign and communicate right up until polling day, including during the final 28 days, during which time the Government’s freedom to do so will be severely constrained. I will also just say to my right hon. Friend that I have never felt that those who support a British exit needed much galvanising.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): EU membership is very valuable for Wales and Plaid Cymru is very much in favour both of reform and of remaining within the EU; we believe another Europe is possible, and will be campaigning for that. I am, however, dismayed by the negativity of the Government’s campaign, effected in much of the leaflet, which even the BBC managed to label this morning as “snappily titled”. Will the Minister concede the possibility that he may be repeating the mistakes of “Project Fear”? I add, if I may, that the online version of the leaflet, which is available now irrespective of the Welsh Assembly and Scottish elections, does not appear to be available in Welsh—although, exceptionally in this case, possibly thankfully so.

Mr Lidington: I do not agree that this is negative. When people are considering how to vote on 23 June, they will want to weigh up both the arguments about the benefits that the United Kingdom gains from membership of the European Union and the potential risks of departure and of trying to forge some other kind of relationship with the EU from the outside.

I make no secret of the fact that the judgment about whether we should remain members of the European Union is a pragmatic one, both for the Government and, I think, for most British voters. We accept that not everything about the European Union is perfect—one cannot be European Minister for six years and believe that it is perfect—but we believe that the clear balance of the argument lies in continued membership that will help to keep us more secure and prosperous, and we have tried to express that in this publication.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I have received many inquiries from constituents who are eager to know more about the Government’s position, and I warmly welcome this decision. Outside the incestuous hothouse called the Palace of Westminster, and under the baleful influence of much of our dismal press, almost all grown-up sane opinion will want to know what the Government’s position is and how they intend to present their case.

Mr Lidington: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents are concerned about the impact of loosening or cutting our ties with our biggest market and closest allies, and they want more information, especially at a time when the media will be dominated by a Murdoch-driven, anti-EU press, and the BBC has been dumbed down to give equal weight to propaganda from the flat-earthers, rather than a rational evaluation of the merits of continued EU membership. Will the Minister undertake not just to publish a leaflet, but to do much more with posters, TV and other media, to ensure that Britain can make a rational judgment?

Mr Lidington: I cannot make the commitment that the hon. Gentleman asks for, but the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers will, on behalf of the Government, continue to press as strongly and persuasively as they can the case for Britain's prosperity and security to be served by continued membership of a reformed European Union.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I remind my right hon. Friend of what he said when replying to the Second Reading debate on the European Union Referendum Act 2015:

“The question I take from the debate is this: how do we provide the credible assurances that give effect to what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said—that the Government will be restrained in their use of public money and have no wish to compete with the umbrella campaign organisations whose job it will be to lead the yes and no campaigns?”—[Official Report, 9 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 1151.]

What does he regret more—the fact that this public money is likely to be entirely wasted and achieve the opposite of his intention, or the damage to the Government’s reputation for straight dealing on this issue?

Mr Lidington: If my hon. Friend would like to check Hansard, he will find that the comments by the Foreign Secretary to which I was referring were about whether the Government might be thinking of spending public money to deliver doorstep mailshots in the last four weeks of the campaign, and I assure him that they have no such intention. I reiterated that when replying to the debate and referring to the Foreign Secretary’s remarks, and I said more or less the same thing on Report on 7 September last year.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The turnout for the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 was 85%. What target are the Government setting themselves for voter turnout, and what measures are they taking to replicate the huge successes of democratic engagement in Scotland?

Mr Lidington: I will not set an arbitrary target, but for a decision of this importance we want registration and turnout to be as high as can be achieved. I hope that everybody—young or old; English, Scottish, Northern Irish or Welsh—will take part in this key democratic decision. As I said, the Government’s leaflet and website contain links to the procedures that electors should use to ensure that they are properly registered before the deadline. In addition to what the Government are doing, the Electoral Commission is conducting its own awareness campaign, with a view to trying to maximise registration and voter turnout.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made much of the precedent set by the Government in sending out leaflets in other referendums, but I am afraid that people will see this as double standards. In the Welsh referendum on further devolution, the Government decided to remain strictly neutral, believing that people were more likely to trust the outcome of that referendum if they did so. Will the
Minister take it from me that this is a matter of trust. How will people trust the Government now when they are so blatantly trying to load the dice?

Mr Lidington: There is a key difference, which my right hon. Friend alluded to when she said that the Government decided to remain strictly neutral during the Welsh referendum. The Government are not neutral in this referendum; they are advocating and recommending a particular outcome, and our decision about the publication of information flows from that principle.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on the informative and well-written booklet that dropped through my door this morning, but may I suggest a little more balance on red tape? For example, north Staffordshire’s biggest private sector employer, bet365 and the owner of Stoke City, can only dream of having one set of regulations in a fully fledged single market in future, rather than 28—or more—at the moment. Indeed, that simplification makes EU membership very attractive to many businesses, so perhaps in May the Government should issue a follow-up booklet to expand in more depth on those tangible benefits to the UK.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman hits on an important point. Although the single market is successful when it comes to trade in goods, it is insufficiently developed for trade in services. We must do more—indeed, we are leading the debate in Europe on the liberalisation of services and the simplification of product standards and regulations. Particularly for an economy such as ours, in which roughly 80% of GDP derives from the services sector, it would be a major risk to turn ourselves from being the shapers of new rules on services trade to the takers of rules set by other European countries, with us absent from the table.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): This House passed legislation that specifically allowed the Government to produce this leaflet as long as it was not in the last 28 days of the referendum campaign, so it is possible that some of the indignation is a touch overdone. Does the Minister agree that it is a strange strategy when, instead of arguing the case, as soon as anyone—whether the Governor the Bank of England, the President of the United States, the CBI or even, ludicrously, the British tape? For example, north Staffordshire’s biggest private sector employer, bet365 and the owner of Stoke City, can only dream of having one set of regulations in a fully fledged single market in future, rather than 28—or more—at the moment. Indeed, that simplification makes EU membership very attractive to many businesses, so perhaps in May the Government should issue a follow-up booklet to expand in more depth on those tangible benefits to the UK.

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very severely constrained in what they are able to do. What we have done on this occasion is in line with the precedent set by Conservative and Labour Governments in the past and I see absolutely nothing wrong or inappropriate in what we have done.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Minister will know that the Social Democratic and Labour party will campaign strongly to remain in the EU. He must also know, however, that few of my constituents will find this leaflet from the UK Government particularly authoritative or persuasive on these issues. Do not the Government also face the problem that many people reading the leaflet will see that it is premised on the so-called special status that the Government say they have secured, even though the Government were going to campaign to leave the EU if they did not secure it? How would the Government have addressed the risks that they are now talking about if they had adopted that position?

Mr Lidington: The Government’s position was announced after the February European Council this year, at which we secured important reforms to the European Union, in particular those that carve us out of the notion of ever closer political union and ensure no discrimination by eurozone countries against those that have chosen not to join the euro. I believe that the leaflet presents arguments that even people in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency might find persuasive once they have aimed off from the fact that it comes from the United Kingdom Government. I know that he and his party colleagues will be campaigning strongly for continued British membership and I very much welcome that fact.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Patience rewarded. I was rather worried about the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and I would not want him to be perturbed in any way.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I sometimes get worried about myself.

May I inform my right hon. Friend that the Public Administration Committee is receiving evidence to suggest that this is going to be a less fair referendum even than the one held in 1975 before there were any authoritative or persuasive on these issues. Do not the Government also face the problem that many people reading the leaflet will see that it is premised on the so-called special status that the Government say they have secured, even though the Government were going to campaign to leave the EU if they did not secure it? How would the Government have addressed the risks that they are now talking about if they had adopted that position?

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Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I sometimes get worried about myself.

May I inform my right hon. Friend that the Public Administration Committee is receiving evidence to suggest that this is going to be a less fair referendum even than the one held in 1975 before there were any proper rules on referendums? At least in that referendum, the grants given out to the two campaigns were worth twice the amount of the present grants. Also, when the then Government distributed their own leaflet in 1975, they provided information on a no vote as well as on a yes vote. We are not getting that now. It has been suggested that today’s leaflet simply has facts in it, but who believes that we now live in a “reformed EU” except for the fantasists in the Foreign Office? Who believes that “we will keep our own border controls” when we have to admit almost any person who says that they are an EU citizen? Who believes that “the UK will not be part of further political integration”?

Does not this compare to the claim in Harold Wilson’s leaflet that “decisions can be taken only if all the members of the Council agree”? Remember that one? Does it not also compare to John Major’s claim that Maastricht “addressed and corrected” the “centralising tendency” that many were so worried about? We have heard all the stories before, but they are not facts.

Mr Lidington: I do not think anything that I say or that the Government might publish could persuade my hon. Friend on this matter, given his track record in this debate. He has been absolutely consistent in his views and I respect that, even though I disagree vehemently with him. He made a serious point about the timing of the distribution and the fact that the Government’s leaflet was not going out at the same time as the leaflets from the remain and leave campaigns. We would have preferred to circulate the Government’s leaflet later in the campaign. The statutory rules under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which prohibit us from making such communications in the final 28 days of the campaign, did not apply during the 1975 referendum period. We accepted the advice of the Electoral Commission that it would be wrong for us to distribute the Government leaflet in a way that interfered with the national elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That is why we have aimed to have the distribution earlier than we might have chosen to do in an ideal world.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Minister is quite possibly the first and only Conservative that I have ever felt sorry for. Yet again, he has been sent out by the Government to be the sacrificial lamb for the howling Brexiteers on the Benches behind him. As someone who supports remaining in the EU, I am concerned the Government are alienating voters rather than informing them. Is the Minister planning any follow-up communications before the referendum? If so, may I suggest that, as in the line from the Scottish national anthem, he is sent “homeward to think again”?

Mr Lidington: We have no plans for any further leaflets to go to every household. In my statement, I described the further publications that we have already committed ourselves to providing.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Government—indeed, Governments of all colours—are rarely shy when it comes to explaining their views to the electorate in public information campaigns. It is perfectly proper and acceptable for Her Majesty’s Government to do that, and to use taxpayers’ money to do it. Given the fact that the Government are not neutral in this campaign but take the view that we should remain in the EU, does the Minister find the arguments against this leaflet rather false and synthetic, or does he think the Brexiteers are suggesting that they should have had editorial control?

Mr Lidington: That point is probably best answered by others rather than by me.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): During the Scottish independence referendum, the UK Government spent around £750,000 on sending out a similar booklet urging people to stay in the UK. One of the promises made in that booklet was that Scots would retain an influential voice in the UK.
Why are the Government now refusing to uphold that promise in the event of Scotland voting to remain in the EU and the rest of the UK voting to leave?

Mr Lidington: Scotland indeed does have a much more powerful voice in the EU as part of the United Kingdom than she would on her own, as we can see, for example, from the priority that British Ministers have given to the Scotch whisky industry during the negotiation of EU free trade agreements with other countries around the world—something that has brought real benefits, in terms of jobs and growth, to the people of Scotland. The hon. Lady invited me in the latter part of her question to revisit territory that the House debated and voted on at the time of the referendum Bill. It is the United Kingdom that is the member state whose name is written in the treaties and therefore it is right that this is a decision for the United Kingdom as a whole.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I believe the Minister is a fair man and this should have been a fair campaign, but the spending of taxpayers’ money on this propaganda is clearly unfair. Does he not recognise the anger in my constituency, where there is pressure on public spending, at this level of taxpayers’ money being used on electioneering? Furthermore, I was fortunate enough to get my copy of the leaflet this morning. I was slightly disappointed that it was printed on shiny, glossy paper. Had it been printed on something a bit more absorbent, then at least my constituents would have been able to put it to good use.

Mr Lidington: The facts are that 85% of the public have been telling us that they want more information, in particular from the Government. The cost of the leaflet is roughly 34p per household. Given the gravity of the decision that people are being asked to take, I really do not think that that should be seen as in any way disproportionate.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When the Scottish Government White Paper on independence was published, it had a catalytic effect on the independence referendum campaign. Although we did not win that campaign, it helped to double the level of support for independence from the standing start that we came from. It was downloaded or ordered in hard copy more than 100,000 times. People even proactively paid for a copy of it, irrespective of what side of the referendum campaign they were on. Do the Minister’s ambitions for the Government’s document go anywhere near approaching the success of the Scottish Government’s White Paper?

Mr Lidington: I am not expecting it to appear in the Amazon best seller lists, but I hope that every household when they receive it will consider seriously the arguments the Government are making. If people wish to explore in greater detail any particular aspect of our European Union membership covered in the leaflet, they can follow up the source material from which the various statements are derived—those have all been published—or look at the lengthier Government publications that we have placed online, in response to our duty under the European Union Referendum Act 2015, and find that information there, too.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), who represents the SDLP, is not alone in taking a principled stand of being in favour of remain, but against the spending of public money on this leaflet. The leader of the Green party in England and Wales, Natalie Bennett, said on Radio 4 on Friday evening that “it isn’t acceptable for the Government to be putting out propaganda in this way.”

Can the Minister tell us which of the two lines he has been putting forward today he really subscribes to? Does he really subscribe to the line that this is information that the public want, or does he commit himself to the line that this is actually the Government arguing for one side of the debate because that is what the Government’s position is? He cannot have it both ways. Either it is an impartial, factual document or it is a partisan argument for one side in the debate. Which is it?

Mr Lidington: It will be for the two designated campaign organisations to promote their own messages to the public as they choose, without the Government interfering. What the opinion research we commissioned told us was that people wanted more information, and that included a clearer explanation from the Government as to why we were arguing the case and making the recommendation that we were. What we are doing in this leaflet is providing that factual information in an accessible form, but also showing why the Government have made the recommendation they have.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is the case that constituents have been asking for more information, but I wonder whether the Minister or anybody in No. 10 even has given a second’s consideration to how our constituents who have been impacted by austerity cuts would feel about £9 million being spent on a glossy leaflet that amounts to nothing more than a booklet of pictures. If people are asking for more information, they are obviously asking for information, not a booklet of pictures. If people are asking for more information, they are not asking for propaganda, they are not asking for facts that are not facts and they are not asking for a glossy booklet. They want unbiased information on both sides of the argument, so will the Minister spend another £9 million putting over the other side of the argument?

Mr Lidington: The two campaign groups will have the publicly funded distribution of whatever leaflet they produce, which will be worth up to £15 million apiece to them. In addition to that benefit of free delivery, they will each have a £7 million spending limit—higher than any other permitted participant in the referendum campaign—and they will each be entitled to a television broadcast and to a Government grant, from taxpayers’ funds, of £600,000, which is something this House approved during our recent debates. I would say to my hon. Friend that her views on the subject of Europe are consistent and well known and are held perfectly honourably, but given the seriousness of what is at stake in this referendum vote, for the Government to be spending £34p per household on presenting their views in an accessible form seems to me to be utterly reasonable.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Perhaps we should be reasonably relaxed about this. Most of these leaflets will end up in the waste paper bin straight away,
[Sir Edward Leigh]

because people do not like receiving propaganda, particularly if they are being asked to pay for it, but may I ask this direct question? If my right hon. Friend does not mind me saying so, I think his answer to the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs was frankly weasel words. We got a firm commitment that there would be broad equality of spending as far as the Government were concerned. That was our understanding and it was weasel words to say, “We’ll do that in the last four weeks, but not now.” Why is it fair that the taxpayer will give £7 million to the leave campaign for leaflets, but £16 million to the remain campaign—£7 million in the Electoral Commission campaign and £9 million now? Why is that fair? Does he not realise that this will leave a lasting taste of bitterness and unfairness?

Mr Lidington: I would advise my hon. Friend to look back at the Hansard reports of the Committee proceedings and the debates that he cites. He will see absolutely clearly, in black and white, that the Government have always drawn a distinction between the last 28 days of the campaign period and the rest of the campaign. Indeed, amendments were tabled to the referendum Bill in Committee and on Report that would have made the period of restrictions under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 much longer, but Parliament decided not to extend that period.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The remain pamphlet suggests that our security could be damaged by us leaving the European Union. How can that be, when there is increasing factual evidence from European security agencies that terrorists are travelling on EU travel documents, which in future, as now, will require us to allow them entry to the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: That is not an argument for leaving the European Union. It is an argument for more effective co-operation between police forces and intelligence agencies. One reason why our security would be at hazard if we were to withdraw is that leaving the EU would mean leaving the various arrangements for police and judicial co-operation that have enabled us to detect and disrupt the work of terrorists and other criminals and to bring to justice people who had fled to other countries to seek refuge from justice there. Because we are in the EU, it means that we are able more quickly and more cheaply to remove to other jurisdictions people who had come to the United Kingdom than we could possibly do outside the EU.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend explain why there is no reference in this document to the massive trade deficit that the UK has with the rest of the European Union? A reference to various percentages is made, but my constituent Alan from Ferndown emailed me this afternoon to point out that those figures are at best meaningless and at worst totally misleading. What are the actual figures, in terms of millions of pounds, for our deficit? Does my right hon. Friend agree with my response to Alan and many others who are angry about this that rather than just be angry, they must get even?

Mr Lidington: My advice to Alan would be that we export roughly 44% of everything exported from the UK to the European Union and I would not want to see that put at risk, particularly when only 8% of the EU 27 exports go to the United Kingdom. That suggests that in the event of a British departure, the negotiating weight over any future trade deal would lie with the other 27 rather than with us.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned that the Government’s leaflets were being sent out this week, but then acknowledged that that was not the case in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where they will not be distributed until after the elections on 5 May, which falls squarely within the referendum period. The Minister will know that the Electoral Commission has expressed grave concern about that. Does he accept that, given the highly partisan nature of the document, the late distribution of the leaflets in those parts of the country will give an unfair advantage to the remain campaign?

Mr Lidington: No. I do not. The fact that the remain and leave campaigns will both be able to circulate their material and communicate as they think fit in the last 28 days of the campaign, when the Government are restricted in what they can say, will enable both sides of the argument to be put to the electorate fairly.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): We held the referendum on the AV voting system in 2011. Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether £9 million was spent at that time? That was a referendum that could have changed the political make-up of our country for generations to come by changing the whole voting system.

Mr Lidington: There is a crucial difference between the two. In 2011, we were part of a coalition Government. The two coalition parties took opposite views on the preferred outcome of that referendum, so there was no agreement on what the Government’s collective message should be. This time around, the Government have a very clear collective view, which is that we should remain in a reformed European Union, and the way that we communicate in the literature that we are distributing reflects that fact.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Several times in this debate the Minister has made the point that the Government came to a balanced view that the UK should remain within the EU. If it was a balanced view, it would be fair to assume that the Government saw pros and cons on both sides of the argument. Will the Minister tell us what benefits the Government recognise would apply to the UK if we voted to leave, and why was that information not contained in the leaflet?

Mr Lidington: We have to come to a judgment about the costs and benefits of European Union membership. The Government considered that at considerable length, went through the negotiations that culminated in the February European Council and reached the view that we would be better off, stronger and more secure by remaining in the European Union. One of the challenges for my hon. Friend and those who share his view is that in the absence of a clear and coherent view about the
desired future relationship of the United Kingdom with the EU if we were to leave it, it is quite hard to form a judgment about the difficulties that might stem from that. We can estimate the risks—we certainly will do that—but it is incumbent on those who are championing the cause of leaving to spell out with much greater clarity than they have hitherto exactly what they see as that future relationship.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Thank you for calling me now, Mr Speaker, because what I have to say follows on very well from the previous remarks. The one title that is missing from this book concerns what things will be like if we remain. There is no indication of what Turkey is going to do. I was just lobbed off with “France is going to veto that”, and we are told that vetoing more powers will provide a safer path to the future, yet the latest data from the Library show that 60% of all our laws are made in the EU. In case the Minister has not noticed, I can tell him that he is part of the remain campaign. What is in this booklet is opinion; it is partial, and it is certainly not fact. As we have seen throughout the turmoil of this week, partial facts are very dangerous things to have in a leaflet.

Mr Lidington: What my hon. Friend is effectively saying is that she disagrees with the Government about Britain’s membership of the European Union. That does not come as a great surprise to me. Let me just correct her on the point about the proportion of our legislation that is attributable to the European Union. The House of Commons study showed that of our Acts of Parliament and statutory instruments, roughly 14% of the total have something to do with EU membership.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The £9 million leaflets express the view of part of the Government. I do not know whether the Minister has noticed, but half a dozen Cabinet Ministers are campaigning to leave alongside a number of other Ministers, so when are the other side of the Government going to get their leaflet? Speaking as a Member of the Council of Europe, part of my responsibility is observing elections. I go around different countries and have a look at the conduct of the campaign before polling day. If in any of the countries I visit I witnessed the sort of spiv Robert Mugabe antics that I have seen carried out by this Government, I would condemn the conduct of that election as not fair.

Mr Lidington: When my hon. Friend reflects on what he has just said and on the fact that election campaigns in Zimbabwe have in the recent past involved the murder, maiming and intimidation of voters, I think he might recognise that what he said was not his finest moment in the House. I think that what the Government are doing at the cost of 34p per household is a reasonable expression of the Government’s case for staying in the European Union, and it is a collective Government position. Quite exceptionally, the Prime Minister has agreed that individual Ministers who dissent may do so publicly in a personal capacity, but that does not alter the fact that the collective Government view, agreed by the Cabinet, is that we are better off remaining.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Electoral Commission has said that the distribution of the leaflets gives an unfair advantage to the stay campaign. Were the Government aware of the Electoral Commission’s views before they authorised distribution? Did they consult the commission, and if not, why not?

Mr Lidington: The Electoral Commission is entitled to its view. We do not agree with it on this point of principle, although, as I said earlier, we did change our plans in relation to the timing of the leaflet’s distribution to take account of the commission’s concern about the impact that it might have on elections in the three devolved areas.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The independent, highly respected Electoral Commission says that the Government are wrong, but what is far worse—and I must word this carefully—is what happened at the time of the purdah debates. We have heard what was said at the Dispatch Box, but what we have not heard is what certain Conservative Members were told. We were told that the Government would not issue a leaflet. [Interruption.] We have not heard that, sir. Clearly the Minister would not have deliberately misled us—in fact, a number of Ministers would not have deliberately misled us—so when did Government policy change? Can the Minister confirm that when those assurances were given, there was no intention of issuing the leaflet? When did the policy change?

Mr Lidington: The Government have always said that we would take, and express, a clear view. As long ago as 10 June last year, the Prime Minister said: “I do not want us to be neutral on this issue; I want us to speak clearly and frankly.”—[Official Report, 10 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 1179.]

The Foreign Secretary and I have repeated that point in the House on several occasions.

If my hon. Friend looks at Hansard and at reports of Select Committee evidence, he will see that Ministers have consistently referred to and discussed the absence of any intention of publishing leaflets, carrying out door drops or advertising in the context of debates and questions about the final 28 days of the campaign, and whether or not the preparation arrangements ought to be amended.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The British public recognise a democratic deficit when they see one, and they see this £9 million propaganda leaflet as unfair, biased, and just un-British. Since the moment it was announced, I have been inundated with communications from people who now wish to campaign for us to leave. Will the Government be releasing figures for the number of their propaganda leaflets that are returned in the post, and has that been budgeted for?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, the cost of 34p per household is reasonable. I think that the public would be astonished if, having reached a clear view about this important decision, the Government neglected to express that view clearly by all means legally available to them. The truth is, I think, that what my hon. Friend yearns for is silence and neutrality on the Government’s part, but that is not what he is going to get.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I take my hat off to my right hon. Friend for keeping a straight face while saying that this was a factual document. If that is the case, there must have been a few pages missing from my
copy, because I did not see any facts in it. If my right hon. Friend is so keen for the facts to be communicated to the British public, will he tell us what the trade deficit between the United Kingdom and the European Union was last year, and what our net contribution to the EU budget is each year? For some reason, those facts seem to be missing from my copy of the document. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would like to put the record straight and apologise for the omission.

Mr Lidington: I think that when the Treasury analysis is published, my hon. Friend will find that it contains a full account of the net contribution in the way that he would expect. As he will know, the calculation of the net contribution is published every year by Her Majesty's Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Who would have thought, this week or any week, that the Labour party would join my own party's Government in supporting the plutocratic elite, the EU bureaucrats, the investment banks and big business against the people? And we wonder why politics is held in such low regard.

As the Minister will know, the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, today told the German magazine EurActiv that the Government had gone too far in their Brexit concessions, and that the Prime Minister's so-called negotiation was legally unenforceable and would, in time, be overturned by the European Parliament. Is it purely coincidental that there is little or any reference to the Prime Minister's renegotiation in this propaganda document?

Mr Lidington: When I have looked at the way in which the February European Council meeting has been reported in the media around Europe, I have seen comments aplenty about this being a big win for United Kingdom diplomacy, and, in some cases, outrage at what people in those countries have seen as a betrayal of federalist ideals. I simply say to my hon. Friend that the President of the European Parliament has made it clear that he wants the deal that was agreed in February to go through and will work to that end, and that the head of the Council Legal Service in the EU has made it clear that the agreement reached in February is legally binding on every member state.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The Prime Minister promised this country, and the people of this country, a treaty change by 23 June. We have no treaty change, so the propaganda that the Government have pushed out cannot guarantee 100% that any of the reforms that we have—pathetic though they are—will exist in law. The moment we are consumed by the EU, if we vote to stay in, MEPs and the European Court will have the power to change what we have tried to do.

Mr Lidington: What was agreed in February, including the aspects of the agreement that require amendment to the European Union treaties, takes the form of an international law decision which is legally binding on every one of the 28 EU member states, and which cannot be changed unless there is unanimous agreement from all those 28, including the United Kingdom. That is why I am very confident that this will go through.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Minister tell us whether any EU funds were involved in the production of the leaflets, and what procurement processes were involved in both the website and the leaflets? I ask because whoever agreed to a £3 million contract for a website and spent that money was ripped off—and that is a fact.

Mr Lidington: The money is coming out of the Cabinet Office's departmental spending, and, to the best of my knowledge, no EU funds are involved. The President of the European Commission has made it very clear on more than one occasion that he thinks it would be wrong for the Commission to participate, as an institution, in the British referendum campaign.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We will come to points of order, but I wish first to deal with the next matter on my agenda. If Members are patient, they will be heard ere long. In a moment, I shall call the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter which she believes should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have our urgent attention, namely that the House has considered Tata Steel’s decision to sell its UK operations, and any action that the Government are taking to secure the future of the British steel industry.

On 29 March, Tata announced that it would sell its entire British strip product business on a tight timetable. The future of the UK steel industry is now hanging by a thread. If a suitable buyer is not found, there will be enormous repercussions. Forty thousand jobs are at stake at Tata and in the supply chain, and steel communities up and down the country face a deeply worrying and uncertain future.

Steel is a foundation industry and essential for the UK’s manufacturing base. Aerospace, automotive, defence, construction, rail and nuclear all depend on steel. The crisis is also an existential threat to our already struggling manufacturing sector. Output remains 6.4% lower than in 2008. The cost of failing to act would be an additional £4.6 billion over 10 years and lost household spending would be £3 billion. The UK’s current account deficit, already standing at a record high of over £30 billion, would widen even further. Without our own industry, we would be dangerously reliant on overseas producers and vulnerable to future price hikes. As well as the economic cost, there would be a wholly avoidable human cost, too, with the devastation of entire communities and the life chances of those who rely on the industry.

The steel industry is cyclical. It can be preserved and can have a strong, sustainable future, but only if the right decisions are taken now. This is an urgent matter and one of grave concern to the House, to the workers facing an uncertain future, to their communities, to the manufacturing sector and to the country at large. As Tata’s announcement came during the recess, there has not yet been the chance to debate this important matter, not least because the Government refused to recall Parliament despite a petition signed by 152,000 people asking them to do so. While I welcomed the Secretary of State’s statement earlier today, a fuller urgent debate is essential to allow Members not only to pose questions, but to scrutinise the Government’s plans in more detail. Given the potentially devastating impact on steel-making communities up and down the country and the urgency of the situation, I beg your leave to seek this emergency debate.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application and I am satisfied that the matter is proper to be discussed under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 12 April, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the application. I hope that that is helpful.

Now, I indicated to eager and expectant Members that their moment would arrive if they were patient, and they have been and it has done.
Points of Order

7.42 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I am a new Member. When I arrived, I was told of the strict convention, which I have always sought to observe, regarding visiting other Members’ constituencies on parliamentary business. I was therefore surprised to learn that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport had made a ministerial visit to my constituency without any official notice to me. It was particularly disappointing because I have repeatedly raised the issue of broadband roll-out, particularly in the rural parts of my constituency, and would have welcomed the opportunity to introduce him to some of the local businesses that have been adversely affected.

What remedy is available for a Back Bencher in such circumstances? Is there any way in which I can convey through your office, Mr Speaker, that I would be happy to arrange for the Secretary of State to make a more informative visit? On this occasion, he may wish to revisit and address the issue at hand directly.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me notice of it. She is right that there is a firm convention that Ministers should give advance notice to hon. Members if they plan to visit the constituency of those Members on official, as opposed to purely private or personal, business. Indeed, the requirement is spelled out in the ministerial code. The apparent failure to do so on this occasion is regrettable. If it be so, it is regrettable to me, too, because I know the right hon. Gentleman the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I have known him for 25 years and have always regarded him as a person of the utmost courtesy. This appears to be something of a lapse.

In terms of remedy, the hon. Lady asked whether it can be conveyed to the Secretary of State that she would be happy to arrange what she considers to be a prospective, more informative visit. She has been most effective in putting that point on the record. The Chair cannot facilitate such a visit, and it is not for me to say whether it will take place, but I am sure that the offer has been heard on the Treasury Bench and will be weighing its way within seconds to the Secretary of State.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have noticed that a former Member of this House, Dr Bob Spink, has described himself on official, as opposed to purely private or personal, business. Indeed, the requirement is spelled out in the ministerial code. The apparent failure to do so on this occasion is regrettable.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is no. I of course remember the good doctor, but he certainly was not a Government Minister. I am not aware of what he may or may not have said beyond what the hon. Gentleman has just reported to the House, but whether someone has or has not been a Minister of the Crown is a matter of public record. It is indeed a matter of fact—indeed, it is a matter of fact that he was a Minister of the Crown, and it is a matter of public record. It is not a matter for the Chair to seek to resolve, notwithstanding the eagerness of the hon. Gentleman that it should be.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 29 February, I raised a point of order about clarity in answers that I received from Ministers about meetings between the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority. Subsequently, the Procedure Committee wrote to the Chancellor directing him to ensure that clear, proper answers were provided to me by his Department. I am still trying to get to the bottom of the matter and seek your guidance on this topic again in the light of further correspondence.

Unlike the obfuscation of the Treasury, the FCA at least confirms on its website that it does meet Treasury Ministers on a regular basis. A freedom of information request was sent to the FCA seeking information on the matters discussed at those meetings. It was essentially a request to the FCA as an independent body for information that the Treasury has refused to provide. Not once, but twice has the FCA come back asking for additional time to consider the request. It has now confirmed that it is consulting the Treasury before responding.

This week, the FCA is examining issues raised by the Panama leaks. Mr Speaker, can you guide me on how we can have confidence in its ability to do so independently of Government when it seemingly cannot answer my simple questions without authorisation from 11 Downing Street?

Mr Speaker: Well, it is certainly a very rum business altogether. I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this point of order. I mean it when I say that I understand her frustration that she is not securing clear answers to her questions. The handling of freedom of information requests by the FCA, or indeed any other public body, is not a matter for the Chair of this House to determine. However, she has made her concern explicitly clear on the record, and it will no doubt have been heard on the Treasury Bench. Indeed, I was going to say that there is an illustrious representative of Her Majesty’s Treasury on the Front Bench, but there is a veritable troika of the characters. There they sit, the three of them. I can therefore say with certainty that they have heard her grievance.

My overall advice to the hon. Lady—I hope that she will not take this in the wrong spirit as it is meant to be helpful—is to be persistent. If the hon. Lady does not secure the answers that she wants, she should keep asking questions and, in the very best and most proper sense of the term, make an absolutely parliamentary nuisance of herself. In the end, it may well be felt that it is not worth the candle so far as those resisting her inquiries thus far are concerned. She should stick at it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have just had a debate about the leaflet that the Government are putting out. We were told about “facts”, and I said that the amount of legislation that comes from the European Union in Brussels was not included in there. I cited a figure of about 60%, to which the Minister for Europe responded, “No, no, it is about 13% to 14%.” I had been given that answer by the Prime Minister in March and I
Mr Speaker: No, but it is only Monday and there are other days in the parliamentary week. I have a feeling that the hon. Gentleman will be waiting all agog to see whether his curiosity is satisfied. Forgive me, I can add nothing beyond that at this stage, although he has put his point on the record.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way in which I can, within the rules of order, bring to the attention of the House the fact that as of a few moments ago 207,444 people had signed a petition demanding that the Government stop spending our money on biased campaigning to keep Britain inside the European Union? That figure is already almost certainly out of date, given the rate at which signatures are being added. Out of all the thousands of petitions on Parliament’s e-petitions website it is the fifth most signed one that is still open for signature. It would be helpful to get those facts, rather than that opinion, on the record in some way.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman asked whether there was a way in which he could bring this important matter to the attention of the House—there is, and he has found it. He has demonstrated that with his characteristic eloquence.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your decision to allow the emergency debate on steel tomorrow, I wonder whether, to clarify this for me, you could explain how the rest of the business of the day will operate, particularly in respect of the Backbench Business Committee debate on contaminated blood and support for the people who have received contaminated blood. I am concerned because lots of people are travelling from all around the country to come to that debate and I just want to be reassured that it will take place tomorrow and will not be put to another day.

Mr Speaker: It is a very fair inquiry and I had thought about this earlier in the day. The short answer is that, subject to any discussions that might take place between the usual channels, of which at this stage I am unaware, the debate of particular interest to the hon. Lady will follow the Standing Order No. 24 debate. Moreover, my understanding is that there is protected time of three hours for that debate on contaminated blood. I absolutely appreciate the importance of the time of three hours for that debate on contaminated blood. I absolutely appreciate the importance of the point the hon. Lady makes about people travelling from all around the country to come to that debate and I just want to be reassured that it will take place tomorrow and will not be put to another day.

Mr Speaker: I say two things to the hon. Lady. First, as she well knows, she has found her own salvation through the ingenious use of the point of order procedure. Secondly—this is not uncommon in this place—I do not think she will seek to contradict me, and neither will anyone else, when I say that in raising her point of order she was vastly more interested in what she had to say to me and to the House than in anything I might have to say to her.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. More than a year ago, Lord Maude of Horsham, the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, signed a contract on behalf of the Crown Estate with Air Products to take the electricity from two innovative energy-from-waste plants being built in my constituency. This was to save taxpayers some £84 million a year. Sadly, the company announced last week that it had failed to get the new technology working and planned to walk away from Teesside, at the cost of hundreds of jobs and leaving the plants incomplete. Are you aware of any plans by Ministers to make a statement to the House about the ramifications of this failure, about what will happen with the Government’s contract and about what Ministers are doing to help seek a new developer who could take over the plants and secure the jobs?
The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I do hope that this will be worth waiting for, Mr Speaker. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out in the recent Budget, the Government's long-term economic plan is securing the country's economic recovery. The British economy is set to grow faster than that of any country in the G7. Our labour market is delivering the highest employment in our history. This year, the deficit is forecast to be cut by almost two thirds from its peak, and is set to fall each year after that, so that we will deliver a surplus in 2019-20. However, being one of most open economies in the world means that we are not immune to global slowdowns and shocks, which makes it all the more imperative that we continue the hard work we have carried out over the past six years to help our economy face up to those challenges.

This Finance Bill demonstrates this Government's commitment to putting stability first.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—

Mr Gauke: I will very happily take interventions, but let me first set out to right hon. and hon. Members the order in which I intend to discuss the measures in the Bill. I will outline, first, how this Bill provides opportunities for households, then how it supports British business, and finally how it ensures that the businesses pay the tax that they owe.

Sir William Cash: In the context of the European side of the global question to which the Minister has referred, is he aware of the substantial deficit in the last quarter figures that the Office for National Statistics has just published in respect of our relations with Europe, which is causing a lot of difficulty for the United Kingdom economy? Last year, we had a deficit on current account transactions—imports, exports, goods and services—of £58 billion, whereas we had a surplus with the rest of the world in the same services of about £30 billion. By contrast, Germany had a surplus of £67 billion in its dealings with the other 27 member states, which shows a significant reason why we should leave the European Union: this single market just does not work for us.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend takes me away from the context of the European side. The Bill also puts the Office of Tax Simplification on a statutory footing. In the last Parliament, the OTS made approximately 400 recommendations, almost half of which have been implemented. The OTS is being strengthened; it has a new chair, Angela Knight, who is already performing a valuable role in leading the debate, and its resources have been increased. I am sure my hon. Friend will follow the OTS's progress closely, scrutinise its performance and decide whether it is proposing measures that take us in the direction of which he approves.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Would my hon. Friend welcome the OTS looking at some more fundamental tax simplification measures such as wholesale reform of individual taxation, rather than focusing on small, individual parts of taxes, as a way of moving us to a much simpler tax system more quickly?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is considerable value in the OTS looking at specific areas, but I think there is a case for it looking at broader matters. Indeed, in its reviews—of small business taxation, for example—it is addressing some of those bigger questions.
Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I thank the Minister for being so accommodating in giving way. Looking at part 10 of the Bill and given the pressure the Prime Minister has been under this week, with the Panama papers and the statement today, I wonder why the Bill does not include a measure to allow HMRC to name and shame publicly those who are involved in tax avoidance not after the third warning but after the first warning, and so send a much clearer signal?

Mr Gauke: I will discuss avoidance and evasion shortly, but on that specific proposal, we have strengthened HMRC’s capabilities in this area. The ability to name and shame facilitators of tax avoidance was introduced by this Government, and I think it is right that we have done that. As for the precise process, we think the balance is about right—it is difficult to see that there would be a substantial difference in terms of effectiveness if action were taken earlier. The whole idea of the regime was introduced by this Government.

As well as helping working households, the Government are committed to creating a nation of savers. In the Bill, we legislate to increase the personal savings allowance from April 2016, meaning that basic rate taxpayers will pay no tax on their savings income up to £1,000 and higher rate taxpayers will pay no tax on their savings income up to £500. As a result, 95% of taxpayers will pay no income tax on savings.

While supporting savers, we must also ensure that support is well targeted. The pension lifetime allowance is currently set at £1.25 million, but 96% of individuals now approaching retirement have a pension pot worth less than £1 million. We want a system that is targeted and sustainable and supports the majority of those approaching retirement. That is why the Bill reduces the pension lifetime allowance to £1 million—a change that will affect only the wealthiest pension savers.

The Bill also implements long overdue reform of the outdated and complex dividend tax system. The current system was designed at a time when total tax due on dividends was as high as 80% for some taxpayers; it also provides incentives for individuals to set up a company and pay themselves through dividends to reduce their tax bill. For those reasons, the Government are modernising and simplifying the dividend tax system by abolishing the dividends tax credit and replacing it with a new £5,000 tax-free allowance. The Bill also sets the dividend tax rates at 7.5% for basic rate taxpayers, 32.5% for higher rate taxpayers and 38.1% for additional rate taxpayers. Some 95% of all taxpayers and more than three quarters of those receiving dividend income will either gain or be unaffected by the changes.

Supporting home ownership and first-time buyers is a key priority for the Government. Although people should be free to purchase a second home or invest in a buy-to-let property, that can affect other people’s ability to get on the property ladder. The Bill therefore implements higher rates of stamp duty land tax for the purchase of additional residential properties that are three percentage points above the standard rates.

I have been made aware that the Bill as drafted might lead to some main houses with an annexe for older relatives attracting the higher rates of SDLT intended to apply to additional properties. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) for bringing that to my attention. I am happy to reassure the House that that is not our intention and the Government will table an amendment in Committee to correct the error and ensure fair treatment for annexes.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am most grateful for that clarification from the Government. It is important in terms of social policy, as annexes are used not only by elderly relatives but by other family members, disabled children with special needs and so on. The Government are making an important statement that these annexes should prosper. I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for saying that I will look carefully at the detail of the amendment, but I am grateful for the courteous way in which he dealt with me.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the courteous way in which he dealt with me, too. He achieved a great deal in his role as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government by addressing the issue in the context of council tax. He will find in this case—and he will want to look at the details, as we are going a bit further than council tax rules to provide support and reassurance to families—a small number of transactions are affected by the measure, but it is important that we provide clarity. We certainly do not want to discourage people who wish to create an annexe for an elderly or disabled relative, providing them with support close at hand.

The measures that I have outlined are important, and help working people to keep and save more of what they earn while ensuring that we have a modern and targeted tax system. I should like to address briefly an important issue that we discussed in the Budget debate: VAT on sanitary products. We heard people’s anger loud and clear, and we said that we would fight for agreement to reduce the VAT rate to zero, and all European leaders agreed our plan to do just that. Last week, the European Commission action plan on VAT was published, and it is an important step towards a common-sense VAT system that works for British businesses and people. The Government are committed to making that change, and let me make that point to those who have raised it, including the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who is in the Chamber, and other hon. Members. I am proud that in the Finance Bill we are legislating to enable zero VAT rates for women’s sanitary products.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the progress he has made. Why does clause 115 say that the measure will not come into effect when the Bill receives Royal Assent, but is subject to the Treasury introducing a provision at some later stage? Why can we not legislate on this in the Bill without any qualification?

Mr Gauke: It is customary, with changes in VAT rates, to give retailers notice. It is not usual for VAT changes to be put in place on the date of Royal Assent, as notice is usually provided. I reassure my hon. Friend that the intention is to provide a short period of time, following Royal Assent, in which retailers will have an opportunity to adjust prices. This is no desire by the Treasury to kick this into the long grass—we want to make progress on the matter.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—
Mr Gauke: I will certainly give way to the hon. Lady, who also deserves recognition for her efforts campaigning on this matter.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister tell the House exactly what he is going to do to ensure that that price reduction is passed on to consumers by retailers, who should not seek to continue to sell the product at the same price?

Mr Gauke: Pricing is essentially a matter for the producers, retailers and customers. We would certainly expect the reduction to be passed on, and I have no doubt that considerable attention will be given to what happens to the pricing of sanitary products after the VAT reduction, and there will be pressure on retailers to pass on the benefits to customers. We do not have a position—we do not have the capability to direct and order people—and we do not have a prices policy as such, but we expect that the reductions will be passed on to customers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being accommodating. I have written to leading retailers and manufacturers of female sanitary products asking to meet them to discuss this. I would be grateful if he offered his support for that course of action. If the Government are unwilling to do that, we may need to consider adding a provision to the Bill.

Mr Gauke: I very much support the hon. Lady’s cause, and she supports my cause that manufacturers and retailers should pass on the VAT abolition to customers, and we expect to see that happen.

I should like to turn to the way in which the Bill will support British business and ensure that our employees have the skills they need. The Government committed in the Budget to put stability first, because it gives businesses the certainty that they need to invest, grow and employ people. The core of our support for British business is low taxes, and the Budget provides the biggest ever cut in business rates, worth over £6.7 billion over the next five years. Measures in the Bill will do more. First, we will again cut the main rate of corporation tax and reduce it to 17% in 2020, ensuring that we have the lowest corporation tax in the G20. By the end of this Parliament, corporation tax cuts delivered since 2010 will save businesses almost £15 billion a year, providing an important boost for our international competitiveness.

Our labour market is delivering the highest employment in our history, but we need to ensure that it has the right skills. The Bill introduces an apprenticeship levy of 0.5% of an employer’s pay bill, where it exceeds £3 million, from April 2017. That will deliver 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020. By 2019-20, Government spending on apprenticeships in cash terms will be double the level of spending in 2010-11. We will put funding in the hands of employers to ensure that it delivers the training that they need by ring-fencing apprenticeship funding in England.

In the last Parliament, we took important steps to help entrepreneurs who start and grow businesses. We also want to ensure that they can access the investment that they need as they grow, and to that end we are legislating to reduce the higher rate of capital gains tax from 28% to 20%, and the basic rate from 18% to 10% from April 2016. Gains on residential property and the receipt of carried interest will remain unchanged. Those changes will create an incentive to invest in shares instead of property, and will help British companies to access the finance that they need to expand and create more jobs.

Finally, the recent Budget took necessary and radical action to support the oil and gas tax regime through difficult times. The Bill will legislate for a key part of this strategy in permanently zero-rating petroleum revenue tax. From April 2016, petroleum revenue tax will be reduced from 35% to 0%. We believe that wherever possible, we should use the tax system to stimulate growth and investment, whatever the sector.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have heard all of this on skills before from the Government. Will the Minister explain the productivity puzzle? Productivity appears to have gone down, rather than up. Why is that, because in every Budget attention has been given to skills? What has gone wrong with productivity in this country?

Mr Gauke: The Budget brings forward the expenditure on transport infrastructure in this Parliament so that we can gain the benefits of that investment earlier. The hon. Gentleman should welcome that.

Before discussing the measures in the Bill that address avoidance and evasion, I shall briefly address the issue that the Prime Minister covered earlier today—the Panama papers. Those papers have again put the spotlight on the global scourge of tax evasion and avoidance. As the Prime Minister set out earlier today, we are taking further action. First, HMRC and the National Crime Agency will lead a new joint taskforce to analyse the Panama papers and take rapid action where there is wrongdoing. It will initially have new funding of up to £10 million and will report to the Chancellor and the Home Secretary later this year.

Secondly, we will bring forward plans to introduce a criminal offence for corporations which fail to stop their staff facilitating tax evasion, ahead of next month’s
summit to tackle corruption in all its forms. For the first
time, companies will be held criminally liable if they fail
to stop their employees facilitating tax evasion. Thirdly,
our Crown dependencies and overseas territories have
agreed to provide UK law enforcement and tax agencies
with full access to information on the beneficial ownership
of companies. We have finalised arrangements with all
of them except Anguilla and Guernsey. Guernsey currently
has elections and its Parliament is not sitting, but we
expect both those territories to follow in the coming
days and months. For the first time, UK tax and law
enforcement agencies will see exactly who really owns
or controls every company in those territories. This
Government’s message is clear: there are no safe havens
for tax evaders, and no one should be in any doubt that
the days of hiding money offshore to evade tax are
gone.

**John Mann:** The Minister is generous in giving way.
Are the agreements with the six Caribbean overseas
territories still non-reciprocal or has that changed?

**Mr Gauke:** The move is towards reciprocal agreements,
but for the first time our law enforcement agencies and
our tax authority, HMRC, will have access to information
held about beneficial ownership. That is a significant
step forward and must be viewed in the light of the fact
that we have introduced the common reporting standard,
meaning that much more information is provided
automatically to our tax authority in respect of money
held there.

**John Mann rose—**

**Mr Gauke:** I want to make a little more progress.

It is vital that we support businesses through low
taxes. We must also ensure that tax is paid where it is
due. This Government have set out a comprehensive
package to tackle avoidance and evasion. In total this
package will raise £12 billion by 2020-21. The Bill
implements a number of those measures.

First, we are leading the way internationally by being
the first country to adopt the OECD recommendations
on hybrid mismatch arrangements. The Bill will introduce
new rules to stop multinationals avoiding paying their
fair share of UK tax through the use of cross-border
business structures or financial transactions. It is estimated
that this will raise more than £1.3 billion over the next
five years. Secondly, we are ensuring that profits from
the development of UK property are always subject to
UK tax. This will level the playing field between UK-based
and non-UK-based developers and raise £2.2 billion in
revenue by 2020-21.

Finally, we will target the unfairness that many small
businesses feel when they compete against companies
on the internet. Overseas sellers are evading between
£1 billion and £1.5 billion of VAT each year on sales to
UK customers via the internet, unfairly undercutting
British business and abusing the trust of UK customers.
The Bill will provide stronger powers to require overseas
sellers to appoint a UK tax representative who can be
made liable for the VAT owed. This is part of a package
of measures designed to level the playing field for firms
trading in the UK. Once again, this Government have
introduced a Bill which makes it clear that everyone has
a responsibility to pay the tax they owe.

**Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): I am grateful to the
Minister for giving way, and grateful for the Prime
Minister’s and the Minister’s announcements today on
tax. May I make two suggestions to the Minister? One is
that the UK, through HMRC, should consider adopting
the US model that requires taxpayers to list as part of
their tax return all foreign bank accounts where they
hold more than a minimal amount of money. That
would force UK citizens to list those bank accounts that
they might hold in other jurisdictions. Secondly, would
the Government consider looking into worldwide taxation
of earnings, which the US has? That would force UK
passport holders to decide whether they want to pay
UK taxes for the privilege and security of holding a
passport.

**Mr Gauke:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those
suggestions. We are not persuaded by the move towards
worldwide taxation. On providing information about
offshore accounts, if tax is due, people have to provide
that information. It is worth pointing out that we are
moving into a different environment where it is that
much easier for HMRC to obtain information about
foreign bank accounts, and it is much, much harder to
evade tax, thanks to the common reporting standard
and the progress that we are making on beneficial
ownership.

The Finance Bill provides opportunities for households.
It supports British firms seeking to create jobs and
growth, and it ensures that businesses pay the tax that
they owe. At a time when storm clouds are gathering on
the global horizon, it is right that we do all we can to
make our economy strong and secure, to put stability
first, and to ensure that the UK remains fit for the
future. That is what this Finance Bill does, and I am
delighted to commend it to the House.

8.26 pm

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): We have just had a speech from the Financial Secretary
which puts a very positive spin on the Finance Bill.
Although he sought to put a positive spin also on the
measures announced by the Prime Minister today on
tax avoidance, his speech shed no further light on the
critical issue of offshore trusts and the need for a public
register of beneficial ownership. It fell far short of the
measures that we announced today in our tax transparency
and enforcement programme.

The House is back after three weeks of turmoil at the
top of the Tory Government which has called into
question the competence and credibility of the Prime
Minister and his senior Ministers. They were in trouble
even before the Business Secretary’s inept handling of
the crisis at Port Talbot. Since then we have had a week
of ducking and diving from the Prime Minister over
revelations in the Panama papers. What the Prime Minister
showed today was that he and his colleagues can get top
marks for talking the talk, but when it comes to walking
the walk their scorecard is far less impressive.

The Bill seeks to put into law the tax-related measures
set out in the Budget, and what a Budget it was. The
author of the omnishambles surpassed himself and
delivered a mega-shambles. No Budget has unravelled
as quickly or as comprehensively as this one. It was a
Budget that failed to add up. As we begin to debate
the Bill, we do so against the backdrop of a huge,
gap black hole, with estimates of a figure of £12 billion or more that has yet to be funded. The Chancellor was faced with the real prospect of a revolt and his Budget not passing. Within days the main revenue-raising policy—cuts in personal independence payments for over 300,000 disabled people—proved too much even for the Work and Pensions Secretary. His parting shot, aimed at the Chancellor, complained of a Tory Government heading in a direction that divides society, rather than uniting it. The Budget and this Finance Bill have unfairness at their very core.

We will be voting against the Bill tonight, because it fails the fairness test and the test of adequately investing for our future. The Bill cuts corporation tax, which is already the lowest in the G7, while the Budget cuts support for working people, leaving over 2 million families, on average, £1,600 worse off a year by 2020. The Bill cuts capital gains tax, which benefits the wealthiest, at a time when the Chancellor has failed to meet his own deficit and debt reduction targets. How can it be fair, at this time, to fund tax breaks for his friends on the backs of the poor and the vulnerable?

Growth has been revised down last year, this year and every year of this forecast, and so too have business investment and productivity. The Chancellor is set to miss his export target by more than 14 years. Growth in average wages is being revised down while household debt is going up. He has admitted failure on his key targets. He has breached his own welfare cap. The Government are set to borrow £38.5 billion more than planned, and public sector net investment is set to fall as a share of GDP over this Parliament.

This is a recovery built on sand, and it is not just us saying it. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) told readers of ConservativeHome that, for all the Chancellor’s talk about investment in export-led growth, “the growth our economy has seen… comes courtesy of debt-fuelled consumption and a renewed housing and property boom.”

It is young people who are being punished by those choices. A recent YMCA survey of young people found that 41% said that debt was the biggest issue facing their family in 2016—so much for a Budget for the next generation.

The Chancellor has singularly failed to rebalance the economy, and that failure has implications for this Finance Bill. The Bill contains a series of tax cuts that he simply cannot afford. The £12 billion estimate does not include new figures published in an answer to a written parliamentary question, revealing that the Tories’ plans to force every school to become an academy could cost £1.3 billion, yet just £140 million was allocated for those plans, leaving a funding shortfall of more than £1.1 billion.

Before the Government seek once again to hide behind the turbulent conditions in the world economy, as the Minister attempted to do, let us be clear that most of the problems are of the Chancellor’s own making. We needed a Finance Bill that builds the foundations of a strong economy and that is the basis for prosperity and security for Britain’s families and businesses. We did not get it. Of course, there are some positive measures, such as anti-avoidance measures and industry support measures, that we broadly welcome. Support for the oil and gas industry and the quality of apprenticeships—30% of apprentices currently appear not to complete their apprenticeships—are issues that we will want to explore further, along with tackling frequent tax avoiders. But these measures do not go far enough, as I will highlight later.

There is little good news for manufacturing, and no coherent overall industrial strategy, which of course includes the needs of the steel industry.

Jeremy Quin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Malhotra: Will she give way?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady is in a positive frame of mind. I normally am, but I am just very concerned about the economy. Perhaps he will raise the Resolution Foundation’s finding that, as a result of the measures in the Budget, the poorest 20% of the population are set to be £565 worse off, while the richest 30% are set to be £280 better off. Perhaps he will think about his constituents and how they are set to suffer as a result of the Budget before he makes another intervention.

I was talking about the steel industry.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman says that I am in a positive frame of mind. I normally am, but I am just very concerned about the economy. Perhaps he will raise the Resolution Foundation’s finding that, as a result of the measures in the Budget, the poorest 20% of the population are set to be £565 worse off, while the richest 30% are set to be £280 better off. Perhaps he will think about his constituents and how they are set to suffer as a result of the Budget before he makes another intervention.

We welcome today’s news that a buyer has been found for Tata’s Scunthorpe steel plant, and we congratulate Unite, Community, the GMB and others who played an important role in the negotiations leading to that deal. However, against that background comes the revelation of a U-turn on business rates by the Chancellor. Before the Budget, the Engineering Employers Federation made a strong case for giving companies an allowance on business rates for plant and machinery, which could have applied to assets such as the blast furnaces in the steel sector. However, we learned from The Times that although the Chancellor was planning to act, he then pulled plans to give Britain’s struggling factories tax relief on business rates.

Why did he do that? The answer, analysts suggest, is that British manufacturing has been sacrificed on the altar of the Chancellor’s obsession with getting a £10 billion Budget surplus in the final year of this Parliament. We wait to see what actually materialises from today’s statement and what actual support comes forward from the Government, particularly for Port Talbot.

The Office for Budget Responsibility revealed that the decision was taken so late that there was no time to change the calculations in its economic and fiscal forecast. That means that its forecast for the level of business investment in this Parliament could well be an overestimate.
Families in Britain are to suffer as a result of another missed opportunity—on housing. By 2025, nine out of 10 Britons under 35 on modest incomes will not be able to afford a home. Rents in the private sector are soaring. So much, again, for a Budget for the next generation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On that subject, the hon. Lady will be aware that the Residential Landlords Association put forward to the Government some ideas for changes, but those have not happened. One was to give people the chance to buy their houses, and the association was happy to do that, but we have not got that in the Bill. Does the hon. Lady feel that something could be done on that to help?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and there are many measures we should explore, particularly as we go into Committee, to support house building and home ownership.

We know from the English housing survey that 201,000 fewer households own a home now than did at the start of the Chancellor’s tenure. That compares with an increase of 1 million under Labour. As of last year, the housing benefit bill is forecast to be £350 million more than the Chancellor intended. It is clear that this country needs a massive programme of capital investment in new affordable homes to rent and buy—nothing less will do if we are to tackle the growing housing crisis. That is why Labour has far more coherent plans to build homes and to make sure we tackle spiralling housing costs. That is the way to control the housing benefit bill.

Today’s report from the Women’s Budget Group shows that female lone parents and single female pensioners will, on average, have seen their living standards fall by 20% by 2020. Women are now set to bear a staggering 86% of the cost of changes and cuts to taxes, tax credits and benefits by 2020. That is worse than the figure of 81% identified last year.

The tax cuts in the Bill are likely to benefit men more than women. It is surely time that the Government conducted a full gender impact analysis of their proposals. That would give the opportunity for greater parliamentary scrutiny.

When it comes to measures on capital gains tax and corporation tax, the Bill must pass two tests: are they fair and are they effective? The Bill confirms that the main rate of corporation tax will be cut further to 17% from 1 April 2020, which will be worth £945 million. If corporation tax, which is already the lowest in the G7, can be reduced yet further, perhaps money can be found and the Government can think again about cuts to working age benefits and public services.

More importantly, a cut to corporation tax will not address the underlying weaknesses of our economy, such as the challenges in productivity, skills and the investment required in infrastructure. Businesses that talk to the Minister as well as to us say that these are the biggest issues affecting their future growth. Connectivity and new technology also require investment.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): The response from the Federation of Small Businesses contradicts what the hon. Lady has said. It said:

“The decision to further lower corporation tax to 17% in April 2020 is an important statement of intent and will provide a boost for affected firms.”

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman certainly does not seem to have the same sort of direct conversations as I do with businesses. This is a question of choices and timing. They also raise the issue of housing, which affects the stability of their workforce, and of infrastructure investment, which affects access and their opportunities to grow. Investment is also required to support the scale-up of their businesses through developing skills. There is a whole host of issues. This is also about judgment, timing and what would be most effective in increasing our productivity.

Seema Malhotra: I will make a little progress and then I will take another intervention.

Geoffrey Kerevan: Is the hon. Lady aware that there is ample evidence in the United States and the UK that large amounts—possibly half—of the retained earnings from lower corporation tax actually go into share buybacks, and that those share buybacks, which end up in the pockets of the original shareholders, do not get reinvested in industry, but go back into property and other kinds of non-productive assets?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. That is one of the concerns. It is assumed that the proceeds from those tax cuts will go directly into investment, but the evidence for that does not necessarily stack up. In fact, an estimated £500 billion is not invested in this country at the moment. That is an important point, which is why greater analysis and scrutiny are required, as well as conversations with businesses about what will actually make a difference for them in the long term.

The basic rate of capital gains tax is to be reduced from 18% to 10%, and the higher rate from 28% to 20%. That is set to cost £735 million in 2020 and £2.7 billion over the forecast period. Capital gains tax was paid by only 200,000 taxpayers in 2013, which means that about 0.3% of the population will benefit from a giveaway of more than £600 million in total from the first year. That was not called for or expected. In fact, the Financial Times described it as an “unexpected gift” for wealthy investors. In 2010, the Chancellor told the House that raising capital gains tax was necessary to “create a fairer tax system.”—[Official Report, 22 June 2010; Vol. 512, c. 178.]

It would be interesting to hear perhaps during the Exchequer Secretary’s wind-up speech what has changed.

Jim Shannon: The Residential Landlords Association was keen to see the extension of the capital gains tax relief so that landlords could sell property to their tenants. That is a small thing that could incentivise the whole housing market if it was done in the right way.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but I think he will agree that the key issue in addressing the housing crisis is the rapid building of new homes and the strategy to deliver that effectively.
[Seema Malhotra]

I want to make a few comments about entrepreneurs relief and the Government’s new investor relief. We welcome the endeavours to encourage investment, particularly long-term investment. The question will be whether the measures pass the test of what business is looking for: simplicity, stability and a strategic approach to fiscal policy. Our concern is that tinkering is no substitute for a clear, long-term strategy to support investment. That is why we are undertaking a review of tax reliefs to see what the evidence is for what incentivises business investment and provides real value for money. Our aim is to ensure that there is a strategic approach to supporting investment and the transparency around it. Those are questions we will pursue as we go forward into Committee.

We also welcome clauses on the reduction in oil and gas corporation tax and petroleum revenue tax. The Chancellor announced that he would reduce petroleum revenue tax from 35% to zero, and that he would reduce the corporation tax supplementary charge from 20% to 10%. There is no doubt that the struggling North sea oil and gas industry needs support. In fact, we think that the Chancellor could have gone further and announced the measures that Labour has called for. Our bold new proposal to invest in the industry is based on the creation of a new public body, which would be called UK Offshore Investment Ltd, to identify areas for temporary public investment. The purpose of that new body was spelled out last month by the Scottish Labour leader, Kezia Dugdale. It would conduct an open-book review with the Oil and Gas Authority to identify assets that have long-term viability and profitability. That, in turn, would provide the evidence to allow UK OIL to commit to public investment in strategic infrastructure and potentially profitable assets.

Clause 115 gives the Government power, through a statutory instrument, to reduce the VAT rate on women’s sanitary products from 5% to zero. That is welcome, as are the Minister’s comments. I am glad that the Chancellor has finally recognised that women’s sanitary products are not a luxury. However, it is crucial that the clause should set a firm deadline for the VAT reduction, and although the Minister’s comments signalled moves in that direction, they did not go quite far enough. I am sure that we will continue to address the point as we move forward in Committee and beyond. I congratulate Labour Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), and campaigners inside and outside Parliament on their hard work in forcing the Government’s hand on the issue. It is a sad indictment of the Government that it took a Labour amendment and an embarrassing Government defeat to achieve that result.

Where in the Finance Bill is a clause to reflect the Government’s other U-turn, which was on VAT on energy-saving materials? The Government accepted our amendment to the Budget resolution, which allowed the Government to legislate on the matter in the Finance Bill. The lack of legislation and the contradictory and noncommittal answers from Ministers are causing uncertainty in the industry. We simply call on the Government to make a commitment that they will not include a VAT rise for solar or other green energy measures in this or future Finance Bills.

On tax avoidance, the two key issues we face are structural reforms and public confidence. The rhetoric today, as in the past, has sought to be impressive—in the past, the Chancellor said that aggressive tax avoidance is “morally repugnant”—but the reality has yet to match the rhetoric. Indeed, the tax gap has grown under this Government to £34 billion. Serious measures to tackle tax avoidance, which is estimated to account for £7 billion of the tax gap, will be even more critical.

It is two years since the Prime Minister wrote to UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies calling on them to publish a public register of firms and individuals sheltering money there, yet virtually no progress has been made so far. Today’s statement did nothing to move us forward on such a public register of firms and individuals. Fundamentally, this issue is about a rotten system that undermines the faith of ordinary families in the fairness of our tax system. Indeed, a definitive analysis by the Financial Times shows that the corporate tax avoidance measures that the Labour Government brought in will still raise 10 times as much as those introduced during the last Parliament.

While we broadly welcome the measures in the Bill, we think that they simply do not go far enough. We believe there must be far greater transparency and enforcement in relation to those who try to hide their wealth and profits in tax havens. As ever, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister give the impression of acting tough, while in reality they are proposing half-measures. Instead, as Labour have set out in our tax transparency enforcement programme, we require the introduction of a general anti-avoidance principle that proactively looks at intent and does not need the consent of the tax profession before it can be used.

Our programme includes an immediate public inquiry into the Panama papers, and more resources for HMRC. Staff numbers having been cut by 6,000 and then added to by 670, we can see that there has been a return of about 10% of those whose jobs were cut, and real concerns have been raised about the impact on tax collection as a result. We have called for a specialised enforcement unit and for greater co-operation with European partners on country-by-country reporting and protection for whistleblowers.

John Mann: Far be it from me to make any proposals to Labour Front Benchers, but will my hon. Friend consider some research into the impact of the Liechtenstein disclosure facility and how it has been used during the past two to three years to subvert the Government’s attempts on taxation?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for his extremely well made comment. He is absolutely right that we should explore that area, because we want evidence about what works as we move forward urgently on the issue of gross tax avoidance and evasion. Indeed, if we want to ensure that tax avoiders and tax evaders pay their fair share of tax, the Finance Bill will need to be toughened up considerably. If the Chancellor fails to listen to our arguments, the public will want to know why.

The Bill also fails the fairness test. Resolution Foundation analysis shows that 80% of the gains from this Budget’s changes to income tax will be for the top half of the income distribution, with the top 20% of households
getting the lion’s share. It estimates that, during this Parliament, households in the lower half of the income distribution will lose an average of £375 a year, while those in the top half are set to gain £235 a year. We are lucky that it can tell us that. It is a matter of shame that the Chancellor no longer produces his own full distributional analysis. This is a Chancellor who either does not want to know or does not want to tell us what impact his decisions are having. Neither competent nor compassionate—after the Budget, that is the verdict on this Chancellor.

This country faces huge economic challenges—automation, competition from nations such as India, China and other growing economies, our grossly imbalanced economy and our growing current account deficit—yet faced with these big challenges, what do we get? We get cuts to corporation tax that the Office for Budget Responsibility says will do nothing to reverse the deteriorating outlook for business investment, productivity and exports. There are cuts to capital gains tax that will benefit a tiny minority but do nothing for the millions of working people struggling simply to stay out of debt, let alone save for a home or a pension. There are clever accounting tricks aimed at reducing the Chancellor’s short-term political embarrassment that do nothing to secure our long-term public finances or economic stability. Missing was a clear vision of the future—a vision of a Britain that has a strategic partnership between Government and business, and is stronger because prosperity is shared more fairly.

We will vote against this Finance Bill because it is unfair. It is unfair on women, on low-paid workers and on children living in poverty—the number of children in poverty has increased by half a million since this Government came to power. These are people who are seeing their living standards cut to pay for the Chancellor’s tax giveaways to the better off. We are worried now about their jobs and their families. It is unfair on all the hard-working families and responsible businesses that play by the rules and pay their fair share of tax. We will vote against the Bill because it fails the test of moving this country forward to a more prosperous and secure future for Britain’s businesses and families.

8.56 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I am grateful to be called so early in the debate. I strongly support the Bill, which will encourage saving, reward work, encourage business investment and tackle aggressive tax avoidance. Those things are exactly what we want to see in a business investment and tackle aggressive tax avoidance. We should note that every year we have a Finance Bill, and they are quite long, thick and heavy. We keep adding a load of new and complex clauses to our tax system, which is still just behind the Indian one for complexity. I do not think that we have a record length Finance Bill this year, although the Government achieved that twice in the previous Parliament. At some stage, we have to find a way of getting off the merry-go-round of further complicating our tax system every year. We even have a new record now—of adding a new tax every year. We had the diverted profits tax last year; this year, we have the apprenticeship levy, which the Bill recognises is actually a tax. Although those two measures are welcome, we are further adding to the complexity that people have to deal with.

A welcome step in the right direction is that we are making the Office of Tax Simplification a permanent feature of this arena. However, we need to free that office up to do more long-term, high-level strategic work rather than having to focus on what can at times be quite small features of the tax system, which do not affect all that many taxpayers. As the Minister said, it has done good work on small business taxation, but we really need the office to work out how we can simplify the big taxes we have, to make them easier to comply with, make it easier for HMRC to enforce compliance, and make those taxes less burdensome. That was my reasoning, in the previous Parliament, for why we should make the corporation tax system follow accounts, and focus the resources we have on transfer pricing and abusive avoidance arrangements, rather than having to inquire into whether a certain item was capital or revenue, or whether a certain entertainment allowance was right.

Such long-term strategic directions to simplify the system would bring in far more revenue and make the system far more attractive. I hope that the Bill will allow the OTS to choose its own work in some situations. Perhaps it will be encouraged to consider some fundamental simplifications, and not just suggestions made by the Chancellor from time to time.

On individual measures in the Bill that are welcome, the savings and dividends nil rates are an encouragement for people to save, and a welcome simplification of the tax system for many people who struggled to work out how the dividend credit worked and what tax rate they were paying. That moves us in the right direction regarding how we stop people incorporating themselves to get a tax advantage that is not intended by paying themselves dividends, and helps us to get to a fairer system in which people who are employed pay the right taxes.

Some issues have not been raised. For example, the peer-to-peer lending rules are leading the world in encouraging the financing of businesses that cannot get normal financing from banks. There are also welcome anti-avoidance rules such as the withholding tax being used to try to stop treaties being abused so that companies avoid paying the withholding tax they should be paying in paying fees to tax havens.
The Bill does not contain some measures that I would like to be included. For example, we must accept that there is a widespread lack of confidence among the public that our largest corporates are paying all the taxes in this country that they are supposed to pay. I suspect that most of those companies are paying their taxes and that a relatively small proportion are engaging in aggressive avoidance, but everyone gets tarred by the same brush. The measures that we have introduced in the past five or six years to tweak things or introduce new rules and so on, are not tackling the fundamental lack of confidence in the system, which is why we need more transparency from large companies.

We should make large companies publish their tax returns so that we can see a calculation of how they have got from the profit they report to the tax they pay. We should know which companies have made aggressive calculations, or used strange reliefs or funny payments that we do not understand, and which are paying the right amount and happen to have losses brought forward or capital allowances that they have not used. That would boost people’s confidence and we would not see stories every few months about another large multinational that has done something that it should not have done, or done something entirely reasonable, but we do not know because such details are not in the public domain. It would help to move this debate forward if those large companies were more transparent.

Companies have to disclose many things about their directors, investment strategies and business practices, and I do not think that a little more transparency about tax affairs would put much more commercially sensitive material into the public domain. Instead, it would boost people’s confidence. I hope that large companies that are complying with the rules would want to do that—they should not be scared of doing so. If they are using existing rules and incentives for the use that they were intended, that is welcome and something that we all understand. Perhaps the one thing that we can do domestically would be to take this debate forward so that we are confident that our largest companies are doing what we want them to do, and not doing things that they ought not to be doing. With that plea, I welcome the Bill and will be voting for it this evening.

9.3 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): This Bill follows in the wake of yet another Budget that began to fall apart within a few short hours of the Chancellor’s statement—indeed, perhaps his future statements should be entitled, “Not the Budget”. If the Budget created disarray on the Government Benches, this Bill, with its clamjamfry of unco-ordinated clauses, presages yet more failure and demonstably fails to address some of the major economic challenges of our time.

I admit that it was a great joy to read all 580 pages of the Finance Bill over the recess, and although I will come to a number of specific issues and technical problems, the Scottish National party has one overriding message for the Government: you cannot build economic success on the back of social injustice. Every social injustice is a hammer blow to economic progress. In recent times, we have seen the ways in which this Government wanted to place further injustice on the shoulders of the disabled, the disadvantaged and the 1950s-born women while at the same time operating an economic system that disproportionately protects and enhances the privileges of the most wealthy in society. Creating such division does not bring progress.

I said in my maiden speech, quoting Adam Smith:

“No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.”

Times move on, of course, and reflections on our current predicament can best be summed up by Professor Stiglitz, who said:

“Rather than justice for all, we are evolving into a system of justice for those who can afford it”.

I am confident that hon. Members will be able to rehearse many instances of social injustice created by this Government, so allow me to move on and reflect on an issue that I raised in the House on 3 February this year—namely, the problem of tax evasion, particularly through the use of tax havens in British overseas territories. Little did I know at the time how prescient that debate in February would prove to be.

I have to say how disappointing I found the Prime Minister’s statement earlier today, despite its containing one or two modest proposals that I welcomed. Let us put this into context. According to Jason Hickel of the London School of Economics, tax havens hide one sixth of the world’s total private wealth—in excess of $20 trillion. I have already commented elsewhere that the revelations in the millions of papers that have been released from Mossack Fonseca are but the tip of a gigantic iceberg. Indeed, Panama does not even make it into the top 10 tax havens. Taken together, Britain and her overseas territories are at No. 1, outdoing Switzerland by some margin. Commenting on a single address in the Cayman Islands, Ugland House, President Obama said:

“That’s either the biggest building in the world or the biggest tax scam on record”.

It is not surprising he said that, given that 19,000 businesses are registered at that one address. It is a big hoose, as I said in February.

At least four major issues relating to tax havens need addressing. The first—the subject of much current debate—is the extent to which the makers of laws and the guardians of the wider public interest are themselves benefiting from tax scams. This is an understandable issue of concern, but we fool ourselves if we think that that is the sole or primary issue. It does, however, have regard to openness and transparency. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) that it would be a positive and welcome move if Cabinet Members, as well as the Prime Minister, were to choose willingly to open up their tax returns to public view.

The second issue, which deserves more focus, is the avoidance of tax. I deliberately say “avoidance”, because that is of course legal. It strikes me, however, that for the average member of the public, it is not a convincing defence for the type of institutional behaviour that we have witnessed in recent times, including from large multinational corporations, to say, “It is legal”. I am sure that I am not the only new MP to have been subjected to huge lobbying by corporations and other financial bodies. They mobilise vast resources to “help” the Government and they are very successful. They have
managed to influence the creation of an international system of finance that enables tax avoidance on a huge scale. Not only that, but they happily operate a system that helps the very rich to hide the gains of vast wealth while the ordinary man in the street has no such luxury.

The third issue, which has surprisingly been the subject of much less scrutiny so far, is the extent of the evasion of disclosure of the source of money itself. There are good reasons to suppose that it is not only corrupt political leaders but drug traffickers, terrorist organisations and other types of criminals who inhabit the shady world of international finance. Sadly, the Panama papers suggest that some legally registered institutions may have colluded in the protection of criminals who stash their cash behind anonymous, untouchable trusts and other financial vehicles. I hope we can take it from the Prime Minister’s statement today and from the Minister’s welcome remarks earlier about making it a criminal offence for some types of such “advice” to be proffered by otherwise legal institutions that we will see considerable progress on this matter.

The fourth issue I wish to raise is where these funds are and how they are set to work for their beneficiaries. As we know, these funds do not actually sit in Panama, the British Virgin Islands or the Cayman Islands. One of their biggest centres is, as we know, London. For example, hundreds of very expensive properties in London have been brought by unknown persons. We need transparency here, too. Some, like my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), have argued that it should be illegal to own property or land in the UK where the beneficiary is unknown—a breathtakingly simple measure to address a cause of great concern.

All this calls for radical reform in each of those four areas, but I am sad to say that neither the Finance Bill nor the Prime Minister’s statement earlier goes nearly far enough to inspire any confidence that the matter will be adequately addressed. It is very disappointing, for example, that the Prime Minister continues to resist calls to do something about trusts. Even if he was right in his interpretation three years ago about how to proceed, this is three years later and public perceptions throughout the world have changed radically. It is time to broaden the scope of action.

The truth is that while this Government, through this Finance Bill, are taking feeble measures to tackle tax evasion, at the same time, in an act of social and economic injustice, they are mounting an attack on small individual contractors who serve rural communities, preventing them from having travel expense relief. These people are not tax dodgers; they are flexible workers, with both private and public clients, who are essential to many rural communities in Scotland. Yet at the same time as these people are attacked, the Government are protecting tax dodgers and millionaire Tory donors by continuing to allow huge loopholes in the system. We must get a commitment to a more open and transparent system that involves all overseas territories, trusts as well as companies, and full and independent scrutiny of the so-called Panama papers.

There is scope in Committee for the Government to be much more ambitious and to present new clauses for debate. They can be assured that it is certainly our intention to do that. Furthermore, the claim that this Finance Bill will adequately address other tax dodges lies in ruins, when we consider its implications for the so-called Mayfair tax loophole. We do not believe the Finance Bill makes anything like sufficient progress in its treatment of so-called carried interest, which is seen by many members of the public as another example of one rule for those with modest means and of huge favours being given to those of considerable wealth and income. Again, this is an area we shall pursue in Committee.

I turn now to wider economic matters. In his 2012 Budget speech, the Chancellor acknowledged Britain’s falling share of world exports and stated that “we want to double our nation’s exports to £1 trillion this decade.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2012; Vol. 542, c. 797.]

Jings, he can certainly dream can our George! However, the figures are moving in the wrong direction, and the Chancellor is likely to fall short of his target for £1 trillion in exports by 2020 by at least some £300 billion.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): A rounding error.

Roger Mullin: Indeed. Failing to meet targets is of course one of the great characteristics of the Chancellor, but to miss it by such a huge margin creates a new category of failure—a right bourach, perhaps. Furthermore, rather than making even modest progress, we find that in the last three months of 2015, the UK had achieved a record-breaking near £33 billion current account deficit.

Part of our declining relative performance speaks to a long-term failure to address adequately the central issue of productivity in our economy. On productivity, this Finance Bill fails to address fundamental concerns. Raising levels of productivity is essential to raising growth in the economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian pointed out on 22 March, developed countries with higher levels of growth, including Australia, Sweden, Spain and the United States, to name only some, “experienced faster growth than the UK in 2015, largely because they experienced faster productivity growth.”—[Official Report, 22 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1412.]

We need productivity growth, too, to enable the cash economy to grow, to enable wage growth and to grow tax receipts.

There are many factors, of course, that affect productivity growth. Some are well known and relatively uncontroversial—areas such as investment in research, development, innovation, and of course, infrastructure. In these areas, the UK lags well behind many of our major competitors. On a number of occasions, I have pointed to the relative decline in investment in R and D compared with our G8 competitors. As things stand, we are bottom of the G8 on R and D spend from both private and public sources, and there has been a reluctance, to put it mildly, to raise infrastructure spend to the necessary levels.

The SNP believes that in order to achieve a sustainable future, R and D expenditure and investment could benefit from a comprehensive, dramatic and territorial review, and that there should be increased planned infrastructure spend beyond the narrow confines of London and the south. As for skills, the subject has already been raised by the hon. Member for—

John Mann: Bassetlaw.
Roger Mullin: Correct! I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman remembered. He referred to the importance of skills, which are of course fundamental to productivity growth. For some 30 years, the UK has been failing, particularly at the intermediate and higher-intermediate skill levels.

Let me come on to another iniquity in the Bill: the continuing failure to relieve Scotland’s police, fire and rescue services from the burden of VAT. The Government’s excuses on this are well rehearsed, but they are hollow words. Their actions confirm that, rather than supporting the police and fire services in Scotland, the Tories are their enemies.

This Finance Bill rides uneasily alongside the Chancellor’s statement to the House on that “we are going to deliver a strong and compassionate society for the next generation”.—[Official Report, 22 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1388.]

I do not know a single young person or couple that will be able to take advantage of raising the amount that can be invested in an ISA to £20,000 a year. I do know, however, all too many constituents, many of them young, who live on take-home pay that is much less than £20,000 annually.

The actions of this Government are not building a strong economy for the future and are certainly doing nothing to create a compassionate society. This Government and this Chancellor are not merely failures; they are purveyors of misery.

9.18 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): This Finance Bill will go a long way to ensuring that there is no thumb on the scales that balance the interests of small businesses and multinational companies. In that sense, it is a Budget of direct redistribution, but there are ways of extending that principle further. The £9 billion gained through restrictions on interest deductibility, the strengthening of withholding tax and the hybrid mismatch rules all mean that a great deal will be ploughed back to provide support for small business. That is great news for someone such as me, coming here after a career in small business and now chairing the all-party groups on small business and on micro-business. In fact, anyone who has run a small business will know that business rates can take up an intimidatingly large proportion of fixed costs. The changes in those, together with the cut in corporation tax, are very welcome, recognising both the value of small businesses as employers and the fact that they are the engine of growth.

I think that the revised business rates will be of enormous benefit to companies in the glorious south-west, where small businesses are not just economic units, but power the communities that surround them. As well as, apparently, having more cows than any other constituency —of which we are very proud—Somerset and Frome consists of a constellation of 140 small towns and villages, many of which pivot around, and depend on, a single company or enterprise. For that reason, we need to recognise the significance of the number of jobs that have been created in the last six years, and the fact that there has been more rapid growth in jobs than at any time since the second world war. That is not just some abstract figure, but a reflection of tangible improvements in conditions for local businesses, and, therefore, for the people who depend on them.

That entrepreneurial spirit also shows itself in the so-called sharing economy, another economic sector that greatly helps those in rural areas. The tax-free allowance of £1,000 for online micro-entrepreneurs is a small but welcome step. A number of community energy and transport projects in my constituency will benefit from those incentives, and from the fact that the allowance recognises the important role that they play. Of course, a great deal more can be done. However, a Budget is not a governmental wish list, but an opportunity to match aspiration with reality.

Along with, I am sure, many Members in all parts of the House, I have recently received a fair bit of correspondence suggesting that reducing foreign aid would give us more scope for domestic expenditure. That is certainly true in purely economic terms, but what would be the moral cost? As of last year, the money provided through British foreign aid has vaccinated 55 million children against preventable diseases, given 50 million people the means to work their way out of poverty, saved the lives of 50,000 women in pregnancy and childbirth, and helped to prevent a colossal 10 million children from going hungry. We must, of course, take every possible step to ensure that the money goes to the vulnerable rather than to some kleptocracy or other, but that is a question of means rather than ends. We are the fifth richest country in the world, and I believe that our continuing commitment to foreign aid is a recognition of the humanitarian duties that accompany such a position of relative strength.

I think that the Bill’s approach is hugely positive. It incentivises and empowers individuals and small companies, properly addresses corporations that skip around in the no man’s land between tax avoidance and evasion, bridges the gap of generational unfairness with the lifetime ISA, and reaffirms our commitment to those who suffer from abject poverty abroad, while continuing to facilitate our economic recovery at home.

During one of the debates on the Budget, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) summarised the priorities for the south-west as “Rail, road, housing and broadband”—[Official Report, 17 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1144.]

I could not agree more, and I am delighted to see the recognition of all those priorities in the financial measures that the Chancellor has set out.

I should also mention the commitment of half a billion pounds to speed the introduction of a fair national funding formula for schools. Many of us have campaigned for such a formula for some time, and it will benefit many schools in my constituency. There has been a long-term imbalance, and it is a relief to see the Chancellor commit himself to righting it.

Despite international pressures, our economy continues, by any comparative measure, to develop strongly. I believe that the Bill will enable small businesses to go on powering the jobs, and therefore the growth, on which we really depend.

9.24 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): In 2010, the Chancellor promised us a new growth model based on higher savings, investment and exports. However, notwithstanding what we have just heard from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton),
those fundamentals, which underpin the economy and are the backdrop to the Bill, are not going as well as we might have hoped. Our national savings ratio has hit an all-time low of just 3.3%. The latest figures, however, has been revised down, with a staggering £87 billion wiped off forecast business investment since last November, and public investment is falling as well. Our export performance has deteriorated further, with the gap between the Chancellor’s 2020 target for a trillion pounds-worth of exports and the OBR’s expectations now widening to £357 billion. That is before we factor in the calamity that the Government have allowed to unfold in our steel industry or the enormous risks to our economy created by putting our membership of the European Union in question. Indeed, just a few weeks after the Budget statement, we have seen even more bad news about not only steel, but the manufacturing sector in general and the worst balance of payments figures that the country has seen since the second world war, with the deficit in the fourth quarter of 2015 reaching a staggering 7%.

All that has an impact on living standards. On top of the downward revisions that we saw in November, expected earnings have been revised down in the forecasts for every single year of this Parliament. Looking at the deterioration in expected earnings since the Budget just after the general election, the OBR forecasts that the average UK worker will be £823 a year worse off by the final year of this Parliament. Following the downward revisions, the total loss over the course of this Parliament is £2,000, the impact of which will be felt most by those on low and modest incomes. Indeed, because the national living wage is linked to average earnings, somebody on the minimum wage will be £600 a year worse off than when the Government originally announced it. In less than a year, the average worker will be £2,000 worse off over the course of this Parliament and somebody on the minimum wage will be £600 a year worse off compared with what the Government originally announced.

Against that background, one might think that a Chancellor who once proclaimed that we were “all in this together” would want to use the Budget and this Finance Bill to target help towards ordinary working families and the low-paid. Instead, we have a package of measures before us that disproportionately benefit the better-off, rather than those who most need support. Let me give three examples. First, fewer than one in five taxpayers will gain from the £2 billion cut in higher rate income tax in clause 2. Those who will gain will also receive the largest benefit from the expensive and poorly targeted increase in the personal allowance in clause 3. The 4.6 million lowest-earning workers in the country will receive no benefit at all from either change. At a time when the earnings of those on middle and low incomes are being squeezed and public finances remain extremely tight, raising the threshold at which people start paying the higher rate of income tax is the wrong priority.

Secondly, the cut in capital gains tax in clause 72 will cost taxpayers more than £2.7 billion over the next five years, but directly benefit only a tiny minority. Just 130,000 individuals will share the gains, the majority being higher rate taxpayers. Around half of capital gains tax is paid by just 5,000 individuals who will therefore receive a windfall and get the bulk of the advantage, so the benefits of this tax break will be pocketed by a relatively fortunate few. Again, that is not the right priority when the living standards of ordinary people are being squeezed and when our public finances are so stretched.

The Chancellor would no doubt protest that that is a price worth paying for the entrepreneurial energy that the capital gains tax cut will unleash, but the official documents reveal that the OBR has made no upward revisions to its forecasts for investment, productivity or growth as a result of the measure, which will cost £2.7 billion. Indeed, the most likely impact of the move will be to increase the incentive to avoid tax by converting income to capital gains. Perhaps the Chancellor has been taking advice from the Prime Minister, who seems to have enjoyed the benefit of some careful tax planning. But, again, I would argue that with squeezed family finances and tight public finances, this is neither fair nor fiscally responsible.

Thirdly, as part of his Budget the Chancellor has chosen to increase the amount any individual can contribute to a tax-free savings account to £20,000 a year, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) mentioned. I welcome action to make it easier for ordinary workers and families to save, but we have to ask whether this approach should be the priority when most of our constituents are lucky to earn £20,000 a year and have anything left to save at all. In my constituency, average earnings are just under £20,000 a year, and many people would struggle to put anything aside, let alone take advantage of a £20,000 individual savings account limit. In the latest year for which detailed data are available, the average ISA subscription was less than £4,000 in the year. Fewer than one in 10 people who contributed to an ISA were able to save the maximum amount of just over £15,000, with a disproportionate number of those who did so having incomes above £150,000 a year. The trends of recent years suggest that as the Government have focused on raising the annual limit for ISAs, the total amount of cash put into ISAs has increased sharply even as the total number of people contributing to an ISA has fallen. In other words, this is moving ISAs away from their original purpose as a platform to support broad-based saving and investment, and increasing their use as a way to minimise tax liabilities for those with large amounts of cash to move around. That is having the wrong effects and the wrong people are benefiting. I support ISAs and tax-free savings, but only if they are there to support those people who need to save. What we are seeing is a falling savings ratio, with the most wealthy people being incentivised to save. We need to help those people on more modest incomes to put something aside for their future.

This Finance Bill, like those before it under this Chancellor, contains a long list of clauses ostensibly aimed at reducing tax evasion and avoidance. Anything that genuinely advances that end is to be welcomed, but we will judge the Government’s achievements not on the number of clauses in their Bills, but on the real progress made towards closing the tax gap and ensuring that everyone pays their share. I urge the Government to do more, by supporting, not blocking, measures in the European Parliament that strive to meet that objective.

The truth is that HMRC’s own figures show that the tax gap fell by £4 billion over the last five years of a Labour Government but has risen by £1 billion under the current Chancellor. The consequences of this Government’s refusal to take the necessary action on...
UK Crown dependencies—[Interruption.] I am happy to take an intervention instead of having the Minister muttering from a sedentary position.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): I wonder whether the hon. Lady would like to comment on the percentage tax gap.

Rachel Reeves: If the Minister is so concerned about the tax gap, why did his Tory MEPs block measures in the European Parliament to crack down on tax avoidance and why did the Prime Minister write to Herman Van Rompuy in 2013 asking for trusts to be excluded. As I say, instead of looking at the number of clauses in a Bill, we should judge the Government by their record, by their actions and by what is happening to the tax gap. Under Labour the tax gap narrowed but under the Tories it is widening. They need to make much more effort to ensure that people at the top and big corporations pay their fair share of tax, but that is not happening under a Conservative Administration.

I hope that I have demonstrated that this Finance Bill prioritises tax breaks for the wealthy at the same time as pulling vital support from the vulnerable and disadvantaged. The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury cited the Resolution Foundation. It has calculated that the tax and benefit measures already taken by this Chancellor since the election will cut the incomes of the poorest 30% by £565 a year, while increasing those of the richest 30% by £280 a year—and that is before we factor in the impact of any further cuts to social security needed to meet the Government’s welfare cap and fill the multi-billion-pound fiscal hole following their U-turn over personal independence payments.

During a sitting of the Treasury Committee I pressed the Chancellor on all of this, particularly the changes to disability benefits. He would say was that he had “no plans” for further raids on the fragile finances of disabled people, low-paid workers or children living in poverty, but that gives very little reassurance to those who rely on social security because they are sick or disabled and cannot work, or because they are in low-paid work and struggle to make ends meet; nor does it reassure families bringing up children in poverty that the Government will not once again hit their family finances.

Perhaps even more problematic than the measures in the Bill are the measures that are missing from it. The House will remember that this was supposed to be the “omnishambles Budget”. This Budget has unravelled even faster than the 2012 Budget, with the flagship measure—changes to disability benefits—dropped and the changes to pensions tax relief dropped before they were even announced. The flagship measure in the 2012 Budget—the cut in the top rate of tax from 50p to 45p—stayed, but the flagship measure in this year’s Budget was dropped.

I believe that the Chancellor wanted to reform pensions tax relief, but could not do so because Tory MPs protested too loudly. Instead, at the last minute he decided to raid the disability budget, but then—after that was announced—recognised that it did not really fit with his rhetoric of, “We’re all in it together.” That is why the Budget has unravelled so quickly, but most importantly—well, not the most important—it is why the political prospects of the Chancellor have unraveled so quickly as well. The highest price for this Budget will be paid by ordinary taxpayers, working families and future generations. That is why I and my colleagues will vote against the Bill this evening. It represents the wrong priorities for our country.

9.39 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to follow the characteristically thoughtful and hard-hitting speech by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). As she knows, I respect her and her experience, but there is no question but that a tax is required on the sugar in that speech, which was too sour on this occasion. I prefer the analysis of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton).

I congratulate the Government and Treasury Ministers on the Bill. Before I explain why, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), the Chancellor’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, on the recent addition, Henry, to his family. We are all grateful on this side of the House for his safe arrival.
It is a pleasure to speak in an important debate on an important Finance Bill, which builds on the success of the Government’s long-term economic plan and takes a number of long-term measures that will make life better and more prosperous, not just now but for future generations. It supports savings for lower earners, with the introduction of the savings nil rate in clause 4, as promised in the autumn statement. The measure excludes the highest-earning additional-rate taxpayers but allows for up to £1,000 of zero-rated savings income for basic rate taxpayers, and only up to £500 for higher-rate taxpayers. That adds to other measures that the Chancellor has put in place such as lifetime individual savings accounts, which were announced this year, and the help to buy ISA, which rightly focus on younger savers.

The Bill works to support further fiscal stability, with necessary uprating in gaming duty in clause 140 and tobacco duty in clause 142. It deals with anti-avoidance issues, as has been discussed, in part 10, with the new general anti-abuse rule penalty clause in clause 146 and escalating sanctions in clause 147. It also promotes economic dynamism, with taxes on income and dividend income—it raises the personal allowance in part 1—and then the new dividend nil rate in clause 5 and schedule 8. It goes on. The Bill introduces in clause 25 welcome improvements and flexibility both to the averaging of profits in the tax treatment of farmers, extending it from two years to five years, and for creative artists. Farmers have long been central to rural life in and around Macclesfield, and in many other constituencies across the country, and creative artists are increasingly adding to our economic and cultural mix in Macclesfield, as demonstrated by the upcoming Barnaby festival—details are available on its website. I hope that the new tax relief for the production of orchestral concerts in clause 50 and schedule 8 will add to that mix.

The Bill is radical in reforming enterprise taxes, as has been said, with cuts to, and relief from, capital gains tax in clauses 72 and 76, and the cutting of corporation tax to just 17% in 2020 under clause 42. These measures show that Britain is open for business, and are for the benefit of the young and enterprising entrepreneurs whom we need for the next generation of business leaders. That economic dynamism is needed for the long-term projects that the Government are rolling out, and it will benefit our children and grandchildren throughout their working lives.

Young people understand—and young people certainly understand this far better than old Labour Front Benchers—that supporting an enterprise economy is not a selfish, atomistic pursuit but a recognition that we all advance by pooling more effectively our comparative advantages into a common, more productive economy. According to research by UK Trade & Investment and the Economist Intelligence Unit which was published only 15 months ago, “running my own business” is the No. 1 career aspiration for the year 2020 among young people in the UK.

Having listened to debates on the Budget in the House and elsewhere, I think that it is important that we remind ourselves why young people are champions of the common value and common purpose that enterprise provides and why it is important that the Bill responds to that. That is key to explaining why the Bill is important for building on the foundations of this Government’s economic success with enabling measures for the success of future generations.

All business transactions must involve at least two parties: the supplier and the consumer. The very word, “enterprise”, is derived from joint undertakings that have been prised—extracted—from “inter”, or working for mutual advantage. It is a profound force for good. It is also voluntary, so carries the element not only of opportunity but of suitably managed risk. For risk to be suitably managed, suppliers need to be flexible. They need to be responsive to demand to survive and thrive in competitive markets. The Government need to ensure that the freedom to be flexible and the confidence to be bold exist for enterprise to thrive. The Government need to remove barriers and provide a stable and enabling environment for entrepreneurs. They are doing so in clause 42 by reducing corporation tax and by incentivising capital gains through clause 72 so that investment improves. As I said in my intervention on the shadow Minister, the Federation of Small Businesses clearly welcomes this.

The Government need to ensure that we have decent standards of education and skills training, hence the importance of the enterprise levy in part 6. The Government need to clear barriers to growth, whether those are unnecessary regulation and high and complicated taxes, or poor infrastructure for transport and communications. These are sometimes known as horizontal measures as they stretch across the whole economy and across large sectors, and do not apply only to a few selected winners within those sectors picked by Ministers and mandarins. This Government have been right to facilitate joint working between Whitehall and local authorities and business on the ground through growth deals and city deals and by encouraging local enterprise partnerships. That is profoundly long-termist.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of skills and apprenticeships. Does he share my concern that apprenticeships, in the way in which they are delivered, still adopt the gender segregation of the past? Most of those going on engineering apprenticeships are boys and men, and most of those going on childcare apprenticeships are young women. Would it not be a good idea to ensure that those in receipt of the apprenticeship levy should demonstrate that they have made every effort to undo the job segregation that exists in our workplaces and in apprenticeships?

David Rutley: The right hon. Lady makes an important point. We want to tackle such segregation. In Macclesfield, AstraZeneca, a great pharmaceutical company that employs many engineers, has 30 new apprentices who started last summer. Many of them are women. That is exactly the route that we need to take. With the new levy, businesses will hopefully have a greater say in how apprenticeships should be taken forward, their quality improved and the gender mix enhanced. That was a good intervention.

The hon. Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) spoke about productivity. Clearly, productivity rates are too low. As we heard in the Budget, the OBR believes that the long-term challenges are even worse than it had originally thought. The Red Book shows that the IMF and the OECD point to productivity challenges in many other countries, as well as the UK. I am pleased to see that the Government are tackling that head-on. Hon. Members can take a careful look at page 61 of the Red Book and see the vast array of initiatives that are
being taken forward to address the productivity challenge. Those reforms rely on encouraging and enabling local enterprise all over the country.

The present Chancellor is the first Chancellor I can think of who has looked at the powers of the Treasury and actively sought to devolve them—to transfer those powers. That is progressive and it is the right way to secure long-term economic progress. Opposition Members should welcome that, like their colleagues in local government in cities close to me, such as Liverpool and Manchester.

That all adds to the Government’s commitment to forge local strategic partnerships which are needed for the success of other productive sectors such as life sciences, not least in the cluster known as the life sciences corridor in east Cheshire, a sub-region of the country which has productivity rates 14% higher than the UK average and higher than in the sub-regions of Bristol or Edinburgh. We in east Cheshire cannot be alone in enjoying high rates of productivity, so I welcome again the tax measures in clauses 72 and 42 that reduce the barriers of capital gains tax and corporation tax and see the Government encouraging business across the UK, including in the highly productive fields of advanced manufacturing and innovation. We see that clearly in the work that AstraZeneca is doing on Zoladex and other treatments not just in Macclesfield, but across the country. Other businesses should follow suit. It is vital for our economic growth.

In conclusion, the Bill delivers concrete measures that will enable a more enterprising economy. It is a Bill for the long term that makes us more flexible in dealing with short-term shocks and impacts, and it is a Bill for rebalancing the economy and for promoting productivity, which is a vital challenge. That is why I will be proud to support it in the Division Lobby later this evening.

9.49 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I have no doubt that the support of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) for greater productivity and skills is heartfelt, but sadly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has outlined, this Finance Bill falls far short of meeting the needs of people on low or even average incomes in this country and helping them to do better for themselves and their families.

It is interesting that the Second Reading of the Finance Bill, which should be the centrepiece of today’s discussions, has been knocked off track somewhat by the disclosures in the Panama papers. Given that we have a major Finance Bill before the House, it is absolutely right that we consider whether it really addresses the central issue of fair taxation and how it can clamp down on tax avoidance and evasion.

Recent events have exposed parallel worlds. In the world of most of Britain’s 29.7 million taxpayers, taxes are deducted automatically. January was the month when 10 million everyday citizens submitted their tax returns. The first week of April is when most of the 22.7 million people who save in an ISA were looking at how they could top it up. That is the world of most of our citizens, the people who work, pay their taxes and follow the rules. They meet the deadlines. They are the people who put into the system and occasionally need to take out of it.

However, there is another world, a shadow world occupied by a group of people, small in number but big in influence, who share another set of characteristics. These are the people who play by a different set of rules. They are wealthy but, not satisfied with just being wealthy, they also want to be tax-free. Being rich is not rich enough. They live across borders, have homes in several countries and bank accounts in others, with businesses nominally located in low or no-tax regimes. That is not because they are busy or simply because they are successful. There is one overriding purpose: to maximise the income sheltered and obscured from tax authorities.

Tax avoidance is not illegal, but the Prime Minister himself has criticised aggressive tax avoidance schemes that subvert the intention of domestic tax laws. To muddy the waters over the past few days, some have suggested that ISAs and helping one’s children are forms of tax avoidance. They are not. To my mind, avoidance is when someone deliberately does something that Parliament never intended. Governments have legislated against particular means of avoidance, attempting to close a specific loophole each time. That kind of patchwork policy making has been described as like plugging holes in a colander, or playing whack-a-mole. The point is that, given the complexity of our tax system, tackling tax avoidance measure by measure is very hard to get right.

The disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regulations introduced by the previous Labour Government in 2004 were key to helping HMRC uncover new information about tax avoidance practices and getting hold of that information earlier. As a result, HMRC learned about schemes that it had never heard of, or ever imagined, and then it could act quickly to shut them down. Those were the first steps in a campaign for transparency. The coalition Government’s co-operation with the OECD’s base erosion and profit shifting measures was to be welcomed, as was their introduction of accelerated payment notices, which I believe have successfully recovered more than £2 billion in unpaid taxes.

This Bill includes a range of measures, including an updated general anti-avoidance rule, the publication of statements of tax strategy and tax planning, and a new asset-based penalty system for large-scale tax evasion, but it is as yet unclear what effect, if any, each measure will have. Even the most intense challenge to tax avoidance by the Government must compete with the ingenuity of legal and accounting experts that the very wealthy and corporate giants have access to, and the global nature of their enterprises. That is why I want Parliament to tackle one of the strongest weapons in the tax avoider’s armoury: secrecy. If there is one thing that the Panama papers have shown us, it is the urgent need for more transparency.

It is tempting to focus on MPs’ tax returns this week—for the record, my taxable income for 2014-15 was £58,724, on which I paid £12,965.80 in tax—but the income of the largest multinational in one week is more than the combined annual incomes of every Member of Parliament. That is not surprising, and some may say thank goodness, but I want to make sure that, in the midst of all the comments about tax, we do not let multinational companies off the hook.
When Google agreed to pay HMRC £130 million in back taxes, the Chancellor claimed victory. My cross-party colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee and I questioned Google and HMRC. Yet even after a long session, not only was Google's Europe, middle east and Africa president, Matt Brittin, unclear about his salary, but we remained unclear whether the £130 million represented a good deal. On top of that, I discovered that the Government’s diverted profits tax—the so-called Google tax—does not in fact apply to Google. It is still not certain what revenue the Government hope to gain from this measure. Even if Government estimates of £360 million a year are forthcoming, that is but a drop in the ocean when one begins to look at the operation of these enterprises.

I therefore decided to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill—the Multinational Enterprises (Financial Transparency) Bill. Its purpose is to require large multinational enterprises, which, as of January this year, must provide HMRC with their country-by-country reporting information, to include the same information in their annual returns to Companies House.

**Rachel Reeves:** Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Caroline Flint:** I will give way to my right hon. Friend—sorry, my hon. Friend.

**Rachel Reeves:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only taxpayers who lose out when multinationals do not pay their fair share of tax? The other big losers are small businesses, which have to pay tax. This is therefore not a level playing field, because they pay taxes while some of these big multinationals get away with paying nothing or very little.

**Caroline Flint:** My hon. Friend, who should be right honourable, is absolutely right. This proposal is a pro-business measure, because many small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK and around the world have no place to hide when it comes to where they pay their tax and how much tax they pay. Putting information in the public domain would help.

In March, I wrote to the Chancellor about my Bill, urging the Government to support it or to include measures in the Finance Bill. After all, the Chancellor himself told a meeting of European Finance Ministers that he was in favour of public country-by-country reporting, and he tweeted about it afterwards—so I suppose it must be happening. I have not had a reply yet, but I wait in anticipation.

One Treasury Minister—I am not sure whether it was the Exchequer Secretary, who is on the Front Bench today—has since suggested that we could not possibly take such a step unilaterally, for fear that we would be disadvantaged by comparison with our European colleagues. Well, I say that it is time we stepped up. The British people are sick of hearing story after story about big businesses not paying their taxes. To be honest, in the digital age of today and the future, privacy of the kind that these companies have enjoyed will not last. We need Governments who lead on public transparency, instead of relying on exposures caused by whistleblowing or technical mishaps.

To those who argue that greater transparency would disadvantage us internationally, I simply suggest that they look at the settlements that France and Italy are pursuing with Google. Both Governments look set to recover a greater sum in unpaid taxes than we were able to, despite their having a much smaller share of Google's business than we do.

I also challenge the argument that public country-by-country reporting would damage businesses. The information I propose should be placed in the public domain is information that businesses are required to give HMRC—it is not commercially sensitive. Publication is a straightforward way to persuade companies not only to come clean and to explain their tax planning, but to restore their tarnished reputations. I believe it would deter them from using tax havens and shell companies.

Publication would also send a strong signal to developing countries, which are often short-changed by corporates that have huge undertakings in those countries but that pay little or no tax to support their developing economies. Charities say that developing countries lose more potential revenue each year because of corporate tax dodging than the amount given annually in overseas aid by all richer countries. They calculate that developing countries’ revenue losses are two to five times higher than those of developed countries such as the UK. This simple measure could profoundly help developing countries to prosper and be more self-sufficient.

Aid is vital for poorer nations, but just as important as a hand down is a hand up, and that will not happen unless we force these companies to come clean. As Christian Aid has illustrated, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was deprived of $1.35 billion—twice its health and education budgets combined—owing to the sale of mining contracts to five anonymous Virgin Islands companies. How can a country such as the DRC ever be self-sustaining if it is deprived of vital corporate taxes in that way?

10 pm

Debate interrupted (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

**DEFERRED DIVISIONS**

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

That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to the Finance (No. 2) Bill: Carry-over.—

(Margot James.)

Question agreed to.
Finance (No. 2) Bill

Debate resumed.

Question again proposed. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Caroline Flint: I am grateful to the 50 colleagues from six parties who supported my ten-minute rule Bill, including every Back-Bench member of the Public Accounts Committee. I hope to build that cross-party support as I seek to amend this Bill. My interest today is not to grandstand, but to change the law.

In January 2012, the Prime Minister said:

“We need a tougher approach. One of the things that we are going to be looking at this year is whether there should be a general anti-avoidance power that HMRC can use, particularly with very wealthy individuals and with the bigger companies, to make sure they pay their fair share.”

Many in this House would agree with that.

Three months later, the Chancellor said:

“I was shocked to see that some of the very wealthiest people in the country have organised their tax affairs, and to be fair it’s within the tax laws, so that they were regularly paying virtually no income tax. And I don’t think that’s right.”

Many would agree with that.

In January 2013, the Prime Minister said:

“We want to drive a more serious debate on tax evasion and tax avoidance. This is an issue whose time has come. After years of abuse, people across the planet are rightly calling for more action and, most importantly, there is a gathering political will to actually do something about it.”

Just last week in Exeter, the Prime Minister said:

“It’s not fair when you’ve got companies who are basically shifting their profits around the world, rather than paying them in the country where they make their money.”

That is all the more reason why I hope the Government will adopt the purpose of the Multinational Enterprises (Financial Transparency) Bill.

However interesting the Prime Minister’s current or recent tax returns are, they are but small beer compared with the need for openness by sophisticated multinationals using various means to legally avoid paying tax in the countries where they earn much of their revenues.

The reputation of the UK is tarnished by the number of tax havens that fly the Union Jack. A World Bank review of 213 big corruption cases found that more than 70% relied on secret company ownership. Company service providers registered in the UK and its overseas territories and Crown dependencies were second on the list of those providing such companies. When the Government said that bankers should pay tax on their bonuses as well as on their wages, companies such as Deutsche Bank, when the Business Secretary worked there, put them out of reach offshore.

I am not a cynic; I am an optimist and I believe in the good of people to do the right thing. I do not believe there will ever be a perfect system to catch those who will use every device they have to avoid paying the tax that is due, but I do believe that backing public country-by-country reporting is vital to addressing deliberate and sophisticated tax avoidance. I urge the Government not to wait for the EU or the OECD, but to adopt my public disclosure measure in the Bill and let the UK lead where I am sure others will follow.

10.3 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this Second Reading debate. I am delighted that you are back in the Chair, Mr Speaker, not least because I have written “Mr Speaker” throughout my speech and I get totally confused if a Deputy Speaker is in the Chair.

Mr Speaker: It is good to know that one has one’s uses.

Kirsty Blackman: I am sure that they are many and varied, Mr Speaker.

As a relative newbie to Parliament, I am fascinated by the fact that this House manages to have incredibly complicated and incredibly cumbersome processes and hoops to jump through in order to get legislation through, while at the same time managing to ensure that those processes are entirely opaque and provide the general public with the smallest possible amount of useful information.

I want to speak about a number of things: oil and gas—you will not be in any way surprised by that, Mr Speaker; the travel and subsistence changes, for those in rural areas in particular; and the savings changes, which the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) mentioned. The UK Government are attempting to undertake a savings swizz. This is not a Budget for hard-working people and young people at all. Increasing the level of tax-free savings will help only those who can afford to save thousands of pounds every year. Most hard-working people will not be helped by this. Just because somebody earns a high income, it does not necessarily mean that they are hard-working. A lot of hard-working people earn pretty low incomes.

Folk who are earning the Chancellor’s pretendy living wage, which is not recognised as being enough to live on, struggle to make it to the end of the month, let alone to have spare money to save for the future. The help to save scheme included in the Budget is welcome, but folk working the minimum 16 hours a week on the pretendy living wage will be earning only £500 a month, and they are hardly likely to be able to spend 10% of that income on savings rather than on immediate concerns.

The tax measures in this Finance Bill disproportionately reward unearned income, and they continue to ensure that tax avoidance is not illegal—only immoral. Many of my constituents find themselves living from pay cheque to pay cheque, and they cannot imagine having the comfort enjoyed by those with six-figure salaries, large savings and stocks and shares—in much the same way, I presume, as those in charge of the Finance Bill have no idea what is like to exist on a low income with a lack of long-term financial security and the absolute necessity of reliance on the state. Some people are unable to have a cache in the bank to fall back on. Rather than all being in this together, too many Members of this House cannot comprehend the real world that most of my constituents live in, and they could do with being given a reality check before they are allowed to make tax policy. The changes to ISAs and the uplift are hardly useful to anyone. As Opposition Members have said, ISAs disproportionately benefit those earning above £150,000 a year. That is not helpful for hard-working, low-income families or for young people.
I am delighted that repetition is encouraged in this place, because I am going to talk once again about oil and gas. That is quite useful, because I can recycle this speech fairly regularly. Yes, I am also recycling the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig). Oil and gas are vital for Aberdeen and for Scotland as a whole. Some of the measures in the Finance Bill go a little way towards easing the situation for oil and gas companies in the current economic climate. Nobody quite knows when the oil price is going to go back up, or what level it will reach when it finally does so. Oil prices are completely unpredictable. The UK Government need to show that they are committed to the future of the industry in the North sea in order to ensure investor confidence.

There is positive movement in the reduction of the supplementary charge from 20% to 10%, but oil and gas companies will still pay significantly more than most companies. The oil and gas industry is vital to Scotland, particularly to the north-east of Scotland and my city of Aberdeen. Back in 2014, Sir Ian Wood published the Wood report. The Energy Bill, which is currently in ping-pong and will be discussed again ben the hoose, tomorrow, cements the position of the Oil and Gas Authority in legislation. The principal objective of the OGA, which arose from the Wood report, is to maximise the economic recovery of UK offshore oil and gas resources. That can only happen if the UK Government seriously consider the tax regime for companies extracting oil and gas in the UK continental shelf.

The tax regime has been built up over the last half century, with measures being added and taken away as the Government of the day make changes to the decisions of Governments past—or, in some cases, to their own decisions. Now that the UKCS can be considered a mature basin—in fact, some are calling it super-mature—I suggest that now is the time to look afresh at the fiscal measures in relation to the taxation of the oil and gas industry. Until the UK Government can commit to doing so, some issues need to be looked at as a matter of urgency. If we are doing only minor overhauls, rather than a major overhaul, these are the key issues for us.

Enhanced oil recovery is mentioned in the OGA corporate plan for 2016 to 2021. The OGA intends to issue an enhanced oil recovery strategy to the industry in the first half of this year. If the UK Government took action so that the activity of enhanced oil recovery could count towards a tax allowance to offset against income, rather than count as operational expenditure, I suggest that the OGA’s strategy could easily be more ambitious, but still achievable. Enhanced oil recovery is very important for the UKCS given its super-mature situation. We really need to work in different and new ways to get out the oil, which is much more difficult and costly, so we would benefit from a fresh look at the tax regime in relation to how that spend is considered.

Finally on specific issues relating to the offshore oil and gas industry, I welcome the fact that HMRC will produce updated guidance notes on the decommissioning allowance. It is very important, particularly for new entrants to the industry, to have the ability to take on such assets in the North sea and exploit them for a longer period than a big player perhaps would, so I am really pleased that that is coming in. On decommissioning terms, we suggested during the passage of the Energy Bill that tax incentives and allowances should be put in place in relation to decommissioning in the UK, so that as much as possible takes place in the UK and benefits UK companies. It is really important that the UK becomes very good at decommissioning, because we can then export that expertise. I would very much appreciate it if the Government considered incentivising UK spend in whatever ways are possible. We will talk about that during the next stage of the Finance Bill.

To move on from oil and gas to a more general point, I want to flag up issues about the Government’s proposal on the taxation of travel provided for those paid through intermediaries. There is no question but that this change will hit rural communities disproportionately. It is perfectly legitimate and sometimes incredibly sensible to pay individuals as contractors or through intermediaries, but I suggest that the Government have not really thought this one through or have not grasped quite how rural some of these communities are. It can absolutely be necessary for people doing work in rural areas to stay overnight to fulfil a task that can in no way be done as part of a daily commute. I understand what the Government are trying to do on daily commutes, but that does not apply in such situations. For example, on some islands off the coast of Scotland, a locum doctor or relief teacher has to stay because there is no regular transport. Surely they should receive tax relief on their hotel stays: it is not a daily commute, but a necessary part of the job, particularly if they cannot possibly get home because there is no boat.

For communities such as Shetland in particular, where there is heavy reliance on oil and gas companies, that may have a significant negative impact. Due to the level of expertise and specialisation in oil and gas, many people in the industry are employed as contractors—disproportionately so—and removing the tax allowance that workers can claim when they stay overnight in Shetland on the way to a rig would be a bizarre way to support either the oil and gas industry or small rural communities. A specific case could be argued for our rural communities, many of which are not diverse in their employment, and such a change may have a significant and disproportionate negative impact on them.

The SNP is concerned both about the future of the oil and gas industry and about the fate of contractors in rural communities. When we go into Committee, we will table new clauses and amendments. The Chancellor has claimed that he is going to listen and learn. We will test him on that claim.

10.13 pm

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): As ever with the Finance Bill, the Public Gallery is packed to the rafters.

Unusually, the shadow Chancellor is in the Chamber during my speech, which gives me the opportunity to pass on a bit of advice. This is also an opportunity—not for the first time, the second time or the third time, but for the fourth time—for the Government to recognise the advice I have given the House and that they have accepted. It started with the pasty tax, and the Bakewell pudding and other puddings were saved when the Government listened to the advice I provided. This time, it is the £1,000 threshold for taxation on interest. I proposed that for a different reason. I did not try to pretend that it was in some way an incentive for saving,
as the Government are vainly attempting to do: I suggested that it was rather sensible, because so many people every year have the irritation of trying to work out minuscule amounts of interest for their tax returns.

That idea has been accepted, and I therefore have a fifth proposal ready and waiting for the Chancellor—I am sure he is listening—to improve future Budgets. This time, the Chancellor is keen on city regions. That is one of the few things he is doing on which I am not totally in disagreement with him. The Sheffield city region is moving ahead appropriately with the support of Bassetlaw Council, among others. It would be sensible, in the near future, for the Government to devolve arts and sports funding to city regions, as I have already proposed. But to my mind, they should go a lot further.

Broadband is one of the key weaknesses in our infrastructure. I would like the delivery of broadband to be devolved to city regions during the next year, so that areas such as mine can get ahead of the game, and city regions can, as well; they will need to, because one of this Government’s great failures is that when it comes to broadband we are lagging behind too much of the world. We should be leaders, but we are not. It is false comfort that the Government give every year about progress, which is far too slow.

I was in Japan last week, and had the opportunity for a bit of a Skype using the superfast broadband available throughout that country. It gives a connectivity that we do not have in this country. It would be appropriate for broadband delivery to be devolved to the city region level. I hope that idea will be accepted by the Chancellor, because he says he is in favour of being a world leader in superfast broadband.

I will throw in a second idea, about housing delivery. City regions are having to agree targets on housing with Government. I would like to see those targets tied to a borrowing potential so that that housing can be delivered. We should allow a borrowing potential that is directly linked to the agreed housing target for city regions. Those two ideas would allow city regions such as Sheffield to develop superfast broadband ahead of many parts of the world and to get housing delivery moving.

As I have said previously—this has not been adopted yet by my own Front-Bench team, but I am sure it will be—when we talk about housing, the key demand in my area is for bungalows, and prefabricated bungalows are now coming on-stream, with the biggest producer anywhere in the country. Why bungalows? Because the Government ridiculously attempted to use the bedroom tax to force a lot of people out of large three-bedroom houses, because they were single elderly pensioners. We should offer them a cheap-to-heat modern bungalow. Many people would rent them willingly, and others would buy them. The demand would be huge. If we devolved that power away from central Government, housing delivery, which, again, is said to be a key Government priority, would be dramatically faster.

I put that idea forward optimistically, knowing that, as was the case with the community infrastructure levy, the pensions drawdown, the pasty tax and the interest on savings, my idea will be adopted. Of course it need not be attributed to me—none of the others was; the Government can take entire and total credit for it.

My advice to the Labour Front Bench and shadow Chancellor would be to hone in on this Government’s key fundamental weaknesses, and we should stick repeatedly to four key themes. The first is inequality, which has already been well articulated. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the country does not like that. That is why there was such a huge reaction to the Prime Minister and the issue of offshoring. People do not like the idea that the rich are getting so much richer and the poor are getting poorer; that is not a British value. The Labour party should hone in on that, because it is about economic policy.

Secondly, the Government have a huge dilemma because they are not delivering on productivity. For the skills agenda in this country we have banded about apprenticeships as if they are anything and everything, including 80,000 hairdressing apprenticeships that never become jobs, through to 60,000 at McDonald’s—

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What’s wrong with hairdressing?

John Mann: Nothing is wrong with hairdressing, but it is wrong to have 80,000 apprentices who do not go into that industry because there are no vacancies. Instead, we should be spending money in areas where we need apprenticeships, such as manufacturing, and craft or building skills. That is more complex and difficult, and so we and the Government ducked it. That is why productivity fails to grow.

The third area is home ownership. That was regarded—this is an accurate historical comment—as the thing most associated with Margaret Thatcher, and it was fundamental to winning over Labour voters who shifted for a period of time and began voting Tory, particularly in ‘79 and ‘83, thanks to the concept that the Tory party was the party of home ownership. That concept has been destroyed over the past six years, and we should be taking up that mantle. We are in favour of home ownership. Of course young people in my area want rented accommodation temporarily, but their vision and aspiration is to own their own home. I do not know any people who do not want that, and the Government have repeatedly made that vision harder and more distant. We should be hammering home that core Labour value.

Fourthly, this Government have repeatedly accused the previous Labour Government of mortgaging the future and loading debt on to future generations, but this Chancellor, more than any other in British peacetime history, has loaded up the national debt, with his Back Benchers happily confusing deficit and debt every time it is debated. Under him, the national debt keeps going up dramatically. This year it is up dramatically, and the projections are for it to do that for the next five years. That is a fundamental economic failure of an unprecedented level by this Government.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Mann: I will certainly give way for confirmation of the facts from a member of the Treasury Committee.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to represent Conservative Back Benchers and leap to the defence of the Chancellor. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the rate of increase
of the debt was £156 billion a year in 2010, and that the Chancellor has substantially reduced that? He cannot deny that the Chancellor has done a terrific job.

John Mann: So the losses are not as big as they were but they are still losses. Imagine if I had put that argument in 2009 or 2010—I do not have the references with me so I will not waste time by quoting from them, but they are in *Hansard* because the then shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition, and many Back Benchers, were happy to make precisely that point. That is a fundamental economic weakness, and it is putting this country at a huge, long-term economic disadvantage compared with our competitors.

My proposal about city regions and broadband was not a shopping list issue; it is fundamental to making this country economically competitive again. How can we have new growth industries in those areas when villages like mine cannot even get simple broadband most of the time and people struggle to get a mobile phone signal? This is not where the world is at any more, and this represents a fundamental economic failure for this country.

There is one more failure. I will end—this is a slightly long ending, Mr Speaker—on what I am sure all Members will agree is an incredibly important point, namely the failure of this Government to tackle tax avoidance and offshoring. We have heard a lot of the theory, but let me tell the House what the people who do the advising on tax avoidance say. They are the best source on this, rather than politicians of any party or persuasion. They are the ones competing for the business of the very people who want to minimise their taxes by offshoring because they are wealthy enough to do so.

Those tax advisers are eulogising the fact that the agreements reached with the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, Anguilla, the Turks and Caicos Islands and Montserrat are non-reciprocal. According to HSBC, that means that UK financial institutions will not have any reporting obligations under the terms of the agreements. That is a fundamental weakness in comparison with what the Americans have done. We are not the leaders in this; we are well behind what the United States has done to enforce transparency.

The British overseas territories that I have just mentioned rely on us for their defence. We pay for their defence, so we have proper leverage. Those territories might be anachronistic quirks of history, but if they wish to remain part of the United Kingdom, they will need to play by our rules and, if you like, speak our language. I am a strong supporter of defending those territories, be it the Falkland Islands, Bermuda or the Cayman Islands, but it is unacceptable to have non-reciprocal agreements for residents of the Caribbean tax havens. There is nothing to address that in the so-called advanced and world-leading proposals in this Government’s previous Budgets that have already been implemented, and there is nothing in this Budget or in today’s announcements that will deal with the matter.

I also want to talk about the Liechtenstein disclosure facility. What does that have to do with those territories and tax havens? I thought that it probably did not have a lot to do with them because someone would have to set up an interest in Liechtenstein in order to qualify for the disclosure facility, but then I read about where we are with financial compliance obligations. Those who advise people who want to avoid paying taxes are absolutely clear about this. Let me quote from an article on a website called taxation.co.uk:

> "It may be better to come forward under the LDF now, and clients who could benefit need to be identified."

Another article says:

> "Although there are several ways to make voluntary disclosures to HMRC, the LDF continues to offer extremely beneficial terms, despite the new restrictions on eligibility, and remains one of the most direct routes of disclosing to HMRC";

and that

> "participants...will...achieve immunity from prosecution...There is no need to have held an offshore asset at all in order to access the LDF."

The only people who cannot do so are those who have already been criminally investigated by HMRC.

There are many examples of this, and that article explained in huge detail how, for example, a self-employed person could theoretically go for a Liechtenstein disclosure facility and—this has been widely advertised across the Caribbean and in other tax havens—why people should shift to it, because for the last three years, until 5 April this year, people could minimise their tax cheaply and beneficially through early disclosure. That is what the tax experts say, what they have advised people to do and what has been going on for the last three years. When the figures finally come out, which they will, we will see the vast numbers who have used that loophole, which was deliberately set up and advertised as such.

When it comes to dealing with tax avoidance, the Government talk tough but play soft. They give the nod, officially, allowing people to circumvent the system. As long as people pay for the right lawyers in countries such as Panama, they get that advice, and because they are competing, it is one of the few things that is publicly available. My advice to the House is this: let us remove these potential and actual loopholes forever. That is why this Bill is wholly insufficient and why the Government are failing on debt and the deficit. The tax is there; people are avoiding it legally. We have a duty to turn that around—a duty to the British economy and the future innovators and entrepreneurs who are being squeezed by the recession. They are the biggest losers of all in this, because they are the ones with brilliant ideas who cannot compete with those using tax loopholes and squeezing them out.

I will end on this, Mr Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I know that Tory Members don’t like it up ’em, but they are failing the British economy, failing innovators and failing entrepreneurs, crowding them out and allowing tax avoidance on a massive scale. They have been caught and had their fingers burnt. There is a minimising—[INTERUPTION.] I hear advice from a sedentary position. The Government have not delivered on tax avoidance, and that is why this Bill must be opposed.

Mr Speaker: The last speaker in the debate before the Front Benchers—not that I am hinting at anything in any way, of course—is Mr George Kerevan.

10.33 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I realise that the hour is late and I will try not to try your patience, Mr Speaker, or indeed that of the House.
In an earlier life I was a journalist, and my editor thought it would be a good idea if I became a restaurant critic. It strikes me that some of the rules for identifying bad restaurants can be applied to this Bill. The way to detect a potentially bad restaurant is to look at the length of the menu. A very, very long menu means there are lots of stale, mouldy ingredients in the back room or in the fridge, needing to be reheated. The Finance Bill before us has 580 pages and comes in two volumes that have to be stapled together. If we reflect on the scale of it, we find stale ideas, hasty ideas, ideas on the back of an envelope and ideas put together at the last minute. Conservative Members have made a good fist of trying to find good things within the 580 pages. There are some good small issues worth taking up. The change in the laws governing transfer payments on intellectual capital and branding, for example, is very good and should have been done a long while ago. There are some good things, but the sum total does not add up to very much.

This Chancellor has given us 14 Budgets, if we include the December statements and emergency Budgets, with 14 ancillary Finance Bills, yet we have got nowhere near the simplification that we require, for which Conservative Members have also called. Why is that? Quite simply, the Chancellor has just one view in mind. It is not to improve productivity, improve the current account balance or improve this and that; it is simply to end up with a budget surplus in the year 2020.

The Financial Secretary made an attempt earlier to provide some intellectual coherence to the Chancellor’s work, and I commend him for that. He told us that what underlies intellectually the 580 pages is the promotion of savings. My hon. Friends and I will vote against the Bill because the last thing it does is promote savings. The Bill is anti-savings, because trying to run a permanent budget surplus itself undermines the whole rationale for savings.

When the Exchequer Secretary sums up, will he address some of these questions? If there is to be a budget surplus in 2020, more will be taken out of the economy in tax than will be put back in. If we run a permanent surplus, Government bonds and Government securities, which are the lifeblood of insurance companies and of safe investments, will inevitably not be issued. They will be taken away. If we add to that a running down of the special assets programme and quantitative easing, we will take even more Government securities out of the economy. I do not know what people are supposed to invest their savings in. The Minister might say that they should invest in shares, but we know that the whole point of quantitative easing is to keep share prices up artificially. When in the first couple of months of this calendar year there was a fear across the world that quantitative easing was being turned off, share prices went down. They have come back up again in the last four or six weeks only because Europe in particular has turned back on the quantitative easing tap.

I warn Ministers that if we go to a period of permanent budget surplus, share prices will be going down, not up. Where, then, in the end are people going to invest their savings, which the Chancellor wants to encourage in his 580 pages? The only place I can think they will be saving is abroad. I think there will be a big demand for foreign-based investment trusts. I cannot see anywhere else that the money will go. The Chancellor and his Ministers should think on that.

I would like the Minister to address another problem with running a permanent budget surplus. If we do so and ally it to our current account deficit, it means taking huge amounts out of the economy. We then have to borrow to put the money back in to make the national accounts balance. The OBR statement that went with the Budget suggested that if we are running a permanent budget surplus by 2020, the deficit that has to be filled will be about 4.5% of GDP a year. That will have to be borrowed. Ultimately, it means that consumers are borrowing. The very act of running a budget surplus forces consumers to borrow more.

The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) made the point earlier that at this very moment the savings ratio is back at historically low levels. That is already happening before we even get to the budget surplus. If the numbers are telling us that savings are collapsing, how can we be told that this is a Budget for savings? It is not, which is why we have to oppose it.

If the Chancellor had used the Bill to tell us that pension tax relief would be reformed dramatically, and that a significant amount of relief would be given to lower earners and young people, I might have believed that he was serious about savings, but that is the very measure that he took out of the Budget a fortnight before this 580-page blockbuster arrived on the desk. He had to stand back and change the Budget entirely. A Chancellor does not run the country by changing a Budget a fortnight before presenting it.

The best summing up of what is happening in those 580 pages, and how it will be delivered, has just come in the form of the 2015 annual civil service survey. Each year, we ask civil servants throughout the Government what they think of the way in which the Government and the civil service are being run. According to the survey, only 25% of HMRC staff have confidence in HMRC’s senior management. There is rot within the delivery system, and there is rot within the mechanism for collecting the taxes. The Finance Bill, if we pass it, will not increase savings, and will not deliver what we are told that it will. It is 580 pages of nonsense.

10.41 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Well, the Chancellor has seen a small fraction of the light. The Bill contains some measures to support industry and some measures to crack down on tax avoidance, as well as the Government’s long overdue but welcome commitment to zero-rating VAT on women’s sanitary products, a cause long championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). The Government have also accepted our amendment to the Budget resolution to legislate on energy-saving materials. It is, however, unfortunate that those provisions are not in the Bill, which is leading to continuing uncertainty. I welcome the creation of 2 million jobs in the United Kingdom since 2010, but those jobs have been bought on a sea of debt.

The Government talk about the simplification of taxes, as they did when they were in opposition. Tolley’s Tax Guide has grown by 50% under the present Chancellor, the Finance Bill contains 827 pages, and, according to
the National Audit Office, there are about 1,300 tax reliefs and the Government have some idea of the efficacy of fewer than 300 of them.

Before dealing with the Bill in more detail, I want to say something about the deteriorating economic context in which it is being introduced. We have heard some of the figures during today’s excellent debate, but I think it is worth reminding ourselves of them. The current account of the balance of payments worsened to a record deficit of 5.2% of GDP in 2015. The Chancellor rightly wishes to encourage individuals to save more, yet the household savings ratio has plummeted, and is worse than it was at the time of the 2008 economic decline. In the last quarter of 2015, productivity was 1.2% lower than it had been in the previous quarter—the steepest drop since 2008. UK productivity is 18 percentage points below the average in the rest of the G7.

Household debt is on its way back up, and the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that by 2020 it will be at about the same level as it was in 2008. Since 2010, median weekly earnings, in real terms, have fallen by more than 5%, and public spending has fallen by more than 10%. The national debt has risen by nearly two thirds from its peak. This Finance Bill legislates to continue that record: it provides opportunity for GDP growth downwards, and revised its estimates for UK debt upwards. Let us not forget that the Chancellor has missed two of his three self-imposed fiscal targets, and the OBR estimates that his chances of hitting the third are about 50:50.

After six years in charge, it is about time the Chancellor took some responsibility for his many and manifest failures. The evident economic mistakes made by the previous Labour Government, for which I have repeatedly expressed my deep regret in the House, are almost as nothing when compared with the Chancellor’s rotten record. The Chancellor does not learn. For example, he has put the income tax rise threshold for tax credits back to what it was initially under the Labour Government when it wreaked havoc on working families, and it has wreaked havoc on the Treasury. Labour learns from its experiences and its mistakes; the Chancellor evidently does not.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the direct effect of Government tax and benefit policy has been to take money from working age benefit recipients towards the bottom of the income distribution. The Chancellor planned to cut disability benefits for some of the most vulnerable and he will make some of the poorest struggle to repay tax credit debts, yet he is introducing cuts to capital gains tax, costing £2.7 billion by 2021, and cuts to corporation tax despite the rate already being the joint lowest in the G20. He believes in cutting the incomes of the most disadvantaged in our society while increasing the wealth of his rich friends. He says that we are “all in this together”. I think not.

It is unfair that the adverse effects of the Government’s harsh economic policies fall most heavily on women. House of Commons Library figures indicate the gender bias of benefit changes. Some 86% of cumulative tax changes and cuts in social security benefits spending due between 2010 and 2020 will come from women. That does not even include the swingeing cuts to public services, let alone the impact of universal credit.

The Panama papers demonstrate the widespread problem of tax havens and of the lengths to which some of those who can afford it will go to avoid tax. The Government’s repeated promises over the past six years to tackle tax avoidance have been shown to be largely hot air. After all, the UK, along with its overseas territories and Crown dependencies, remains the biggest secrecy jurisdiction in the world, and the British Virgin Islands are by far the most popular tax haven revealed by the Panama papers. While containing a few, limited anti-avoidance measures, this Finance Bill will do nothing fundamentally to fix that. By not acting, we damage our own economy, but we also damage some of the poorest people on earth.

In July 2015, the Financial Secretary said that he expected the UK’s overseas territories with financial centres to set out a timeline for introducing registers of beneficial ownership or similarly effective systems by November 2015. Despite the timeline not being met, the UK Government had not even expressed their disappointment until recently. Of 10 overseas territories and Crown dependencies, only two have accepted the Prime Minister’s request to adopt a public register of beneficial ownership. The measures announced now, including a £10 million taskforce and a new criminal offence—conspiracy to evade taxes—for something that is already a criminal offence, are too little, too late. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury told us today that Crown dependencies have agreed to provide full access to a register of beneficial ownership, but that will mean a central register kept by those territories, not a public register, which is what we need. When will the Government take serious action and when will the Government take some responsibility?

The Chancellor is borrowing like a drunken sailor, using the nation’s credit card to pay the day-to-day bills, which is just plain wrong and will end in tears. Borrowing to invest in infrastructure is fine. It is like borrowing on a mortgage to buy bricks and mortar. That is what Labour would do. We advocate capital investment in mass house building because we have a housing crisis in this country that has got much, much worse in the past six years. The measures in this Bill will do far too little to address that housing crisis. I am a socialist who spent most of his working life in business, and I understand the laws of supply and demand, but apparently this Tory Chancellor does not. Let me spell it out for him: increase the supply of housing. To address the housing crisis caused by insufficient supply, the Government should themselves build more housing.

This Chancellor should stop wringing his hands and blaming the last Labour Government. He has been in office for six years now and it is high time he took some responsibility. This Finance Bill is palpably inadequate. In failing to address the severe challenges facing our country, this Government and this Chancellor are failing all of us, but they are particularly failing the next generation. I urge all Members to vote against Second Reading tonight.

10.51 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): This Government have delivered on growth, record levels of employment and a deficit that is forecast to be down by almost two thirds from its peak. This Finance Bill legislates to continue that record: it provides opportunity
for families and hard-working individuals; it backs business and enterprise; and it puts the UK at the forefront internationally in tackling tax evasion and aggressive avoidance.

We started late. Mr Speaker, but we have had a lively and full debate, and I wish to respond to a few of the points raised. The hon. Members for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), and others, spoke about the effects of Government policies on women. We have an employment rate among women that is now at a record high, with the majority of women in full-time roles. More than 1 million more women are in employment than was the case in 2010. By 2017-18, 13.1 million women will benefit from increases in the personal allowance, and about two thirds of those who benefit from the national living wage will be women. There are 300,000 fewer children in relative poverty compared with 2010 and there has been a massive reduction of 480,000 in the number of children growing up in workless households. Some 40% of two-year-olds—the least well-off—are benefiting from 15 hours of free childcare and working parents will benefit from 30 hours of childcare for three and four-year-olds, with tax-free childcare to come in from this month. There are also increases in childcare support under universal credit, including at small hours of work, to allow more women to re-enter the workplace.

Housing was mentioned a number of times, including, entertainingly, by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). We absolutely agree on the centrality of housing in a number of respects, from affordability to social and geographic mobility and to productivity. That is why we have such a focus on this area, working towards 400,000 affordable housing starts by 2021. It is why the spending review doubled the housing budget from 2018-19. We want to get on with this as quickly as possible, which is why we are bringing forward capital for affordable homes and why central Government and local authorities are working collaboratively together, and with their partners, to release more land for homes.

The hon. Gentleman talked about his fifth proposal on devolution and I understand that he is due to meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury soon. Likewise, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) is to meet the Financial Secretary to discuss some of her points about tax transparency. The hon. Members for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for East Lothian (George Kerevan) talked about savings, and I am sure they will welcome not only the lifetime ISA, but, crucially, the help to save programme, which allows investment of up to £50 a month, with a Government 50% top-up, which could be worth a significant sum over the four years. For many people it could be the opportunity to build up a rainy day savings fund—a cushion against life-shocks—for the very first time.

The hon. Member for Leeds West also talked about the tax gap—I think she said I was muttering at the time. I did not mean to mutter; the only thing I wanted to mention to her was that in the year to 2014 the tax gap was 6.4% of the tax due, whereas it had stagnated at its 2010 value of 7.3% of the tax due, £14.5 billion less tax would have been collected. This Government have a good record on narrowing the tax gap.

The hon. Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and for Wolverhampton South West talked about transparency and publicly available information on company ownership. Our public register of company beneficial ownership will go live in June, but we want to go further, which is why we are consulting on extending transparency requirements to overseas companies purchasing property in the UK or bidding on public contracts. The overseas territories and Crown dependencies have to play their part as well, and at last December’s Joint Ministerial Council territory leaders agreed to hold company beneficial ownership in central registers or similar effective systems.

This Government have always believed that we should back working people. The Bill implements key measures to help working people to keep more of the money they earn, support the next generation, build up their assets and save. It increases the personal allowance by an extra £500 next year to £11,500, cutting taxes for 31 million people, with a basic rate taxpayer paying over £1,000 less in income tax than in 2010. It increases the higher rate threshold to £45,000 next year, taking 585,000 people below that threshold. It introduces a new personal savings allowance that means that basic rate taxpayers will pay no tax on their savings income up to £1,000 and higher rate taxpayers will not pay tax on savings income up to £500. It also implements higher rates of stamp duty for the purchase of additional residential properties and £60 million of those additional receipts will enable community-led housing development in areas where the housing market is particularly affected by the prevalence of second homes.

Despite record-breaking increases in employment and strong overall economic growth, productivity growth has been weaker than forecast. The Bill takes further steps to back business, drive productivity and create yet more job opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) reminded us how fundamental those job opportunities are to families throughout this land. A highly competitive corporation tax rate has been a central part of the Government’s economic strategy to get businesses to invest in this country and the Bill drives progress even further by cutting the rate to 17% in 2020. It encourages investment in companies to help them to access the capital they need to grow by cutting the higher rate of capital gains tax for most assets from 28% to 20% and the basic rate from 18% to 10%.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North rightly spoke up for her constituents and the key industry in her constituency, oil and gas. The Budget and Finance Bill deliver a £1 billion package of reforms to ensure the UK has one of the most competitive tax regimes for oil and gas in the world, taking the petroleum revenue tax to zero, halving the supplementary charge and extending the investment and cluster area allowances to safeguard jobs and investment. No other Government have responded on the scale that we have to the fall in the global oil price.

We must ensure that people have the right skills to realise our productivity potential. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) talked about the centrality of skills and how skills and investment go hand in hand. Improving the quality and quantity of apprenticeships is an integral part of the plan. The Bill ensures that that can be achieved by introducing from
April 2017 an apprenticeship levy of 0.5% of an employer’s pay bill where it exceeds £3 million.

This Government have demonstrated that we are tough on tax avoidance and on evasion—a subject rightly raised by a number of speakers, including the right hon. Member for Don Valley, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). We have led the way internationally, acting unilaterally in the Finance Act 2015 to introduce the ground-breaking diverted profits tax to deter large multinationals from avoiding UK tax. This Bill goes even further to ensure that all companies and individuals pay their fair share. It stops multinational tax avoidance by introducing new rules to address hybrid mismatch arrangements and by tackling contrived arrangements relating to payments of royalties.

**Caroline Flint:** Will the Minister meet me and colleagues from other parties to talk about the ways in which we can put into the public domain more information from the big corporate multinationals?

**Damian Hinds:** I believe that a meeting has been set up for the right hon. Lady with the Financial Secretary, so I hope that, like him, she is looking forward to that.

The Bill targets key areas of online VAT evasion by providing stronger powers to make overseas sellers pay the VAT that is owed, helping to create a fairer market against UK players. It legislates to ensure that profits from the development of UK property are always subject to UK tax, reflecting the fact that land is a precious natural and national resource, and ensuring that UK developers share a level playing field with overseas developers.

Finally, the Finance Bill introduces a tougher anti-offshore tax evasion regime, with new criminal offences and civil penalties for those who evade or enable evasion. The Government’s position is clear. We will deliver a low tax regime for businesses, but they must pay their fair share of taxes here too. Evading tax is unacceptable and we will continue to bear down on it. The Government have announced legislation for 25 measures to tackle avoidance, evasion and aggressive tax planning, which are forecast to raise over £16 billion in this Parliament, on top of more than 40 changes made in the last Parliament.

As always, at Budget 2016 the Treasury updated its distributional analysis. The headlines are: it remains true that since 2010, the distribution of spending on different income groups or quintiles has remained essentially unchanged, while the incidence of taxation has shifted towards the most affluent fifth; the best-off 20% will pay more tax than all other households put together in 2019-20; and UK income inequality is now lower than it was in 2010.

Since 2010, the Government’s long-term economic plan has focused on sound public finances. Significant progress has been made, with the deficit as a share of GDP forecast to be cut by almost two thirds from its peak in the last year of the Labour Government. The Finance Bill ensures that the record can continue. It provides certainty for working people by reducing income tax and rewarding savers. It backs business and enterprise by cutting corporation tax and reforming capital gains tax. It supports the simplification of the tax system, and it takes bold steps to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. The Finance Bill demonstrates the Government’s commitment to a stronger, secure and more productive economy, and I commend it to the House.

**Question put,** That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided:

**Division No. 233**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
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<td>Gray, Mr James</td>
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<td>Greening, rh Justine</td>
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<td>Grieve, rh Mr Dominic</td>
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<td>Halfon, rh Robert</td>
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<td>Hall, Luke</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and
Margot James

NOES

Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danzuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edward, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrerly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fielo, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinn, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter

Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollобone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jerneck, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCann, Jason
McCann, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowatt, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pouw, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mr Gavin
Robinson, Mary
 Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scally, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rosie
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaney, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Walker, Mr Opportunist
Wallace, Mr Ben
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Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
(1) The following shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House—

(a) Clauses 7 to 18 and Schedules 2 and 3 (employment income);
(b) Clauses 41 and 42 (corporation tax: charge and rates);
(c) Clauses 43 and 44 (corporation tax: research and development);
(d) Clauses 65 to 71 (capital allowances, trade and property business profits);
(e) Clauses 72 to 81 and Schedules 11 to 14 (capital gains tax);
(f) Clause 129 (insurance premium tax);
(g) Clauses 132 to 136 (tax avoidance and evasion);

(2) The remainder of the Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House

(3) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be completed in two days.

(4) Those proceedings shall be taken on each of those days as shown in the first column of the following Table and in the order so shown.

(5) Each part of the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the time specified in relation to it in the second column of the Table.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provisions relating to</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tr>
<td>(i) employment income,</td>
<td>Two hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the first day</td>
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<td>(ii) the subject matter of clauses 41 to 44 and 65 to 71, (iii) capital gains tax, (iv) insurance premium tax, (v) climate change levy, and (vi) tax avoidance and evasion;</td>
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<td>Four hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the first day</td>
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<td>(i) any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to—</td>
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<td>(a) Clauses 7 to 18 and Schedules 2 and 3 (employment income), (b) Clauses 41 and 42 (corporation tax: charge and rates), (c) Clauses 43 and 44 (corporation tax: research and development), (d) Clauses 65 to 71 (capital allowances, trade and property business profits), (e) Clauses 72 to 81 and Schedules 11 to 14 (capital gains tax), (f) Clause 129 (insurance premium tax), (g) Clauses 132 to 136 (tax avoidance and evasion);</td>
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Table

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<th>Proceedings</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clause 129 and new clauses and new Schedules relating to insurance premium tax Second day</td>
<td>Six hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the first day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clauses 144 to 147, Schedule 18, Clauses 148 and 149, Schedule 19, Clause 150, Schedule 20, Clause 151, Schedule 21, Clauses 152 and 153, Schedule 22, Clause 154, new clauses and new Schedules relating to tax avoidance and evasion</td>
<td>Two hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the second day</td>
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<td>Clauses 41 to 44, Clauses 65 to 71, new clauses and Schedules relating to the subject matter of those clauses</td>
<td>Four hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the second day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause 72, Schedules 11 and 12, Clauses 73 to 75, Schedule 13, Clause 76, Schedule 14, Clauses 77 to 81, new Clauses and new Schedules relating to capital gains tax</td>
<td>Six hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the second day</td>
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**Proceedings in Public Bill Committee etc**

(7) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on 14 July.

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

(9) When the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Public Bill Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill shall be proceeded with as if it had been reported as a whole to the House from the Public Bill Committee.

**Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading**

(10) Proceedings on Consideration, any proceedings in Legislative Grand Committee and proceedings on Third Reading shall be completed in two days.

(11) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in Legislative Grand Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the second day of proceedings on Consideration.

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

(13) Standing Order No. 83B (programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.——(Gavin Barwell.)

*Question agreed to.*

**FINANCE (NO. 2) BILL (CARRY-OVER)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),*

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Finance (No. 2) Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.——(Gavin Barwell.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

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

**EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES, ETC.**

That the draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.——(Gavin Barwell.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 13 April (Standing Order No. 41A).
Upper Gastrointestinal Haemorrhage

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

11.17 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure we are all very relieved to be having the Adjournment debate at this hour, rather than at two o’clock in the morning, as was previously rumoured.

I must first declare my interest as a doctor. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring forward this extremely important debate—it is certainly important for our constituents—about the management of acute upper gastrointestinal bleeding. I am grateful to the British Society of Gastroenterology, and particularly to its president, Dr Ian Forcades, for helping me with research in preparing for the debate. The BSG has done a great deal of work over many years to highlight this issue.

Between 50,000 and 70,000 people every year are admitted with acute upper gastrointestinal bleeding, and 10% will, sadly, die. That presents a significant challenge to our national health service.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me say that upper gastrointestinal bleeding is what was so vividly portrayed by Hugh Bonneville, as Lord Grantham, in Julian Fellowes’s “Downton Abbey”. As the New York Post said, the Dowton ulcer his lordship had been moaning about for weeks finally erupted all over the dinner table and all over Lady Cora. That is at the extreme end of the spectrum, but when it happens it needs to be dealt with very quickly and proficiently.

I want to start with a little bit of good news. Lord Grantham was lucky to survive in the 1920s, but mortality from upper gastrointestinal bleeding has been falling in the UK, with modest improvements in recent years as new treatments and innovative therapies have emerged, despite an ageing demographic. That is a tribute to our NHS and to some great pioneering work in therapeutics and interventions, much of which has been trialled and researched in the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I asked him beforehand for permission to intervene. Northern Ireland has seen some improvements by allowing relatively experimental procedures, provided they are regulated, such as nitrogen treatment systems, to name just one. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that all trusts across the UK need to share such information on any and all new developments, to advance treatments nationwide so that we all gain across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who takes an interest in these matters. He is right to say that we need to do more networking, to ensure that good practice is understood and inculcated. I will deal with some of that in my remarks.

Two major studies—one by NHS England and the British Society of Gastroenterology in 2013, and the other by the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death in 2015—highlighted significant shortcomings in provision, confirming earlier studies.

The foreword to the NCEPOD report is starkly entitled “A Bleeding Shame”. NCEPOD found that the clinical care of 45% of acute GI bleed patients was sub-optimal, with a similar number receiving care judged to be good overall. Alarmingly, a quarter of all hospitals treating upper gastrointestinal bleeding were found not to be accredited by the joint advisory group set up 20 years ago to set standards for endoscopy. More hospitals told NCEPOD that they could deliver open surgery of the sort Lord Grantham had in the 1920s than interventional radiology for this particular range of conditions.

Some would say that that is down to inadequate resources. That is the mantra we often hear, particularly from the Labour party, but the situation is far more complicated than that. Alarmingly, NCEPOD reported that organisational issues led to less than satisfactory care in 18% of cases. “Organisational issues” is a polite way of saying poor management, such as failure to organise rotas—the “Bleeding Rota”, as NCEPOD graphically puts it—and I will come back shortly to how that can be addressed with minimal resource implications.

I support the concept of the seven-day NHS, or at least my interpretation of what a seven-day NHS actually means. The management of this range of conditions provides an excellent case study of why seven-day working is important and why Ministers are right to pursue it.

Overall, the evidence does not support the proposition that relatively poor weekend healthcare outcomes for conditions across the board are attributable to a lack of seven-day working. As Professor Matt Sutton’s work, reported by the Office of Health Economics last year, has shown, the quality-adjusted life-year evidence just does not support the cost of translating midweek working to the weekend. Data on increased mortality for those admitted at the weekends are alone insufficient to justify organisational change. The much cited Freemantle paper on weekend deaths does not say that excess weekend deaths are avoidable. Unfortunately, it has been quoted incorrectly by some who have confused association and causation.

Sir Bruce Keogh is right to say, however, that general hospitals are under-resourced at weekends, and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges is right to point out that junior doctors are, to a certain extent, “winging it” out of hours, because consultants do not tend to be around to the same extent and many support functions are not, either. I remember it very well indeed. Sir Bruce was also right, in his 2013 review of 14 trusts with persistently high mortality rates, to commission Professors Nick Black and Ara Darzi to try to bottom out the relationship between excess mortality rates and avoidable deaths. Sadly, the report published last year did not seem to take us much further forward, other than to call into question the basis of the selection of trusts for the original Keogh review.

In my view, there is a firm argument for a seven-day-a-week NHS, but we need a common understanding of what that actually means beyond the soundbite. Upper GI bleeding is a good case in point, which the Government could perfectly reasonably use to support their proposals for seven-day working without resorting to selective quoting from, for example, the Freemantle paper. Most people are really not bothered about the inability to get an outpatient appointment in dermatology on a Saturday afternoon. That is a luxury bordering on an indulgence.
However, if their Downton ulcer erupted on a Friday night, they would not really want to wait until a chaotic Monday morning list before getting endoscoped. They would need to be scoped on a routinely scheduled endoscopy list the following day, and they should not be subjected to delay in investigative and interventional radiology if that is necessary to manage their case optimally.

As far back as 2004, a large study by Sanders published in the European Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology showed that dedicated GI bleed units are associated with reduced mortality. NCEPOD asserts that patients with upper gastrointestinal bleeding should only be admitted to units with on-site endoscopy, on-site or networked interventional radiography, on-site surgery and on-site critical care. It promotes the model of comprehensive, dedicated GI bleed units in hospitals on acute medical take. We are far from achieving that.

That highlights some broader issues around right-sizing the NHS estate for optimal acute and critical care outcomes, which is a subject that I have raised before. Because critical care requires multi-specialties, because of the need for increased sub-specialisation and all that implies for populating staff rosters, and because of the better outcomes in large specialist units, not to mention the cost pressures, optimal management of this range of conditions underscores neatly the need for the model hospital concept outlined in February by Lord Carter of Coles. Why are we not moving faster towards having secondary and tertiary care in regional and sub-regional centres, where critical mass, and therefore quality of outcome, can be more readily assured?

I am proud to support a Government who are spending more on the NHS than ever before—spending, let it be remembered, that was opposed by the Labour party at the general election. However, outcomes in the UK routinely compare unfavourably with those in similar countries, with which we can reasonably be compared. I have no specific comparative data for acute upper GI bleeding, but I have no reason to suppose that they run counter to that general trend. The unavoidable truth is that our neighbours spend significantly more on healthcare than we do. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I, with colleagues across the House, have called for a commission to achieve consensus on five-year forward view, which does not come close to long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding. That is despite Simon Stevens's call for a commission to achieve consensus on long-term funding.

Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death (Ben Gummer): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for his wide-ranging introduction to this important matter, and for his ability to make this difficult medical subject relevant using the important context of “Downton Abbey”. Lord Grantham’s ulcer is, indeed, a filmic representation of a dangerous clinical event that can happen to people. Mercifully, its incidence in this country is relatively low when compared with that of our European partners and colleagues, although the mortality rates associated with GI bleeding are higher than we would wish. The data are not as robust as I would like them to be, and comparisons can therefore not be nice ones, but none the less mortality rates are not as low as they should be when compared with European comparators.

My hon. Friend points out a number of reasons why that should not be the case. He speaks wisely about the need for on-site endoscopy, on-site radiology, on-site surgery and on-site critical care, all of which were recommended by the NCEPOD report. That tallies closely with the most recent National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. The guidelines specify that endoscopy should be offered to unstable patients with severe acute upper gastrointestinal bleeding immediately after resuscitation and offered within 24 hours of admission to all other patients with upper GI bleeding.

Reports from NHS Improving Quality and the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death, to which my hon. Friend referred, go further and state that that will require the appropriate structures to be in place at all hours of the day and on all days of the week. As he reflected, that tallies well with the aims of the Government in producing a seven-day NHS, although I will, if I may, take issue with certain aspects of his comments in a few moments.

The audit of endoscopy services for acute upper gastrointestinal bleeding in 2007 found that only half of all acute trusts in England were compliant with NICE guidelines in this area. The most recent survey has shown some improvement. In 2013, 62% of services are able to provide a formal 24/7 rota for endoscopy specialists, and 56% of services can offer acute admissions for endoscopy within 24 hours of admission. While this is an improvement, there is clearly a long way to go if only 62% and 56% of services respectively provide the kind
of provision we expect. Our aim, therefore, is to ensure that every patient has 24/7 access to safe, high-quality GI endoscopy services with facilities to perform an interventional clinical procedure, linked to other essential interventions, such as interventional radiology and surgery. High-quality care will not only reduce mortality and complications but increase early discharge, through the use of formal risk assessment scores, and reduce lengths of stays.

It is therefore important that those services are available to those patients at all hours of the day, and on all days of the week. That is why we have made clear our commitment that, by the end of this Parliament, patients with urgent and emergency hospital care needs will have access to the same level of consultant review, diagnostic tests and treatment seven days a week; patients with upper GI bleeds will be one of many cohorts of patients to benefit from that.

At this point I should be very clear in my response to my hon. Friend. He restated the position, often quoted by Opposition Members, that somehow there is a lack of definition about our intentions for 24/7 services. I say to him gently that we have been very clear about how we believe the seven-day NHS will be delivered. In secondary and tertiary care, it will be based entirely on the needs of urgent and emergency care pathways. Those pathways have been outlined in 10 clinical standards brought together by the Academy of Royal Medical Colleges, under the chairmanship of Sir Bruce Keogh. Those 10 clinical standards inform the policy we have developed on urgent emergency care, which will be announced and rolled out in the weeks and months to come.

We could not have been more clear, both in this place—I believe we have been clear to my hon. Friend—and to the public at large, that our intentions for a seven-day NHS are rooted in the provision of a consistent urgent and emergency care pathway for patients. We have never intended to mandate from the centre non-acute care, interventional procedure linked to other essential dermatological services, as he suggested, or any other service like that.

Clearly, to support good 24/7 services in hospitals we have to be able to provide exceptional diagnostic services. Whatever the lacunae in the current evidence base around particular specialties in the NHS—we are never going to have a full picture in the way we might wish—we can draw general conclusions. One, which my hon. Friend rightly drew, is that the quality of diagnostics needs to be consistent, people need to have access to those diagnostic services on a regular, rigorous, robust and consistent basis, and those services need to be available on a Saturday night much as they would be on a Monday morning. That is why the Government’s intentions on 24/7 services involve consistent diagnostic services, as we have made clear since the beginning of the policy.

It is important to explain how those services will become priorities for trusts. In the roll-out of a consistent 24/7 service in diagnostics, we want to be clear to trusts about exactly what is expected of them. Patients admitted as an emergency should be seen as soon as possible by a consultant for review, but at least within 14 hours of arrival at hospital. In-patients must have scheduled access to the full range of diagnostic services, including endoscopy, with reporting of results within one hour for critical patients and 12 hours for urgent patients. In-patients must also have timely 24-hour in-patient access to consultant-directed interventions such as critical care, interventional radiology, interventional endoscopy and emergency general surgery, either on-site or through formally agreed network arrangements. Finally, all acutely ill patients in high dependency hospital areas, such as the acute medical unit and the intensive care unit, must be seen and reviewed by a consultant twice daily.

I hope my hon. Friend will see that we are already encapsulating his principal demands about upper gastrointestinal bleeding in the general outline of the clinical standards that we plan to roll out to ensure consistent quality of care for urgent and emergency care pathways.

We will monitor the implementation of those clinical standards through transparent metrics, and I hope that in a year, if my hon. Friend is successful in securing a further Adjournment debate—I would happy to brief him privately on this issue both then and in the interim—he will see that through the transparent metrics that we will publish on mortality, length of stay, emergency readmissions and whole series of other measures, there will be trust compliance across clinical standards.

Jim Shannon: I understand that mortality rates for hospitalised conditions can be as much as 35%. That worries me, and I am not sure whether the Minister has addressed that issue. He referred to 10% mortality, but some hospitalised conditions have a 35% mortality rate. We must address that.

Ben Gummer: There is variation in mortality, and I hope we will make progress in that area over the next period. We must understand comparisons of mortality across the country, and as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Secretary of State is interested in discovering and understanding that issue. We must also understand variations across the European Union, and in the United Kingdom where there are apparent variations between practice in England and that in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Some of that comes down to data collection, but we must understand where it comes down to practice and consider how we can improve in accordance with our most neighbourly health systems.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I appreciate the Government’s intention, but do not know whether my local hospital is accredited. I am highly concerned about the current postcode lottery. What is the Minister’s plan right now, tonight, for people who are going to a hospital that does not have an adequate rota system and is not accredited?

Ben Gummer: The principles that inform the policy of creating a sustainable seven-day NHS are being announced in stages. The clinical standards to which I referred have been explained in this place and outside several times, and I expect that in the next few weeks and months, further details will be given on the pace at which units around the country will comply. My hon. Friend will know that in the autumn the Prime Minister made it clear that 25% of the population will be covered by 24/7 urgent emergency care services by March 2017, 50% by March 2018, and the entire service by 2020. Precisely how that happens will be made clear in short order, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be satisfied that her hospital will form part of the programme to provide the coverage she expects.
The fact that we are having this discussion is testament to the fact that we are willing to be open about variation and failure, and to do something about it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire for bringing this issue before the House because, just as Lord Grantham popularised it for the nation at large, my hon. Friend has explained in a particular clinical area how the introduction of robust, sustainable 24/7 services will provide the improvements in clinical care that the Government seek. That is why the challenges and difficulties that face us in introducing 24/7 services require attention across the board—not just in hospital estates, but in the configuration of services, the way that services are commissioned and procured, and the contracts that ensure that rotas can be properly manned across the service. We must attack this problem on all fronts and ensure that we provide consistency of care to our constituents. They do not choose when they fall ill, but they should expect the same quality of care whether they go to one unit or another, or on a day not of their choosing.

Question put and agreed to.

11.44 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Referendum

1. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the EU referendum on the UK’s diplomatic relations (a) within the EU and (b) globally.

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): Other Governments respect the fact that this is a decision for the British people. Our EU partners agree that many of the reforms that we have secured in the renegotiation will benefit Europe as a whole, and more and more of our friends and allies around the world are telling us that they value this country’s membership of the European Union.

Mr Speaker: Order. It would be a courtesy to the House to tell Members what I think Front Benchers know—namely, that the Foreign Secretary is away on ministerial business.

Mr Lidington: I apologise for not doing so at the start. My right hon. Friend is in the far east on the final leg of a tour covering several countries.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful, and we look forward to the right hon. Gentleman’s imminent return.

David Warburton: Does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever the outcome of the referendum in June, the threats we face mean that our bilateral intelligence-sharing relationships with other European countries will remain vital, and that, working with those outside the EU, European relationships will continue unimpaired. What the Prime Minister has secured—a fair outcome. What the Prime Minister has secured—a fair outcome.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend will want to know that our counterparts around Europe are robust democracies and they recognise that this country’s membership of the European Union has divided politicians of all parties for very many years, and that it is possible for people on the right and the left to come to opposite points of view. What the Prime Minister has secured—a firm Government position to support our continued membership of the European Union but with licence given to Ministers to express their dissent in a private capacity—is a fair outcome.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): When the Prime Minister described European discussions as “abrasive” and “difficult”, he was not talking about other European countries; he was not talking about debate across the Floor of the House; he was not even talking about debate within the Conservative party. Rather, he was talking about discussions within his own Cabinet. What does that fractious disunity do to the credibility of this Government’s foreign policy in Europe and beyond?

Mr Lidington: Our counterparts around Europe are robust democracies and they recognise that this country’s membership of the European Union has divided politicians of all parties for very many years, and that it is possible for people on the right and the left to come to opposite points of view. What the Prime Minister has secured—a firm Government position to support our continued membership of the European Union but with licence given to Ministers to express their dissent in a private capacity—is a fair outcome.

Alex Salmond: Does the Minister not feel that the robust democracies in Europe and beyond—not to mention the people of this country—are crying out for a debate on our future in Europe that rises above the internal divisions in the Conservative party?
Mr Lidington: That is precisely what the Government are leading at the moment. I think that at the end of this week, when the Electoral Commission designates the two campaign organisations for remain and leave, we will indeed see that debate continue, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and his party will wish to play a constructive part in it.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): There has just been a referendum in the Netherlands, where the people overwhelmingly rejected the extension of privileges to Ukraine and its membership of the European Union. How will our Government recalibrate our policy on that?

Mr Lidington: The Dutch vote was a consultative referendum on a Dutch parliamentary decision to ratify the European Union-Ukraine association agreement. It is a matter entirely for the Dutch Government and the Dutch Parliament. The United Kingdom remains a strong supporter of the efforts being made by Ukraine to defend its national sovereignty and integrity in the face of Russian aggression, and to implement much-needed, far-reaching political and economic reforms that will benefit everyone in Ukraine.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the only thing that Nigel Farage, George Galloway and Vladimir Putin have in common is that they want Britain to leave the European Union? Does that not say a lot about the consequences of our possible departure from the EU?

Mr Lidington: There are indeed some strange bedfellows in that particular camp, and none of those three gentlemen is one from whom I would want to take advice about where the best interests of the British people lie.

Migration (Western Balkans)

2. Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of recent steps to reduce migration to Europe through the western Balkans.

Mr Lidington: Each asylum claim in Greece has to be assessed according to international law and judged on that basis. The United Kingdom is giving strong financial and political support to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which are bearing the brunt of supporting the very large numbers of refugees coming from Syria, including the Yazidi women about whom the hon. Lady is particularly concerned. She is right to be concerned about those people, but the best way to offer them the help they need is to ensure that the money that was promised at the recent London conference on Syria is provided to give them assistance in the first safe country.

Mr Lidington: The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The Government believe that the EU-Turkey agreement will make a genuine difference to the migration flows into Europe and through the western Balkans. The plan disrupts the smugglers’ business model, and breaks the link between getting into a boat and settling in Europe. We continue to monitor the impact on the ground and help countries in the region to manage the pressures that they currently face.

Karen Lumley: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will continue to help Greece to manage the pressures on its borders and avoid the distressing scenes that we have witnessed in the western Balkans?

Mr Lidington: Yes. To date, we have allocated more than £19 million to Greece for urgent aid such as food, water and medical assistance. We are also supporting organisations that are helping the Greek Government to build their capacity to manage arrivals and monitor borders. So far this year, for example, we have offered 139 months’ worth of screening and debriefing expertise to Frontex to help it to beef up the capacity of the Greeks to manage the very large number of asylum claims that they will need to process.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I understand that the British Government have also contributed eight judges, but I also understand that the shortfall in expertise amounts to 2,500 staff. What more can the Government do to support the Greeks?

Mr Lidington: We continue to consider whether there are ways in which we can help further. We are not members of the Schengen group, so under the group’s rules we are barred from providing some forms of assistance. However, the Prime Minister talked to Prime Minister Tsipras very recently about what more we could do, and we continue to discuss with Greece and our other European partners how best we can help to manage the pressures on Greece. It is in all our interests that European countries come together to manage the crisis in the Aegean and ensure that migrants are treated humanely but also fairly, and that if they do not have well-founded asylum claims, they can be returned.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If a migrant claims asylum in Greece and then makes his or her way to the United Kingdom, we are unable to send that individual back to Greece because the Greek asylum system is deemed unfit for purpose. What steps is the Minister with his EU counterparts to ensure that Greece brings its asylum and detention systems up to the requisite standard?

Mr Lidington: Anyone in the circumstances that my hon. Friend describes who was not a Greek national would need a visa to enter the United Kingdom from the countries to which asylum seekers are going from Greece. The whole purpose of the EU-Turkey agreement and of the assistance we are giving to Greece is to manage the situation in the region so that we do not face the pressures he describes.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Thousands of Yazidi women who have been kidnapped, tortured and raped by ISIS cannot come through the Balkans and are unable to access the medical and psychological support they need in the region. Will the right hon. Gentleman encourage our EU partners to follow the example of Germany by admitting some of those women so that they can access the medical support they need? Will he also talk to the Home Office about allowing some of those women access to Britain so that we too can assist them?

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they get to, rather than encouraging them to make a perilous journey across the Aegean sea in the hands of the people smugglers.

**Daesh**

3. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What discussions he has had with other members of the international coalition on improving diplomatic co-ordination of steps to tackle Daesh.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Britain has helped to create the global coalition against Daesh that now includes more than 60 countries. The last meeting of the smaller group of countries, which the Foreign Secretary and I attended, took place in Rome in January this year.

**Kevin Foster:** I thank the Minister for his answer. As reports emerged of the genocide being committed by the Nazis, the allied Governments made a co-ordinated joint statement on 17 December 1942 to condemn those crimes and pledge to bring those responsible to justice at the end of hostilities. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that co-ordinating a similar statement today would be appropriate, given the evidence of similar crimes being committed by Daesh against Christians and other religious minorities?

**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful argument. The regular images on our screens confirm the scale and the barbarity of Daesh’s inhumane treatment of minorities. We are now witnessing systematic and horrific attacks against Christians, Yazidis and others, based on their religious beliefs or their ethnicity. I too believe that acts of genocide have taken place but, as the Prime Minister has said, genocide is a matter of legal rather than political interpretation. We as the Government operate within the law. The Prime Minister has said that we will not criminalise people in this country before the law has judged them. We can say that we are concerned about the acts that have taken place, and we have put in place preventive measures to try to forestall what has taken place, but we are not the prosecutor, the judge or the jury. Such matters are determined first in the international courts and in the United Nations Security Council, but we are helping to gather evidence that could be used to hold Daesh to account appropriately.

**Jo Cox** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Daesh poses a particular threat to civilians in Syria, as does the ongoing besieging of communities across that country. With the Syrian regime continuing to block United Nations trucks, less aid is now reaching those communities than before the cessation of hostilities. Does the welcome news on 17 December 1942 to condemn those crimes and pledge to bring those responsible to justice at the end of hostilities mean that now includes more than 60 countries. The last meeting of the smaller group of countries, which the Foreign Secretary and I attended, took place in Rome in January this year.

**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The difference between Daesh and al-Qaeda or others before is that this and future groups will use the internet to recruit, to fund themselves and to encourage people to fight. That is why we formed the coalition’s strategic communications working group. In London, we have formed a cell that shares best practice to ensure that we stop the movement of funds and fighters and that we challenge the poisonous ideology that Daesh puts out online.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Yesterday, the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors met and carried out an assessment of its ability to face terrorism, stating that its capability to deal with the international terror threat was imperfect. Will the Minister indicate whether he will host a conference with Garda officers and draw up a plan to ensure that the threat does not permeate our border?

**Mr Ellwood:**: That is a little bit off my beat, but it is something that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, the Home Office and I should want to move forward. We have been at the forefront of sharing best practice in recognising when extremism starts to embed itself, whether in universities, prisons or elsewhere, but if lessons are to be learned and if co-ordination can be better, we should absolutely look into that.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): The international peace agreement is effectively dead as a result of recent Russian action in Aleppo. What further action can the group of countries that my hon. Friend mentioned in answer to an earlier question take to tackle Daesh more effectively?

**Mr Ellwood:** I understand that my hon. Friend considers these matters closely, but I do not agree with his analysis. Russia is playing an important role in the cessation of hostilities given its influence over the Assad regime. He is right to identify the consequences and challenges facing Aleppo, which is Syria’s largest city by some margin. There has been an awful lot of frustration at the lack of humanitarian aid, which Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy, is focusing on to ensure that support can get in.

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): Daesh is trying hard to radicalise sub-Saharan Africa as well as the Maghreb. What efforts are the Government making to ensure that east African countries, such as Kenya, and the nations of the Sahel—Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad—do not fall prey to this malignant cancer?

**Mr Ellwood:** The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on not only the challenges of Daesh in Iraq and in Syria, and we are also familiar with what is happening in Libya. Further afield, unless we are able to work and encourage local police and forces and local capability to put pressure on Daesh, we will not be able to tackle this threat.
recognise extremism, we will see it permeate other places, such as sub-Saharan Africa. That is exactly what we are doing with our local programmes in each of those countries to ensure that they have the strength and capability to recognise when extremist groups, such as Daesh, al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram, are trying to penetrate their areas.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, progress is rather slow today. I am keen to accommodate as many questioners as possible. A short sentence by way of question and a short sentence by way of reply will usually suffice.

**EU Referendum**

4. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the EU referendum on UK trade with countries with which the EU has a free trade agreement.

Mr Lidington: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he does as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to the ASEAN—Association of Southeast Asian Nations—region? I agree with him that the record shows that alternative trade agreements would take years to negotiate and there would be no guarantee whatsoever that we could obtain terms that were anything like as good as those that we enjoy through the European Union today.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Conservative Members do not like to hear this, but will the Minister confirm that he listened to the wise words of David Miliband on Radio 4’s “Today” programme this morning? Is what he said not absolutely true: our international trading partners are already postponing decisions on investment in this country and ceasing to hire in this country?

Mr Lidington: I missed that interview this morning, but I do agree with what Mr Miliband says. What I hear direct from businesses in this country is that they are concerned about the uncertainty, that some have indeed postponed decisions and that many more would consider reducing the levels of employment or of investment in this country if there were a decision to quit the European Union.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister really believe the guff and propaganda he is spouting?

Mr Lidington: I would point my hon. Friend to the fact that the Government’s case—that we are better off remaining in the EU—is supported by the overwhelming majority of business leaders and of trade union leaders in this country. I just wish he and others who advocate leaving the EU would, for once, come up with a coherent and consistent description of the alternative.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As we know, the Government are in favour of the European partnership, trade and the benefits of remaining in the EU. The EU referendum provides the opportunity to display exactly that, so when will the Minister be inviting and, we hope, welcoming President Hollande and Chancellor Merkel to the UK, with the strong campaign message, “Shoulder to shoulder. It is better for the UK to remain in the EU”? Will he welcome and invite them?

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In answer to the Minister’s question, our vision of the UK outside the EU is very simply that we would be like most other free trading nations around the world: trading as we see fit. I suggest the Government are playing with fire, because the more they wade in in favour of remaining during this referendum debate, the more the referendum will be seen as being unfair, and that could create further uncertainty, particularly if the vote is narrowly for staying.

Mr Lidington: The Government are not going to be silent or neutral on an issue that we believe is central to the future prosperity and security of the United Kingdom. I am glad that my hon. Friend seems to believe, on leaving, we should continue to be part of the European single market, but he is yet to say how that would involve not having to accept freedom of movement, agreement to all European rules although we would have no say or vote on them, and contributing to the EU budget. That is the situation Norway and Switzerland are in today.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Given the claims some have made about possible free trade deals outside the EU, is the Minister for Europe aware of any major trading partner that wishes the UK to leave the EU?

Mr Lidington: No—none.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The key point here is of course that we have a free trade agreement with the European Union, as we have with other nation states. There is a question that has to be answered: why are so many of the states that have said we should stay in the EU the ones that the other side seem to think we can have some sort of agreement with?
Mr Lidington: The consistent message that we hear from friends, allies and partners, not just in Europe, but in the Commonwealth and around the world, is that they want to see us stay in the EU. I am still waiting for the advocates of quitting to come up with an example of a friendly international leader who supports their case.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): There are more cars manufactured in one city in the north of England in one month than that great car-producing country Italy makes in a year, and the vast majority of those cars are exported to Europe—and that is just one city in one region. We see that being replicated right across the country. Early assessment suggests that any post-Brexit deal would place a tariff of up to 10% on every single car manufactured in the UK and sent to Europe, and that, over time, that would damage both manufacturing and jobs in the UK. Will the Minister confirm the possibility of a tariff of at least 10% being placed on every car manufactured in the UK?

Mr Lidington: That is indeed the case. If we were outside the single market, and World Trade Organisation rules applied, we could expect that 10% tariff on every car exported to the rest of Europe from the United Kingdom, which is why exit would be such a bad deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I made an appeal for a speed-up a few moments ago, but unfortunately, to put it bluntly, the Member concerned made a mess of it and did not speed up. We must now speed up.

Honour-based Violence

5. Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support other countries in tackling honour-based violence.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Tackling violence against women and girls—including so-called honour killings—and the promotion of women’s rights remain central to UK foreign policy objectives. We work closely with the most affected countries, including with the Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Jake Berry: I support the work that the UK Government have done with the Government of Cameroon in tackling the abhorrent practice of breast ironing. Does the Minister agree that unless we seek to find ways for these so-called honour-based crimes to be prosecuted in their country of origin, we will struggle to pursue prosecutions here in the United Kingdom?

Mr Ellwood: I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he does in this area. He has called debates in Westminster Hall and in other forums to ensure that we recognise the important role that Britain and the international community must play in relation to female genital mutilation and breast ironing. As he says, those are abhorrent crimes, and we are working with other Governments in countries where such practices exist.

Mr Ellwood: We have doubled our commitment to human rights and increased the Magna Carta Fund to promote better understanding of these issues. What we find is that states have the laws in position, but they do not apply them. That is where we need to work closely with Governments to make sure that they follow through the laws that are already in existence.

Middle East

6. David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the likelihood of a two-state solution in the Middle East.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in February and I remain clear that a two-state solution is the only credible way to resolve the conflict. We continue to work closely with international partners to preserve the viability of the two-state solution and to encourage a return to meaningful negotiation.

David Mowat: In 2016, there has been an acceleration of evictions and property destruction on the west bank. By these continuing actions, the Israeli Government are showing complete contempt for the notion of a two-state solution—a fact recognised by President Carter. When will the Government update UK policy to reflect reality on the ground in this area?

Mr Ellwood: During my meetings with the Deputy Foreign Minister and indeed with the Prime Minister, I found that they remained committed to the two-state solution, but my hon. Friend is right to recognise that measures are being taken and events are taking place that seem to take us in another direction. We need to ensure that people are able to come back to the table, and that we are able to make progress. There is no other solution to this. We cannot continue with the status quo.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Hezbollah is constructing a base in Syria to fire Iranian ballistic missiles into Israel. How seriously does the Minister regard that?

Mr Ellwood: Again, the hon. Lady highlights the challenges that the region faces. We need to ensure that we work with the international coalitions to prevent such events from taking place. Iran is starting to take incremental steps towards greater responsibility in the region. Unless it is able to control Hezbollah and have an influence, we will see that this nuclear deal will mean little.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): There have recently been two initiatives in the region: the extension of fishing rights for Gazan fisherman with
Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend highlights the dilemma that we face. We need grassroots initiatives on a low level such as extension of fishing rights, for which I have pressed for some time. Oil and gas reserves can be tapped into off Gaza, which will also help the economy. At the same time, basketball courts and, indeed, schools and streets are being named after terrorists, which does not suggest that the Palestinians are as serious as they should be.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister will know that Israel is demolishing Palestinian homes and other structures at three times the rate at which it did so last year. I was in the region last week, with the hon. Members for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and for Hazel Grove (William Wragg), and Lord Warner, and we saw that for ourselves. Given that a number of these structures are EU-supported and EU-funded, what are the Government going to do not simply to express concern but to hold Israel to account? What mechanisms are available to do so?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman highlights a challenge that we face. Britain has been working closely with Israel to change the approach that Israelis have taken on administrative detention. We have also funded and facilitated independent reports on the challenges that we face, and I raised this matter with the Deputy Foreign Minister, Tzipi Hotovely. I will continue to press Israel to move forward. Again, this takes us back—it is a retrograde step.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Will the Minister tell me if he managed to visit—

Mr Speaker: Question 7 would be a good start. No more today about the Israelis or Palestinians—the next question is about the Chagossians.

Chagos Islands

7. Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): What progress his Department has made on allowing Chagossian people to return to the Chagos Islands. [904407]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): This is much more familiar territory for me. Officials met over 500 Chagossians in their communities in the UK, Mauritius and the Seychelles. The public consultation we published in January received over 800 responses. I recognise that Chagossians have urged us to announce a decision soon, and we very much hope to do so.

Dr Mathias: Does the Minister agree that the £60 million estimate for the resettlement of the Chagos islanders, at 0.002% of the international development budget, is a price that the Government must pay this year so that the Chagos islanders can return home? Every day they are not allowed to do so is a day of shame for this country.

James Duddridge: Perhaps I might outline for the House some of the costs. We estimate that the initial costs would range from £55 million for a 50-person pilot on Diego Garcia to £256 million for a 1,500-person resettlement on Diego Garcia and the outer islands. In addition, operating costs would range from £5 million to £18.5 million a year on a potentially open-ended and escalating basis.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Foreign and Commonwealth Office commit that financial resource, which is desperately needed, to recognise the human rights of this group of people who have suffered for so long under many different Governments?

James Duddridge: Following the detailed KPMG report and subsequent consultation, Her Majesty’s Government are looking closely at the matter. The hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not come to a conclusion at the Dispatch Box, but go through due process, and I will try to do so as quickly as possible.

Refugees: Middle East

8. Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU, Africa and the middle east on steps to tackle the refugee crisis in the middle east. [904408]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): Ministers have frequent discussions with both EU and non-EU partners about migration and refugees. Our focus is on securing a durable solution to the crisis which tackles the causes of migration as well as the consequences, and we continue to play a leading role in that work.

Chris Philp: The Libyan Government recently requested help to prevent illegal migrants from departing from their coast. When does the Minister think we will be in a position to begin returning those intercepted in the Med to the north African coast, rather than allowing them to make landfall in the EU?

Mr Lidington: We are ready to respond positively to requests for support and assistance from the new Libyan Government to tackle the criminal gangs of people smugglers and prevent tragic deaths at sea. We have not yet had a specific request for assistance on tackling migration as my hon. Friend described, but we are ready to take action if we receive such a request.

21. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What is the Minister’s current assessment of political progress in Tunisia, and what are the British Government doing to support the progress there? I do not mind if the Minister with responsibility for the middle east answers.

Mr Lidington: We continue to support the democratic evolution of Tunisia, and we are working actively to support the Tunisian authorities to ensure that they have control over their borders so that there can be
checks against the risks of terrorists moving across borders and in order to disrupt the work of people smugglers.

**Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): As we successfully engage Daesh in Syria and northern Iraq, what assessment has the Minister made of the threat of Daesh moving to Libya?

**Mr Lidington:** It is a very serious threat indeed. That is why we give such a high priority to international work to establish a proper system of government in Libya and very much welcome the work that has led to the creation of the Government of national accord. We are working actively with European and wider international partners to ensure that that new Government get the support that they need.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Many on the Opposition Benches strongly agree that there should be a strategy in which the UK is involved to strengthen countries in order to stop their people wanting to flee. However, far more should be done by the UK to allow more people in, and one process would strengthen the other. Does the Minister agree?

**Mr Lidington:** No. We have given a commitment, on which we are delivering, to resettle 20,000 vulnerable Syrian refugees from camps in the region during the lifetime of this Parliament. Let us not forget that we also pledged £2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance to support Syrian refugees, giving them help in the regions where they are present and trying to deter them from taking the appalling risk of putting themselves in the hands of the people smugglers.

**EU Referendum**

9. Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What discussions his Department has had with the Department for Work and Pensions on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on employment. [904409]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The Government’s view is that the UK will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in a reformed EU. More British people are in work than ever before, and nine out of 10 people in work in this country are UK nationals.

**Mr Hanson:** Airbus, which is based near my constituency, employs 15,000 people directly, has 100,000 people in associated businesses and has taken the unprecedented step of writing to all its employees urging them to vote yes to stay in Europe, because it says that "we…don’t know what ‘out’ looks like."

Will the Minister endorse that decision and tell the House what “out” looks like?

**Mr Lidington:** Airbus is typical of a large number of advanced manufacturing companies that are based across national borders within Europe but benefit from the European market, and which also give business opportunities to a host of small enterprises through their supply chains. That reinforces my view that it would be a severe blow to employment and hopes of growth for this country to withdraw from the EU.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): Given the cross-departmental nature of the question, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister could very helpfully agree to go before the Liaison Committee to deal with all these cross-departmental questions?

**Mr Lidington:** The Prime Minister agreed with the Liaison Committee that he should make three appearances during 2016. The next one is scheduled to take place before the summer recess. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also been at this Dispatch Box on many occasions to answer questions about European policy, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has taken ample advantage of the opportunity provided by those events.

**Mr Speaker:** I doubt that that will satisfy the Liaison Committee, but I note what the Minister says.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is not just those in employment, but pensioners who would suffer the consequences of Brexit. What can the Minister say about any British pensioners living in Europe who may be caught up in the “frozen pensions” scandal if we leave the European Union?

**Mr Lidington:** It is the case that British pensioners and other expatriate UK citizens who are resident in other EU member states get certain rights and benefits as a consequence of our EU membership. We cannot guarantee that in the event of a British withdrawal, the negotiations on exit would lead to those rights and benefits being retained.

**Sir Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot) (Con): In the Minister’s publicly funded glossy brochure—I have a copy here—which claims to set out the facts, the Government state: “Our EU membership magnifies the UK’s ability to get its way on the issues we care about.” Will my right hon. Friend explain how that squares with the fact that the UK has been outvoted every time it has voted against an EU measure—72 times in total, and 40 of those defeats under this Government?

**Mr Lidington:** I suggest that my hon. Friend checks the footnotes to the leaflet, which have been published online so that everybody can see the basis on which those statements are made. We have been successful in roughly 87% of votes in the Council of Ministers, and most outside observers say that we have a better track record than most other member states in getting our own way.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Given that after 40 years the European Union has still not managed to negotiate a trade deal with the United States of America, surely if we left and regained control of settling our own trade deals, we would be able to make trade deals much faster than the EU.

**Mr Speaker:** In relation to employment.

**Mr Nuttall:** And create job opportunities as a result.

**Mr Lidington:** I am glad to hear that my hon. Friend speaks for that faction of the Brexit camp that supports the transatlantic free trade agreement, because not
everybody on his side of the argument does. The United States, through its chief negotiator and the head of its chamber of commerce, has made it clear that it is interested in a deal with 500 million people, the biggest market in the world, but not terribly interested in giving priority to a deal with a country of just 65 million people.

Yemen

10. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Yemen.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The level of fighting in Yemen has reduced in recent weeks, and I am pleased to welcome the cessation of hostilities, which began on 10 April.

Carolyn Harris: We finally have a fragile ceasefire in the region, but not before thousands have been killed and millions displaced. There have been wide accusations of serious war crimes. Will the British Government now finally support a full investigation into the allegations?

Mr Ellwood: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming the cessation of hostilities. The peace talks will begin on 18 April in Kuwait. A number of organisations have been created, including the Yemeni national independent commission of inquiry, which is the appropriate body to look into human rights issues in Yemen. The Saudis have themselves organised their own investigative committee in order to analyse and put their hands up when mistakes were made.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I commend the Minister for his tireless work in seeking an end to the horrendous conflict in Yemen. What steps are the Government taking to support the UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait in little under a week’s time?

Mr Ellwood: We have participated fully in bringing together what has been a very complex situation. Often people simply try to knock it down to one, two or three sides, but al-Qaeda is in Yemen, as is Daesh. There are not only the Houthis and other groupings, but many militias that are looking at which way the winds will blow. I have spoken on a number of occasions to President Hadi, and indeed to Ismail Ahmed, the UN envoy, to encourage the ceasefire. I hope that we will see real progress when the talks commence in Kuwait on 18 April.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I welcome the ceasefire, but since Sunday there has already been an attack on Taiz. Will the Minister confirm that he will be in Kuwait on 18 April and that he will do all he can to ensure that the ceasefire holds?

Mr Ellwood: I cannot confirm at this moment whether I will be attending, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to outline the breaches, which are taking place not only in Taiz, but elsewhere, including east of Aden, where Yemeni soldiers were killed, and not by the Houthis or any other militia, but by al-Qaeda. It is important that we ensure that the talks work and that the international community supports them fully.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I just push the Minister on the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) about the Saudi investigation into the conduct of the coalition campaign in Yemen? Does he have faith that the investigation will be thorough, independent and transparent? Does he expect the initial findings to be published? What follow-up will the UK take if allegations of war crimes are substantiated? Will he also outline the steps that the Government have taken to ensure that the UK liaison officers supporting the Saudi military campaign have not been unwittingly involved in potential war crimes?

Mr Ellwood: As I have said in the Chamber a number of times, we have one of the most robust systems of arms export control licences in the world, and it is important to make sure that they are robust. We have been working closely with the Yemeni authorities, but also with the Saudis, to make sure they put their hands up when a mistake is made. We have frank conversations with them privately to make sure that the investigation will work as we expect it to.

Topical Questions

T1. [904359] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is currently in Vietnam holding meetings with Vietnamese Ministers about trade and political relations. This follows visits to China, where among other things he pressed the Chinese authorities for action to bring greater stability to world steel markets, and to Japan, where he represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of G7 Foreign Ministers.

Richard Graham: In the wake of the recent visit by Premier Modi to the UK and the current visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to India, can my right hon. Friend highlight the trade and investment benefits to both countries from these important high-level exchanges?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Indeed I can. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the current visit by Their Royal Highnesses, which is going extremely well. We have incredibly good bilateral relations with India, and the visit here by Mr Modi was a great success. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the soft power we have in our diplomatic armoury, from the BBC, to the British Council, the GREAT campaign, the Newton Fund and the Chevening and Marshall scholarship programmes. All those are part of the jigsaw that helps us to do business and to project British values right around the world.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister said yesterday that all of Britain’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies, apart from Anguilla and Guernsey, have now agreed to provide our law enforcement and tax authorities with full access to information on beneficial ownership. Why will there not be public access to the registers, given that the Prime Minister wrote to the overseas territories on 25 April 2014 to say that...
making such information open would help “to tackle crime”, and given that, from June this year, the British register of beneficial ownership will be open to the public? If openness is good enough for the UK, why should we accept a different position in our overseas territories?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): It is disappointing that the shadow Secretary of State does not congratulate the overseas territories on the enormous progress they have made on tax transparency and on opening up for law enforcement agencies. This is really superb progress, but as the Prime Minister outlined yesterday, it is not an international standard, and we need to move towards eliminating all corrupt, terrorist and money laundering practices across the globe. While there are states in the US where people can open companies and not have full public registers, it is only fair to say to the overseas territories, “Congratulations on progress so far.” Longer term, the Prime Minister and the Government are clear that we want greater transparency, and that will be about a move towards public access.

Hilary Benn: I do welcome progress; I was just asking why the overseas territories will not meet the standard Britain is going to set.

Our membership of the European Union helps us in the fight against money laundering, terrorist financing and tax evasion—an example being the fourth anti-money laundering directive, on which the UK has taken the lead. The directive will, for the first time, oblige all member states to keep registers of beneficial owners and to make those open to tax and law enforcement authorities and to others who have a legitimate interest, including investigative journalists. Does that not show that leaving the EU could hinder the fight against financial criminality in Europe, because the best way to tackle such criminality is to work in partnership with our neighbours?

Mr Lidington: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there are many ways in which we benefit, in taking action against crime, through this kind of European co-operation. What I hear from the police service is that almost all serious crime these days has an international dimension of some kind, and countries need to work together to tackle that. The current system, where we can choose whether to opt in to individual justice and home affairs measures, really does give us the best of both worlds.

T2. [904351] Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What more can be done to prevent vulnerable people from being indoctrinated to become suicide bombers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Koran actually forbids suicide, and if we look at the profile of suicide bombers from Sousse to Bali, we will see that martyrdom is sold by extremists as a fast track to paradise to people who have scant knowledge of the Koran. They are promised a ticket to heaven with little, if any, service to God. If we are genuinely to defeat extremism and stem the tide of vulnerable recruits, greater emphasis needs to be placed on duty to God in this life as well as the next.

T3. [904352] Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The Minister will be aware of reports that Libya paid $1.5 billion into the US compensation fund for relatives of victims of terror bombing in Libya. Why have the UK victims of IRA terrorism that used Libyan Semtex not received similar support? The Minister recently indicated that he would support those victims of IRA terrorists who used Semtex. What is he doing and what support is in place for them?

Mr Ellwood: It is for a previous Government to explain why that opportunity was missed when the United States advanced discussions in that area. What I have done, in meetings both in Belfast and here in London with those victims of terrorism that involved Semtex or, indeed, that was supported by Gaddafi, is facilitate a visit to Tripoli when the security measures allow it.

T4. [904353] David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Could a Minister update the House on the support we have given to the Government of the Ivory Coast following the terrorist attack in Grand Bassam in March?

James Duddridge: Last week I visited the scene of the attack in Grand Bassam in Côte d’Ivoire, which killed 19 people and injured more than 20, and laid a wreath on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government. Furthermore, I met President Ouattara and discussed how the UK can support efforts to prevent the radicalisation of young people in his country. We all offer our condolences, support and, indeed, solidarity.

T9. [904358] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Developing countries lose three times as much to tax havens as they gain in international aid. Although yesterday’s announcement was a welcome, partial step in addressing that, registers of beneficial ownership will be ineffective unless they are public. Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister’s anti-corruption summit next month would be an appropriate deadline to insist that all of the UK’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies adopt public registers of beneficial ownership?

James Duddridge: First, we should congratulate the Prime Minister. This is the first international conference on anti-corruption. We have already made great progress on beneficial ownership, but it is not the only issue of corruption. Having visited Ghana last week, I know that many other issues need to be tackled. Although beneficial ownership is an important issue, it is not the only issue for that corruption conference.

T5. [904354] Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The huge Mosul dam is crumbling and might collapse. If it does, Mosul will be covered with up to 70 feet of water and 1.5 million lives will be threatened in Tikrit, Samarra and Baghdad. What work is under way to maintain the integrity of that structure?

Mr Ellwood: To use your superlative, Mr Speaker, this is one of the most serious things that Iraqis face, on top of everything else that is going on in Iraq. If a 14-metre tsunami along the Tigris goes through the Mosul dam, it will take out the city of Mosul and put Baghdad under 5 feet of water. The Iraqi authorities
Mr Swire: I do not think we need to get too hung up on the actual date; what is important is the result, which is the big prize towards which all have been working for a considerable amount of time. We again congratulate the negotiating team under President Santos, as well as the Cuban Government in Havana on the part they have played. I am also pleased to say that the United Kingdom has helped the process with advice and financially, with an EU trust fund and a UN fund.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Last week, the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, said that there is a greenhouse effect in terms of the extremist groups that are bringing their ideology to bear in the wake of the Syrian conflict. Can the Minister confirm what the Government’s strategy is for defeating Daesh, as opposed to simply displacing it?

Mr Ellwood: I raised the issue of the Baha’is and other minorities in meetings with the Foreign Minister when he visited in March. I also have regular meetings with the chargé d'affaires—the ambassador in waiting—in London.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join my condemnation of the human rights abuses, documented by the United Nations and Amnesty International, that have been committed by the South Sudanese Government forces, which included deliberately suffocating men and boys in a container and allowing government soldiers to rape women in lieu of wages. Following his recent visit to South Sudan, can the Minister tell the House what representations he has made to the Government of South Sudan and what process is in place for peace?

James Duddridge: I made a number of representations to President Salva Kiir and to Riek Machar during the African Union meeting. The UK Government secured agreement at the UN for a new commission on human rights, and the Government of South Sudan must now fulfil its commitment to co-operate with the commission, which is charged with investigating gang rapes, the destruction of villages and attacks on civilians that may even constitute war crimes.

Mr Lidington: As the Prime Minister said the other day in the House, Turkish membership of the EU is not on the cards for many years indeed. That is not least because there would have to be a Cyprus settlement before Cyprus lifted its block on a whole number of the negotiating chapters. That is not something that we are likely to face in the lifetime of this Parliament or the next, and possibly not in the one after that.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The recently elected MPs of the new Hluttaw in Myanmar are acutely aware of the scale of the task that they face in building democracy in their country. On my recent visit, I was really quite touched by the extent to which they appreciate the support of the UK Parliament for the work they have to do. On that note, may I ask what dialogue the Government are engaged in to promote freedom of expression and political rights in Burma?

Mr Swire: I am glad that the hon. Lady called the hon. Lady right. Not only is that the case at the moment, but when the Bali bombing took place, there were 21 registered terrorist groups from a British perspective, and today that number is more than 50. It is important that we focus on eradicating Daesh in all its forms not only in Iraq and Syria, but where it is starting to spread, and its franchises, such as the Khorasan group, the Taliban, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. Those other groups are trying to get support from Daesh. Internationally, we must wake up and focus on the scale of the problem.

Rehan Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Given that so many are now using the proper name for the terrorist organisation Daesh to defeat its ideology, propaganda and appeal, is it not unfortunate that the BBC still refuses to do so?

Mr Ellwood: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who, I think, got an award in your presence, Mr Speaker, for his campaign on that very issue. I am puzzled about why the BBC, from John Humphrys to John Craven, continues to use the term Islamic State. There is nothing Islamic and nothing state-like about it. I do not know what more we need to do. Perhaps we need to write to “Points of View”.

We continue to support Burma across the whole range of issues, from human rights, to the issue in Rakhine, to the peace process and the ceasefire. I congratulate hon. Members from across the House who have taken the trouble to go to Nay Pyi Taw to try to teach some of the new politicians there the basic elements of how to run a democratic Government. There is a long way to go, but I believe that we are moving in the right direction.

We have already taken precautions at the embassy.
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This Government and the previous Labour Government have deliberately undermined authoritarian regimes such as those of Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi and Assad, and they have unleashed totalitarian regimes as a result. Will the Government accept that Assad, however unpleasant, is not going to go? Will they accept realpolitik, pick up the phone and try to broker a deal between Russia, Assad and the other anti-Daesh movements in order to try to get some chance of peace in the benighted Syrian countryside?

Mr Ellwood: It is for the people of Syria to decide who should lead their country. The majority of people in Syria do not accept that Assad should be part of its long-term future. He has used barrel bombs, he has used chemical weapons and he should have no part at all in the long-term future of the country.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Will the Minister give us an assessment of how far away Libya is from having a stable Government? What is the strength of Daesh there, and are real steps being taken to bring in ground forces to push them out of the country?

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased that Prime Minister Siraj and the Presidency Council are now meeting in Tripoli. It has taken a long time to get the General National Congress and the House of Representatives to agree to support the Prime Minister. These are important initial steps, but the hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that Daesh has a foothold in Derna and Sirte. That is why the sooner the Prime Minister is able to make the important decisions, the sooner the international community can come in and provide support to make sure that Daesh does not gain a long-term foothold.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): British exports to China have more than doubled since 2010, led by firms such as Havant-based manufacturer Colt. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Colt, and encourage other firms to follow its lead?

Mr Swire: Indeed, I congratulate all the companies in my hon. Friend's constituency. Trade with China, despite the recent setback, is still doing extremely well. Our bilateral relations have been reset, following the successful state visit to this country of President Xi. The Foreign Secretary has just been in Beijing. We both encourage British companies to trade more in China—it is a huge market—and all of us, as local Members of Parliament, to do everything we can to encourage our small and medium-sized enterprises to trade with China. Equally, the United Kingdom still continues to attract huge Chinese investment in our infrastructure, which of course provides employment and jobs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but, as usual, demand has hugely exceeded supply and we must now move on.
Points of Order

12.36 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have made the Minister for Community and Social Care aware of my intention to make this point of order. In an answer to my written parliamentary question asking for the number of deaths that have occurred in child and adolescent mental health units since 2010, the Minister said that only one such death had been recorded by the Care Quality Commission. However, freedom of information requests conducted by Inquest have found that at least nine young people have tragically died in England while receiving in-patient psychiatric care since 2010. In response to this research, the Minister stated in an interview on last night’s BBC “Panorama” programme that he did not know how many children and adolescents have died in psychiatric units in recent years. This discrepancy between the Government’s account of the number of child deaths and the data collected from FOI requests raises serious questions about how the deaths in psychiatric care of some of our most vulnerable people are treated, recorded, investigated and learned from.

Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, whether you have received any indication from Ministers that they intend to clarify for the parliamentary record what the accurate figure is for the number of children who have tragically died in all NHS-funded psychiatric in-patient settings since 2010?

Mr Speaker: Extremely important questions are raised by this matter and by the broadcast, although not for me. We cannot have Question Time on the basis of points of order, but as the Minister of State is in the Chamber and apparently willing to say some words, we are happy—exceptionally—to hear him.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his courtesy. On a personal note, may I wish the Minister very well in that important meeting with Deborah Coles? She is a very formidable character, as I know myself, because we knew each other at university. She is very formidable indeed, and I wish him well.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have just had questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. We had an excellent team of Ministers here, but we did not have the Secretary of State. The Minister for Europe made the point that the Secretary of State was on the last leg of an overseas visit. I thought it was a convention of this House that Parliament came first and that Secretaries of State should be here for questions unless an emergency took them away from the House—clearly this trip was planned. Will you give guidance to the House on whether Secretaries of State should be on overseas trips when questions to their Department are scheduled?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Things may have changed since I was paying attention to this—it is 25 years since I was a Minister—but in my day, a Minister for the Government spoke with the same authority no matter what rank of Minister they were.

Mr Speaker: Certainly the team communicate with the House as a team. That is undeniable. This is not within the power of the Chair. The Secretary of State did courteously write to me to notify me that he would be absent. My sense is that he is not likely to be absent on anything like a regular basis. If that were to happen, it would be strongly deprecated not just by the Chair but by Members across the House. Let us hope it does not happen again. If there are no further points of order, perhaps we can move on to the ten-minute rule motion.
Events and Festivals (Control of Flares, Fireworks and Smoke Bombs Etc)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.41 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make it an offence to be found in possession of, or to use, certain articles or substances capable of causing injury or behaviour likely to lead to injury at, or in transit towards, certain events, concerts or festivals or other public gatherings; and for connected purposes.

In plain English, this Bill proposes to prevent audience members at concerts and festivals from using dangerous pyrotechnics such as flares, fireworks and smoke bombs. There are places where items like these can safely be used, but not in the close confines of a live music audience.

Flares can burn at up to 1,600 °C; fireworks can be even hotter, at up to 2,000 °C. There is also the added danger of an unexpected projectile. Smoke bombs are also hot and pose particular risks at indoor venues and also for fellow audience members with asthma or other such breathing difficulties. The surprise throwing of pyrotechnics from within a crowd can also create dangerous and distressing crowd disturbance.

In 2014 there were 255 incidents involving flares at live music events, both indoor and outdoor, ranging from festivals such as Electric Daisy Carnival and T in the Park to popular city venues such as Brixton Academy. Like many right hon. and hon. Members and our constituents I enjoy live music, but no one should be seriously burned as part of a fun afternoon or evening. No one wants to see panic at the disco or any other music event. We want to get the number of these incidents down to an all-time low.

Gigs and festivals are particularly popular with young people. They and their parents have a right to feel safe both in attending and in sending their children. Unfortunately that was not the experience of an 18-year-old girl who attended an Arctic Monkeys concert and required three dressings to burns on her arms from a flare that had been thrown, or of the 17-year-old girl at the Reading festival who suffered a panic attack after being burned across her abdomen and thighs by a smoke bomb.

When I mentioned the subject of the Bill to other people, many outside the music industry were surprised that audience use of pyrotechnics was not already banned. Their surprise is understandable given that such protection has long been afforded to football fans by the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1985, which made it an offence to enter or attempt to enter a football ground while in possession of a flare, smoke bomb or firework. Courts have taken such public endangerment very seriously, and even those without previous criminal records have been given custodial sentences of one or two months and banned from football grounds for up to six years.

The numbers bear out the fact that that is an effective approach, both legislatively and judicially. By contrast with the 255 incidents at music events in 2014, there were just three incidents at football grounds.

In my capacity as chairman of the all-party group on music, I have found broad support for the Bill throughout the music industry. Live Nation, one of the largest concert organisers and ticket providers in the UK, has been campaigning on this subject for a considerable time, as yet without success. I would like to see that change sooner rather than later, because, with the right support, these injuries and incidents are absolutely avoidable. The Association of Independent Festivals, which represents many popular events including the Secret Garden Party and the Isle of Wight festival, has asked for the law’s support:

“It is the responsibility of organisers to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for fans and the Government should support this objective by creating a level playing field between music and sports fans.”

Concert organisers have every reason to want to protect concert goers. Unfortunately, with their powers basically limited to expelling someone from a venue, they feel rather toothless when it comes to deterring this kind of dangerous behaviour, despite their desire to do exactly that.

Unlike at football grounds, the current legal situation at festivals and music venues is as follows. Under-18s are banned from carrying fireworks, a classification that also includes smoke bombs, in public places. However, an overwhelming majority of concerts and festivals occur on private property. There is no such regulation for flares, which are not controlled under the Fireworks (Safety) Regulations 1997 because they are not intended for entertainment use. There is no offence for adults carrying fireworks or smoke bombs, unless it can be proven that it is done with intent to cause injury. Concert injuries from these articles are usually a case of—I will be frank—bone-headed disregard for others and stupidity, rather than malice. Essentially, it all amounts to no rules or protection when it comes to audience possession of pyrotechnics at music events. When an industry wholeheartedly welcomes a proposed law not as a burdensome regulation but as an essential tool to protect safety surely this is one of the most clear-cut cases where Parliament should act. We would not be doing our duty if we ignored it.

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims confirmed in a letter to Live Nation in March 2015 that in his view the matter required “proper examination of how best to deter the misuse of these devices.”

That is a view I share and welcome, but little progress has been made. I believe that proper examination of the effective results achieved by the ban on the misuse of these devices at football grounds leads to the conclusion that a ban covering music events would be the best next step. Thus, in proposing the Bill, I believe the time has come to take that forward.

Right hon. and hon. Members will know that I am not, by instinct, someone who likes to ban things. By and large, I believe people should have the right to choose to take risks and make informed decisions for themselves, even if they are not decisions we would make ourselves. However, audience members have not chosen to be exposed to the danger of flares and fireworks deployed in improper conditions, possibly by those who do not know how, or are in no fit state of mind, to use them. They have come to enjoy live music, and these incidents both endanger them and ruin their events.
To be entirely clear, my Bill would apply only to audience members and spectators at these events. There has been a little misreporting today online on the “billboard” website. Venues and artists would still be able to use pyrotechnics in their act and in their stage set-ups as they currently do. I certainly do not want to curtail the ability of trained professionals to put on a vibrant and exciting show. Having enjoyed many a gig myself, I know that “the fire has always been burning since the world’s been turning”, and that when tested properly and used safely it can be part of a great spectacle. I am not sure whether you are a fan of the Kings of Leon, Mr Speaker, but I am sure you would agree that we should ensure that nothing untoward is ever on fire.

There is support from the industry, venues, artists, fans and colleagues from across the House—I am grateful to my co-sponsors for showing there is cross-party agreement. This is a problem on which there is a consensus of concern among music fans and the music industry, and I am grateful for the opportunity to bring it before the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Nigel Adams, David Warburton, Steve Rotheram, James Heappey, Mark Pritchard, Pete Wishart, Valerie Vaz, Byron Davies, Craig Williams, Kevin Foster and Nigel Huddleston present the Bill.

Nigel Adams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 April, and to be printed (Bill 157).
never has it been more urgent that the Business Secretary does so. This is urgent because on 29 March Tata announced it would sell its entire steelmaking operations in the UK, leaving the future of the UK steel industry hanging by a thread and putting 40,000 jobs in communities up and down our country at imminent risk.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): As someone with a Tata presence in my constituency, I wonder whether the shadow Secretary of State shares my concern that although we knew about this on 29 March—people going to Mumbai knew it was going to happen—we have not discussed it formally until today, and yet three years ago, the Prime Minister reconvened the Chamber within two days, during an Easter recess, to talk about the death of Margaret Thatcher. What does that say about the Government’s priorities?

Ms Eagle: It is regrettable that there was not a recall of Parliament, but we are where we are, and we have this debate now, thanks to you, Mr Speaker.

It is imperative to underline the fundamental importance of this industry for our economy and our country. Steel is a foundation industry. While it might make up just 1% of total manufacturing output, that output is crucial. I believe that our world-leading automotive, aerospace and defence industries and our rail and construction sector all depend on a strong and sustainable domestic steel industry.

Our manufacturing sector is already facing tough times. The Secretary of State said yesterday in the House that manufacturing was up since 2010, but Office for National Statistics figures show a different picture. Manufacturing output in the last quarter of 2015 remained frozen at the level of five years ago, while output in January was actually lower than the year before and is still 6.4% down on the same period before the global crash.

In his 2011 Budget speech, the Chancellor espoused his vision of a Britain “carried aloft by the march of the makers.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 966.]

But he has failed to match his rhetoric with reality, because since then the manufacturing sector has actually shrunk. His much promised rebalancing of our economy has in reality failed to materialise. In this context, the challenges facing the steel industry represent an existential crisis for the UK’s manufacturing sector as a whole. I do not believe we can safely allow it to shrink further. And I for one am glad that the Government appear finally to take note.

The loss of our steel industry would worsen our already record-breaking trade deficit, which is now the worst since 1948. The value of the goods and services we import now exceeds the value of those that we export by £32.7 billion. The loss of steel and our current exports of steel combined with the need to import far more steel would make this barely sustainable record deficit even worse.

Beyond the economic cost, there would also be an intolerable social cost. There are 15,000 jobs directly at stake in the industry and a further 25,000 jobs at stake in the wider supply chain. These are the kind of high-skill, high-paid jobs of which we need to see more. The end of steelmaking in the UK would be devastating for 40,000 workers and their communities. Some people have highlighted the potential costs of intervening to save the steel industry, but I believe the costs of letting steel fail are far greater.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I do not want to pre-empt what the hon. Lady may say, but will she confirm that it is the policy of Her Majesty’s Opposition that the steel industry should be nationalised, and should remain in public hands until it can successfully go back into private hands?

Ms Eagle: What needs to be done is what is necessary to preserve, restructure and ensure the survival of our steel industry for the future. That is the Government’s job. We will be as supportive as we can—I shall set out some parameters later in my speech—but this is about the Government getting their act in order. The Opposition are holding the Government to account for their actions, rather than just their words. That is what this debate is about.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On that point, we heard nothing yesterday from the Secretary of State, either at the meeting of the all-party group on steel and metal-related industries or in the Chamber, about what action the Government will take on energy costs and business rates—costs that are burdening the steel industry, and on which the Government could act, yet we have seen no sign at all that they will change their policies in these vital areas.

Ms Eagle: I hope that we will have the chance to hear about concrete action from the Government in this debate.
I was talking about the costs to the community of letting steel fail. The costs to manufacturing and the economy are high, but the costs to the workers and their communities would be much higher. We very much welcome the recent commitment from the Business Secretary to do everything he can to protect steel-making and processing in the UK, but this Business Secretary has form. Warm words are all very well, but they are worthless, as the community in Redcar know to their cost, unless they are followed up with meaningful action.

Opposition Members are in no doubt that there are huge challenges facing the UK steel industry, but we believe that it can have a strong and sustainable future, and we know that decisions made by this Government now will ultimately determine whether it does. That is why I welcome the commitment the Business Secretary appeared to make in yesterday’s statement to what he called co-investment. Perhaps he will tell us whether he is considering co-investment to save the blast furnaces at Port Talbot, because we did not get an answer to that question in yesterday’s statement.

Will the Business Secretary confirm here and now that he will avoid a fire sale of these assets, and ensure that irreversible mistakes are not made in the way that they are sold? If Tata is to act as a responsible seller, it must consider only those offers that seek to maintain both upstream and downstream assets—that is, both the strip business at Port Talbot, and the specialist business based in and around Rotherham, Stocksbridge and the rest of south Yorkshire. The Government must also make sure that enough time is made available to ensure that an appropriate consideration of responsible offers can take place. It took nine months for the Scunthorpe deal to be developed, yet Tata has indicated that it wishes to exit the UK in four months. What is the Business Secretary doing to reassure the existing customer base that their current and future contracts will be fulfilled during this period of uncertainty? The plants cannot be saved if their order books disappear.

Let me turn to a number of areas where I believe the Government can make a positive difference. The most significant cause of the crisis facing the steel industry is the dumping of huge amounts of cheap Chinese steel on the market. It is priced below the cost of production; Chinese state-owned steel companies are making billions of pounds in losses, yet they continue to pour out more and more product. UK steel producers simply cannot compete with this state-subsidised unfair trade, which is threatening to destroy the European industry as well as ours. We are not calling for protectionism, but we are standing up for fair trade, and calling for quick and effective tariffs that will help to level the playing field. The Business Secretary must abandon his opposition to the abolition of the lesser duty rule and block unfair Chinese imports.

Granting market economy status to China must not be automatic. China meets only one of the five criteria that must be met if this status is to be granted, yet the UK Government support granting market economy status to China as early as the end of this year. Action to level the playing field using trade defence instruments, and on market economy status for China, would give potential buyers of Tata’s UK steel operations the surest sign that the Government stand ready to act.

On procurement, the Government should take concrete action to ensure that UK steel producers are able to benefit from large public sector contracts. The Ministry of Defence will spend £178 billion on defence equipment over the next 10 years, yet the Conservative-led coalition Government scrapped Labour’s defence industrial strategy, which made British jobs and industries the first priority in all decisions on MOD contracts. We are now in the deeply regrettable situation of an aircraft carrier, British surface ships and armoured vehicles all being manufactured in the UK with mainly imported steel, when, with more planning, our domestic industry could have supplied those needs.

The Government must also take action on infrastructure investment. Despite all the Government public relations about this, public sector net investment in the UK will in reality be lower as a percentage of gross domestic product at the end of this Parliament than at the start, and half what it was under the last Labour Government. Of the projects announced in the Government’s infrastructure pipeline, just one in five is actually under way. For the sake of our steel industry and the wider economy, Labour calls on the Government to bring forward shovel-ready projects that require a significant amount of steel, and to ensure that the changes to the procurement rules, which the Government keep boasting about, actually begin to make a difference.

Ian C. Lucas: I would like to share with my hon. Friend the fact that I received a letter from the Prime Minister yesterday praying in aid and praising an infrastructure project investment in the railway between Wrexham and Chester. However, this is being funded by the Labour Welsh Government and, unfortunately for the Prime Minister, it appears to be the only example that he could put forward of investment in rail in north Wales.

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend makes a telling point, and I hope that the Government will connect those two things in their procurement efforts, so that we can make a real difference to the potential customer base for UK steel at this very difficult time.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that certain major procurement projects, such as High Speed 2 and nuclear, are being given to the Chinese? My fear is that they will naturally want to use Chinese steel. Also, if these were British companies, they would be paying British corporation tax, national insurance and income tax, and would be developing supply chains and export capacity. Does my hon. Friend share my fear that there is no proper joined-up industrial strategy to protect our jobs and our future?

Ms Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend, and when we see the Chancellor travelling around China and asking the Chinese to bid for all these contracts, it is hard to avoid realising what is happening.

Business rates represent a far higher cost for UK steel producers. There had been reports that the Government were planning to exempt plant and machinery from business rates, which EEF has described as a “tax on investment”. The Chancellor reportedly even costed this change with a view to including it in his now
infamous Budget last month before dropping it at the last minute. It seems that the measure, which would have significantly improved the future prospects of the industry, was sacrificed in pursuit of his economically illiterate and increasingly unachievable surplus target.

I said earlier that part of the problem is ideology. Labour has been calling for a modern and intelligent industrial strategy, and I am pleased to say that in yesterday’s statement the Business Secretary actually uttered the words “industrial strategy” for the first time. Now that that Rubicon has been crossed, all we need is action to match the words. Today, let us spare a thought for the thousands of steelworkers whose futures hang in the balance. The Government ignored the warning signs for far too long, and now they must act to find a suitable buyer, and to work with the steel producers, the workforce, and the clients and customers to ensure that the industry is placed on an even keel. The cost of failure, both economically and socially, is unthinkable. We need urgent action to save our steel.

1.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):
The whole House will have been deeply concerned by the crisis that has affected the global steel industry over the past year. The facts are familiar, but they bear repetition. Around the world, steelmaking capacity is about 35% higher than demand. In China alone, excess steel capacity is 25 times the United Kingdom’s entire annual production. Demand has slumped in China as its economy grows, and demand here in Europe has yet to return to pre-crash levels.

That surge in supply, coupled with a fall in demand, has inevitably led to a large fall in prices, and the knock-on effect for steelworkers around the world has been, quite simply, devastating. Here in the UK, we have sadly seen the closure of the SSI plant in Redcar after its Thai parent company ran up unsustainable losses. Across Europe, some 70,000 steelworkers have been laid off since 2008. Last week we heard that the steel capacity is 25 times the United Kingdom’s entire annual production. Demand has slumped in China as its economy grows, and demand here in Europe has yet to return to pre-crash levels.

This is, of course, about more than just numbers. It is a human tragedy. When we talk about job losses in the abstract, it is easy to forget that each of them represents a person: a hard-working, highly skilled man or woman. Many of those men and women will have husbands, wives, children and other dependants to support, or there will be local businesses that rely on their custom, the same pattern will be repeated throughout the supply chain. That is why, when job losses have happened in Britain, we have done everything we can to support the communities affected.

Mr Anderson: The Secretary of State said that we must not forget. I assure him that there are people in this House who do not forget. I am one of the people whom his Government did this to some 30 years ago, when they closed the coal mines. They looked at the economics, and they did not care about the social cost, which destroyed areas like mine. The Secretary of State needs to bear that in mind during this debate.

Sajid Javid: I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that when there are job losses and the Government can help, of course they must do so.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: I will plough on, but I will give way in a moment. I am about to speak about Redcar, and I know that the hon. Gentleman is interested in that as well. We have committed up to £80 million to help people affected by SSI’s closure. That includes more than £16 million to help local firms to employ former SSI workers, and a further £16 million to support firms in the SSI supply chain and the wider Tees valley. Millions more are paying for retraining at local colleges. For example, there was a £1.7 million package to help former SSI apprentices to remain in employment, education or training.

Tom Blenkinsop: The Secretary of State said that the Government would do everything possible for the communities and people affected. As he knows, on the day of the liquidation at Redcar, he announced an £80 million total package—

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is £90 million.

Tom Blenkinsop: Oh, is it £90 million now? We have heard previously, from that Dispatch Box—

Mr Speaker: Order. Shush, junior Minister. We do not need you to burble from a sedentary position. Be quiet! Your burbling is not required. Learn it. I have told you so many times; try to get the message.

Tom Blenkinsop: Not so long ago, at that Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State changed the figure to £50 million. Moneys on top of that have only been acquired because the Community trade union claimed a protective award from the tribunal to ensure that the workforce got what they were entitled to. The Government could have fast-tracked that some seven months ago.

Sajid Javid: I thought I heard the hon. Gentleman say “up to £90 million”. What we have always said is “up to £80 million”, and that has not changed. I agree that there is a long way to go, but so far, in respect of Redcar, nearly 700 jobs have been created, safeguarded or supported, and only a quarter of the more than 2,000 workers at SSI were claiming jobseeker’s allowance at the end of February.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to take up too much time, because I shall be speaking later, but the figure of 600 jobs relates to those who are in work or full-time training, not just those who are in work. That is important, because it is work that will be vital at the end of the training.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has made a very important point: at the end of the day, it is about work. Training can lead to work, as can retraining, so it is important to invest in it. I know that, to the people of Redcar, this seems like a drop in the ocean. When a community is built around a single industry, the death of that industry
Sajid Javid: By calling it a fraction, the hon. Gentleman underplays the help that this support is providing to the industry. The manufacturers in the industry see this as a big game-changer in how they account for the cost of power. I can agree with the hon. Gentleman, however, in that I think there is still more to look at in this area, particularly with regard to Tata and securing a buyer.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): In a meeting with the Industrial Communities Alliance, which represents traditional industrial areas in the UK, the EU Commission reiterated its commitment to change the trade defence instruments, which would tackle the cheap steel issue. We are in line and the Commission is in line. Will the Secretary of State get in line to ensure that we can make these changes?

Sajid Javid: I will come on to trade defence instruments in just a moment.

I want to talk about the delivery of a new flexibility on emissions regulations. This was asked for by the industry and we have delivered, potentially saving the industry hundreds of millions of pounds. We have also taken action on procurement, and we have become the first country anywhere in Europe to take advantage of EU rules to make it easier for the public sector to buy British. That is on top of our proud record of procuring British steel.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State makes much of the changes he is making on procurement. The Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is sitting next to him, told me in answer to a recent question that the Ministry of Defence did not even have full records of where it was getting its steel from for UK defence projects. How can we be sure that the Secretary of State will follow through on his commitment on procurement when Government Departments are not even keeping records and when so many UK defence projects are being made in Korea, China and elsewhere?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman might hear more from the Minister for Defence Procurement in the coming days, but I can tell him that the two new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers are being built with almost 100,000 tonnes of British steel, that Crossrail, the biggest construction project in Europe, is using almost exclusively British steel for its 26 miles of tunnels, and that 96% of Network Rail’s spending on steel rail goes directly to British steel. That is on top of our proud record of procuring British steel.

EU rules to make it easier for the public sector to buy British steel.

Mr Betts: Does the Secretary of State accept that the support that the Government are giving our steel industry in respect of energy costs is only a fraction of the support that Germany and other countries are giving their steel industries? It will still leave our industry with much higher energy costs than those of other European Union countries. Is the Secretary of State not prepared to consider going further to help our industry when it is in such a difficult position?

...
second biggest in the world, will use UK steel. What progress is the Secretary of State making with his colleagues to ensure that that happens?

Sajid Javid: We have had meetings with that particular company and many others in a similar situation. The hon. Gentleman will know that many of them are private companies and therefore not subject to all the rules around procurement, but there are ways of trying to encourage them to invest more in British steel, and that is exactly what is happening.

The question of trade defence instruments was raised earlier, and the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) mentioned the point as well. We have been working hard on this issue at EU level, and that work began long before this crisis broke. I hear a lot in this House about ideology, but I am just interested in one thing: what actually works. When evidence shows that tariffs against unfair trade will make a difference without harming British businesses or British consumers, I will always support them. That is why last July the UK voted to impose a 16% tariff on wire rod; since those duties were imposed, imports from China have fallen by as much as 90%.

In November, we voted to impose a 28% tariff on seamless pipes; since those duties were imposed, imports from China have gone down 80%. In January, we voted to impose an 11% tariff on rebar, and since then, imports of that particular steel product have fallen by a massive 99%. In February, we voted for a 15% tariff on cold rolled flat products, and that move has already reduced imports from China to almost nothing. This is real action with real tariffs and they are making a difference for British steelworkers.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The European Steel Association’s spokesperson, talking about the change to the lesser duty rule, has said that “the fact that the UK continues to block it means that when the government says it’s doing everything it can to save the steel industry in the UK and also in Europe, it’s not.”

Is not that the truth about the Secretary of State’s efforts?

Sajid Javid: I will turn to that in just a moment.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I thank the Business Secretary for taking my intervention. I hope that he will also answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) has just asked him. On the question of procurement in relation to energy, the Government are intervening more than ever before in the energy market through contracts for difference. Has the Secretary of State looked into ensuring that when those often very generous contracts are negotiated, they contain a requirement to buy British-made steel?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the right hon. Lady that no stone remains unturned in our efforts to help sell as much British steel as possible. The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) has just asked about the lesser duty rule, and this point is raised repeatedly by Labour Members, but Labour had no problem whatever with the rule when it was in government. Scrapping the rule altogether would cost British shoppers dear. It would raise prices on everyday items that we rely on. For example, the rule saves British shoppers £130 million on footwear in one year alone. However, I told the House yesterday that I would be more than happy to look at any ways of specifically helping the steel industry, and I hope that Members will come up with ideas during the debate. I will, of course, be listening.

Ian C. Lucas: I referred earlier to the Labour Government’s intervention on car scrappage before the 2010 election. They stepped up to the plate to support the industry at that time. May I suggest that the Secretary of State approach the aerospace and automotive sectors and ask the Automotive Council and the Aerospace Growth Partnership to place on their agenda ways in which they could assist the UK steel industry by stepping up to the plate at this time of great difficulty for the industry?

Sajid Javid: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have sector councils for both those industries, and we meet regularly and have a regular dialogue. This is exactly the kind of thing that those sector councils are designed to focus on, and it is exactly the kind of work that they are doing. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I have read some very interesting statistics in the past week. There has been a 43% decline in the foundation industries across the United Kingdom since 2000, but the figure across the other OECD countries is only 21%. Why does the Secretary of State think the decline across the UK since 2000 has been twice that of the other OECD countries?

Sajid Javid: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman gets his numbers from, but this brings me to a useful point. The hon. Member for Wallasey said earlier that I had stated yesterday that manufacturing output in this country had gone up since 2010; she suggested that that was somehow incorrect. I can tell her that manufacturing output has gone up 2.2% in real terms since 2010 and that it is up 18.7% in current prices. Those are the official numbers, and manufacturing employment is also up. If she wants to hear about when manufacturing output actually fell, I can tell her that it was during the last Labour Government, when it fell from 18% of GVA to about 10%.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Steel companies are seriously concerned that the granting of market economy status to China will severely jeopardise their ability to take Chinese and other companies to court for steel dumping. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of that threat?

Sajid Javid: First, that will be a decision for the EU. We will, of course, have an input, but it will be a collective decision. Secondly, if any country wants market economy status, it must earn it. Whatever the country, it must show that it is behaving in a responsible way. Thirdly, we must remember that even when countries get market economy status, tariffs can still be imposed. Russia and the United States would be good examples.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that many on this side of the House believe that it is for this House and this Government to decide when a country such as China is dumping? We
should decide whether to impose tariffs. Indeed, many of us think that if we had been outside the EU months ago, we would have imposed tariffs on Chinese dumping and would have solved the problem.

Sajid Javid: We have led the way in taking action, which has resulted in the right tariffs, which have helped the steel industry while protecting producers and consumers. My hon. Friend will agree that when action is taken through tariffs, we want to ensure that they are at the necessary level to help the industry without hurting consumers and producers.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: I will give way once more on this.

Stephen Doughty: While we are still on tariffs, the Secretary of State mentioned the tariff on rebar and the drop in production. Increasing the tariff in that industry is obviously crucial, but other facts are at play. Rebar exports shunted up production before the tariffs came in, so we may have seen a drop-off due to that; there are also the exchange rate differentials. Does the Secretary of State still think that the rebar tariffs are high enough or should they be even higher to deal with the changes going on in that industry due to other factors?

Sajid Javid: We should always be driven by the evidence. The 99% fall in imports year on year, resulting from the tariff, suggests that it is effective, but we should always keep the situation under review and ensure that it remains effective.

Richard Fuller: My right hon. Friend mentioned the action that the Government have taken on procurement and their response on tariffs and power. Yesterday, he talked about Government co-investment. Will he please take this opportunity to clarify what is meant by that?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will know that that comment related to Tata’s decision to sell its strip products business. What I said was really to show that if a proposal comes forward.

Mr Bailey: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: Not now.

The action taken on tariffs, energy costs and procurement has sent a powerful message to investors around the world that the British Government are standing up for UK steel. That commitment is not new; I have been working with the steel industry from my very first day as Business Secretary, long before the current crisis made it on to the front pages. As I told the House yesterday, Tata contacted me several weeks ago to warn that it planned to sell parts of its strip business and to close its Port Talbot site immediately. Thanks to the groundwork laid by my team and colleagues over the past year, we were able to secure a reprieve while a buyer is found. I am leading the Government’s efforts to help find a buyer for the strip business, and we will update the House on progress as soon as possible.

When that buyer is found, the Government stand ready, as I have said, to support it in any way we can to help to get the deal done. We have already set out some of the ways in which we can help. It would not be prudent to go into the detail, but the goal is to find a commercial buyer, with the Government helping to secure that transaction and a long-term, viable future for the business.

Tom Blenkinsop: I understand where the Secretary of State is coming from, but, taking a broader view of co-investment, one option is R and D. The steel sector does not have Catapult status. Will the Secretary of State look at that as a potential route for co-investment in the steel sector, particularly in respect of organisations such as the Materials Processing Institute, to get an R and D link with our domestic steel industry?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. He will know that Catapult centres are a partnership between Government, business and academia. If that can help the steel sector, I am more than happy to look into it if a proposal comes forward.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Hundreds of apprentices at the Port Talbot works receive on-the-job training while attending local colleges and universities. Swansea University has approximately £40 million in active grants to support research and innovation in the steel industry at the Materials Research Centre. If the steel-making facilities are removed and sponsorship is subsequently lost, future generations will be deprived and the UK will miss out on the potential to be at the forefront of materials development.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes a key point about the importance of skills and training, and I can assure her that we are already working with the Welsh Government on that. I have already started discussions with both the Minister for Universities and Science and the Minister for Skills to ensure that the issue remains front of mind.

We heard yesterday about the deal between Tata and Greybull Capital, and we will do everything we can to help finalise that transaction for Tata’s long products division. Yesterday’s announcement has also helped safeguard almost 5,000 jobs; alongside Liberty House’s acquisition of steelworks in Scotland and the west midlands, it is a real vote of confidence in Britain’s steel industry.

I would not have been able to do this work alone and I want to praise my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, who has been absolutely tireless over the past year in her efforts to protect steel, as has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. I have also had the pleasure of working closely with the First Minister of Wales and the leader of the Welsh Conservatives in the Assembly. They have both proved to be positive, constructive allies in the fight to save Port Talbot. The steel unions,
particularly Community, have been equally constructive, consistently coming forward with solutions rather than complaints. For that, I thank them once again.

Investors everywhere know that British steel is the best in the world and that British steelworkers are the hardest working in the world. They know that the British Government stand with the steel industry. We will do whatever we can to support it and to help it become more competitive. The challenges we face are great and the crisis facing the steel industry is global, but I am fighting for Britain’s steelworkers every hour of the day. I was fighting for them long before this crisis hit the headlines and will go on fighting for them as long as it takes. Britain’s steelworkers are the best in the world, and they deserve no less.

1.37 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) on securing this debate; I appreciate your discretion in permitting it under Standing Order No. 24, Mr Speaker. I will speak briefly from the SNP Front Bench, to allow colleagues from steel communities both in Scotland and in England and Wales to contribute to this short debate.

Yesterday, the Business Secretary tried to dig himself out of the hole he had dug by claiming credit for the news that Tata may have found a buyer for the Scunthorpe plant. He told us that this Government had done everything they could for the steel industry and that workers in England and Wales, with their jobs on the line, should be grateful to the Tories. It is welcome news that Tata appears to have found a buyer for its operations in Scunthorpe, and I hope that buyers can be found for Port Talbot and other sites. If the Government have been involved in the deal, I commend that, but I am concerned at reports of a possible erosion of workers’ terms and conditions as part of the deal. Is the Business Secretary aware of that? If he had discussions with Greybull Capital, did the changes come up? Will he now make representations to it on that matter?

I am also keen to probe a bit further the Business Secretary’s apparent flirtation with direct UK Government investment and the potential co-ownership of steel sites, including Port Talbot. He described it as co-investment in “commercial terms”. Perhaps he could clarify that, because it was as clear as mud yesterday and left more questions than answers. Indeed, it appears that this morning No. 10 was briefing against his flirtation, saying that nationalisation is not the answer. How unco-ordinated and shambolic!

Tom Blenkinsop: On what the hon. Gentleman said about terms and conditions, that ends up going to ballot, after being negotiated with lay reps on site, including those at Skinningrove in my constituency. The reductions in terms and conditions and the pension contributions are for 12 months only. In collective bargaining that is usually called a short-term working agreement, and I have negotiated those many times in order to save sites. It is also an industrial matter; it is not really a political matter for this place to discuss.

Neil Gray: I take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention in the spirit in which it was clearly given.

As I said yesterday, the fact that the Business Secretary was literally on the other side of the world at the height of this crisis two weeks ago when Tata made the announcement is a perfect metaphor for the Tory approach to the steel industry. Yesterday, I believe, was the first time this Government have proactively engaged with the House on the steel issue, and even that was after a shambolic recess, when there were calls for a recall of Parliament. On every other occasion I have been involved in discussions—certainly on the vast majority of occasions when steel has been discussed in this House—it has been because the Government have been dragged here by Opposition parties, as they have been again today. It is clear that the Government have been comfortably behind the curve on the steel crisis.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): We had a statement yesterday!

Neil Gray: I have already said that yesterday was the first time the Government had proactively done this, and that was after a shambolic recess. They have clearly been comfortably behind the curve on the steel crisis; we have seen poor, defensive reactions, rather than proactive and practical support. That is in stark contrast with the proactive, professional and diligent way the Scottish Government approached the crisis facing the Scottish plants at Clydebridge and Dalzell. Nicola Sturgeon said her Government would leave no stone unturned in saving a crucial industry, and that is exactly what happened.

The Scottish steel taskforce was quickly assembled, and I am delighted to say that my hon. Friends the Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) contributed to that, and that Liberty House has now bought these sites, to maintain a crucial industry in Scotland.

Yesterday, the Business Secretary was noble enough to commend the Scottish Government for their actions and efforts, and I thank him for that, but the mask slipped later on in the exchanges when my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West asked whether the UK Government had learned anything from the approach taken in Scotland. He said the only reason why Scottish steel has a bright future is the strength of the UK economy. That was utterly complacent, arrogant and ignorant of the facts. SNP Members now stand in solidarity with the steelworkers of England and Wales as they struggle and fight for their jobs and their industry, alongside their union representatives. We now hope the UK Government can work more co-operatively with EU colleagues on anti-dumping measures, energy costs and the other issues facing this industry, so there can be a long-term future for a crucial part of the manufacturing sector.

There needs to be a credible strategy for manufacturing and heavy industry in the UK, as the shadow Business Secretary said. This Government are facing a massive, record-breaking trade imbalance. The only way of rectifying that is if we start making things and if this Government start supporting those areas of the economy, rather than relying so heavily on other areas. Imagine what could have been achieved had the Prime Minister spent the last year touring European capitals pressing for action on steel, rather than testing the patience of European colleagues on his EU referendum gamble.

Yesterday, I asked the Business Secretary a simple question and he dodged it. He now has the opportunity to hear it again and perhaps he will take the opportunity
to answer it. Will he publish details of all the meetings, phone calls and correspondence with the EU and with international and trade counterparts that he, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and other members of the Cabinet have made in respect of the steel industry, and any such visits they have made? If he has done the work he claims to have done and if he has indeed strained every sinew for the steel industry, he can have nothing to hide. Indeed, publishing would help to show if he really had the grip on this issue he claims to have had.

I suspect that the Secretary of State dodged that issue and question yesterday because the reputation he has gained for himself in steel communities across these isles is ringing true. What we needed to hear, today and yesterday, was the commitment of this Government to save this crucial industry, not just for the workers—saving their jobs, and their skills and livelihoods—but for the wider economy. I wonder whether we will ever hear that commitment from this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of interest, there has to be a time limit. We will begin with a six-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.44 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who speaks for the Scottish National party. I have to say that I thought some of his remarks were more designed for party political purposes than to deal with what we are facing today. We are dealing with people’s livelihoods and with whether they have jobs, and I hope the tone of the House today will be about a solution and what we can do, rather than about making party political points. I also regret, Sir, that Parliament was not recalled last week, as this was a matter of such urgency that we could have come back to have a proper debate, and Members interested in this vital issue would have attended. It was quite right, Sir, that you allowed this Standing Order No. 24 application and that it was unanimously approved by this House—there was no opposition to it.

I know that many Members wish to speak, so I will keep my remarks brief. I declare an interest, as some of my constituents work in the steelworks in the neighbouring constituency and have contacted me about their concerns. This is about not just the people who work directly in the industry but those who rely on the economic benefit that the industry brings to their constituency and have contacted me about their concerns. The shadow Business Secretary analysed the situation very well. There has to be a steel industry in this country, and I think Members on both sides of the House agree on that. We cannot be left without a steel industry, and there is one reason for that: if there is a war in the future—I hope there will not be—we have to have our own steel industry or we cannot defend ourselves. Everyone accepts that we need a steel industry and everybody wants to work towards a solution. I know that the ministerial team have been working very hard but I do think they are working with one hand tied behind their back.

The shadow Business Secretary’s analysis was absolutely right: the problem our steel industry has is the unfair dumping of Chinese steel, and now perhaps Russian steel, on to the market, backed by state-controlled companies, which can put millions of pounds into their industries with no problem at all. If I was sitting in China and I wanted to keep my industry going, the classic way I would do it would be by selling my product abroad at less than what it costs to produce. What then happens, as we have seen, and as the Secretary of State has made clear, is that businesses across Europe close. When those industries are knocked out, the main supplier—in this case, China—takes a bigger share of the market and can then bump the price of steel up and hold the whole world to ransom. That is just what happens.

Where do I think the one hand tied behind the back is? It is the European Union. We have heard from Members on both sides of the House that the problem has been delays in the European Union dealing with tariffs. If we were in the United States, the President would just impose a tariff of 266% and that would shut off Chinese steel coming into the USA. Whatever we think about the issue and whether we think the Government have been poor in pushing for tariffs or not, I hope the whole House can agree that if this matter was totally in the hands of this Parliament, the Government could make their decision and act, and the Opposition could criticise and vote against it if they did not agree.

Sir Edward Leigh: This is a vital national industry. Can my hon. Friend imagine any previous UK Government, in war or peace, allowing our steel industry to go down the tube? My constituency abuts Scunthorpe, and many of my constituents cannot understand the situation. If we had control of our own destiny, surely we could just stop this dumping overnight. This is unfair, unreasonable and ridiculous dumping, and we should stop it.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is correct. That is the problem. I am afraid that the two Front-Bench teams cannot deal with this situation because of their position on the European Union. If the referendum had not been going on at the moment—

Stephen Doughty: I was in agreement with much of what the hon. Gentleman was saying until he got on to his usual track about the EU. Celsa in my constituency is a Catalan company that operates across the whole of the EU. If we were to leave and to lose access to the single market, we would still be bound by World Trade Organisation rules on state aid and other issues. The uncertainty, damage and risk to jobs in south Wales, which he said he cared about, would be immense. It is grossly irresponsible to suggest that leaving the EU would benefit the steel industry in this country.

Mr Bone: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that his analysis is absolutely wrong and that his ideology is driving his comments.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con) rose—

Mr Bone: I will not give way again.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): On that point—
Mr Bone: No, I cannot give way, because other Members wish to speak.

It is interesting to note that, by the time this debate ends, a cheque for £7 million will have been written by the Chancellor to send to Brussels—that is how much money we send every three hours to the European Union. Just a fraction of that money could be used to protect our steel industry.

On the question of whether we should renationalise the industry or sell it off, I have to say that I have no problem in that regard. A partial ownership of the steel industry for a period makes sense, as this is a strategic industry, but there is no point in doing that if we cannot solve the overall problem of the dumping of steel in this country. Put simply, we must cut out the cancer first. I have not come here today because of the European Union—[Interruption.] No! I have constituents who are concerned and worried about their jobs. Let me tell the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) that it is because of the European Union that they may lose their jobs. It is no good him smiling and laughing, because that is the truth. He should be ashamed of saying otherwise.

If we really want to solve the problem of the steel industry, we must stop the dumping. I know that some Opposition Members do not like this, but the only way to save the steel industry is to come out of the EU and make our own decisions in this House. If we had left the EU months and months ago, we would have imposed tariffs on China. If Members want to save the steel industry, they will have to vote to come out of the EU.

1.52 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I wish to start today by thanking both the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for securing this debate, and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

I also thank the Secretary of State for his statements yesterday and today and for attending the special meeting of the all-party group on steel yesterday afternoon. However, although I am grateful to him, I regret to say that those meetings and statements have done little to address investor and customer confidence, which are of paramount importance at this time. Alongside the efforts the Government need to make to find and support a commercial operator, the priority at the moment should be securing the order book.

Erosion of the customer base is the most pressing issue facing the British steel industry. If the customer base goes, it will not come back. Unless the order book is secured, it does not matter what else happens. No one will buy a business if it has no customers—it is as simple as that. That is why I was so deeply concerned by the Secretary of State’s response to my question at the APPG yesterday, when I asked him to outline the specific actions he was taking in that regard. He said that he would be happy to engage with customers as and when they approached him. That is simply not good enough. The Secretary of State should be on the phone. He should be reaching out to the chief executive officers of Honda, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover and others, making it clear that production of the world class steel that they have come to expect and to rely on will continue, come hell or high water.

This House and every steelworker in the country now looks to the Secretary of State to take action. He should set out precisely, and in specific detail, the representations that he intends to make in the coming days and weeks to the companies that comprise the customer base, which is the lifeblood of the British steel industry.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the companies in the supply chain and the customers, and he is absolutely right to do so. What I have said to him and to others is that we are engaging with many of those organisations—I know that the Secretary of State for Wales is, too—but what he must understand is that much of this is commercially sensitive. Many of those suppliers would not like us to discuss who we are talking to and what their concerns are. I hope that he understands that it would be quite improper for us to divulge that information.

Stephen Kinnock: I fear that the Secretary of State has misunderstood me. I am simply saying that it is very important to be on the telephone to the customer base. [Interruption.] We on the Opposition Benches and the steelworkers of this country would like a little bit more detail. [Interruption.] Ministers must forgive us for being sceptical about what they are doing or for thinking that there may be a lack of action.

The Secretary of State talked about co-investment yesterday. Although I welcome the fact that he has belatedly converted to the fact that the Government and industry can work in partnership, I am not entirely sure what co-investment means in his terms. I agree with him that nationalisation is not a long-term solution, but what customers need to know is that, come what may, they will still be able to purchase strip products from the Tata sites. Such security can be offered only if the Government commit to keep all options on the table. Can the Secretary of State make such an assurance to the House?

The men and women working in steel and connected industries across this country are among the most highly skilled and effective people in Britain. The Port Talbot workers are already turning the business around, with improved productivity leading to tangible improvements in business and financial performance. Their skill and dedication is matched by that of Roy Rickhuss, the general secretary of Community, who was even praised by the Secretary of State yesterday.

The surprise announcement that we really needed yesterday was not that of a Conservative praising a trade union leader, but that of the Government announcing an end to their laissez-faire attitude. What we needed from the Government was a list of all the discussions that they have had with the customer base, but what we got was yet more prevarication and procrastination. What we needed from the Government was the announcement that all options were on the table, but what we got was ambiguity. What we needed from the Government was the announcement that they would put down their pom-poms and give up their role as China’s chief cheerleader in Europe; that they would end their championing of market economy status for China; and that they would end their campaign against trade defence reform, but what we got was more of the same.
Yesterday, the Secretary of State only confirmed something that we already knew—that the Government’s approach has been characterised by a dangerous combination of indifference, incompetence and a rolling out of the red carpet for Beijing.

Andy McDonald: Was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was to hear that, when the Chancellor went to China, he invited it to take part in the HS2 project and to bid for the steel? That would mean having Chinese steel in one of our major infrastructure projects.

Stephen Kinnock: I was not surprised. Let me remind the House that 80% of the Chinese steel sector is state owned. On what planet can that be considered a market economy? I leave that to the House to decide.

The Secretary of State’s claims that he has been working on these things for months simply do not stack up. Yesterday, both in this House and at the APPG meeting, he claimed to have been aware of Tata’s decision to sell before it was publicly announced. If that was the case and if he really knew what was coming, why was he caught so unaware? If he really was in the know as he claims to have been, why did he have to rush back to the UK in a mad panic?

The Secretary of State also boasted yesterday that it was his actions and his actions alone that prevented Tata from closing rather than selling Port Talbot and the rest of its strip products division. I must admit that my jaw hit the floor when I heard that claim. I was out in Mumbai. I was there for the board meeting with Roy Rickhuss and Community. The Secretary of State was not. Tata has expressed deep disappointment and frustration with the lack of support that it has received from this Government. We have seen delayed action on energy compensation, with many companies still waiting to receive their money, and weasel words on procurement from a Government who got the steel for the latest set of Ministry of Defence frigates from Sweden. Above all, Tata saw a Government who refused to support the steel sector in tackling Chinese dumping by opposing trade defence reforms, while championing market economy status for China. Therefore, this supposedly pro-business Government’s influence on Tata is very limited. What really made the difference was Community’s high profile “Save our Steel” campaign, and the fact that Labour MPs have raised the issue of steel on more than 200 separate occasions since the general election.

The clock is ticking. Tata has said that it will give the sale “all due time”. Yesterday’s news about Scunthorpe and £58 million on the airport in Cardiff. Does he think that the £60 million allocated to Tata in Port Talbot is sufficient?

We have to accept that many steel companies in the UK have failed to do that. The OECD goes on to say:

“The role of governments should be to allow market mechanisms to work properly and avoid measures that artificially support steelmaking capacity.”

The OECD understands the ways in which developed and developing economies can prosper, and it is important that the Government bear those words in mind. It is also important—and I should like to hear from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise on this in her closing speech—that while we prepare for the best we also prepare for the worst. I should like to know what the Government are doing to prepare support for Port Talbot if all their best efforts to save the steelworks do not come to fruition. May I make one point from my memory of the coal-mining communities in the 1980s? The Government can never give enough support to communities that rely on a single industry.

Caroline Flint: Mrs Thatcher did not have an industrial strategy.

Richard Fuller: No, this is a lesson that we all need to learn. [Interruption] If the right hon. Lady stops chuntering, I can make a point with which she might agree. Lessons have been learned from the 1980s, and in
communities with a significant concentration of industries. The Government always have to do more than they think they have to do.

Duties have been mentioned a number of times, so let us clear up the lesser duty rule. The point, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, is whether the duty is effective. We follow the lesser duty rule, and in the three instances that he mentioned, import penetration has all but disappeared. Giving up the lesser duty rule is not about stopping more steel coming in, but about raising prices on those products. If a 14% tariff is increased to 50% when imports are eliminated that will result in inflationary pressure from the steel industry to other markets, and might be regarded as supporting subsidies from one part of the steel industry to another. It is not right to give up the lesser duty rule, which is the underpinning of the World Trade Organisation, and to take the US approach of zeroing in on tariffs.

On the 267% tariff that America imposed on Chinese cold rolled flat, it was part of the same US decision that imposed a 31% tariff on Tata steel. Fit for tat on trade tariffs does not work.

David Mowat: Does my hon. Friend have a view about why Chinese dumping affects the UK industry much more than the German and Dutch industries? Indeed, Tata is trying to consolidate in Holland. Why have we been affected differently?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend speaks very intelligently. Private companies make decisions in different markets across the European Union. I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), although we agree on Brexit, as I am not sure that the EU is pertinent to the decision that will affect the steel industry. The Government have taken effective action on procurement and power. Having served on a Bill Committee on the privatisation of Royal Mail, I think that a case can be made for the Government to take action on the pension requirements for members of the British steel industry, which was a nationalised industry. There is plenty of scope, for people like me who believe in the free market, to argue that the Government can take action on that basis.

The Opposition say that they believe in nationalisation. The hon. Member for Aberavon said that he believes in nationalisation, but that it is “not a long-term solution”. Opposition Members do not know when the crisis in the global steel industry is going to come. The global capacity glut is over 30%. I am afraid that if we nationalised, we could not determine when we could return the industry to the private market. If people nationalise, they do so for as long as it takes, and I believe, although I understand why my right hon. Friend will not do so, that the Government should rule out nationalisation, which is a step too far for the British economy in supporting the steel industry.

Finally, may I put the issue of the steel industry in context? During the time that most of us will spend in the House—I am looking at older Members—we will live though a global over-supply of capacity. That will be true not just of steel but of other sectors of our economy. We need to understand and abide by the rules that have created a free trade system that has been one of the biggest supports in improving living standards around the world. Supporting WTO rules on the lesser duty tariff is important, as is avoiding a tit for tat war on tariffs. Supporting communities with a significant industry that is affected and making sure that the Government do more than they think they need to do to support those communities are part of making sure that our economy supports them. I commend the Government on their actions, and I will continue to support them critically.

2.8 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my colleague on the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills. I do not agree with much of what he said, but the rigour of his analysis, both in his speech and in his work on the Committee, makes the Committee much sharper in what it does, so I commend him for that.

I welcome the emergency debate, because steel industry is facing a real emergency. It has faced it for some time. The Committee found, going back 40 years, that successive Governments failed to value manufacturing and domestic steelmaking capability as the foundations of an innovative economy. Other countries—and this is in reference to an intervention from the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—value their domestic steel industry more than we do, which makes them more resilient to the perfect storm of over-production and low steel prices affecting global steel markets.

I want to put it on the record that the challenges facing all steel manufacturers around the world are vast. China produces more steel than all other steel manufacturing nations put together. In two years China has produced more steel than we, the inventors of modern steelmaking, have produced since the start of the industrial revolution, so even if the Government were doing all they could, those challenges would remain vast.

The Government could do more, because Britain does not face a level playing field in respect of steel production. One contributing factor is the high pound. I know that the Government will not do anything to affect that, but they can intervene directly on uncompetitive energy costs and business rates, which put British-based steel manufacturers at a disadvantage.

In December we on the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee published our report on the Government response to the steel crisis. That was prompted by big turbulence, particularly the closure of SSI in Redcar in early October. It revealed the shocking absence of an effective early-warning system in Whitehall designed to detect and address mounting problems in the industry. Industry had been crying out for some time, with five asks concerning procurement, business rates and energy costs, but the Government had been deaf to such pleas. Had they been alert, they would not have had to resort to crisis management and preside over the tragic hard closure of an integrated steel facility, the second most efficient blast furnace anywhere in Europe, and the loss forever to the steel industry of jobs and skills.

The Select Committee’s report found that the Government recognised the vital importance of the steel industry, but the increased activity had not yet translated into a measurable impact on those in the industry and the communities that they sustain. Five months on from the closure of SSI, with other losses...
such as Caparo, and with the decision last month by Tata to sell its UK steel operations, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that lessons have not been learned and that increased activity has not resulted in positive outcomes.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend talks about the absence of an early-warning system. In his capacity as Chair of the BIS Committee, does he have any concerns that there is insufficient capacity in the Department to respond to challenges as they emerge on world markets?

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should be looking out for the British economy, making sure that it is the Department for future economic growth. It needs the civil service capacity to do that, and the proposal for it to lose 30% to 40% of its headcount will have enormous consequences for those early-warning systems and for the expertise and knowledge of the steel industry and other key sectors that are needed to ensure that Britain can thrive.

Today and yesterday in his statement, the Secretary of State stated that he was aware that Tata was planning to hard close its steel operations in Port Talbot and elsewhere, but that he prevented that from happening. He was fully aware of the enormity of the crisis, yet he still flew to Australia rather than Mumbai. The evidence surely suggests that he was left blindsided by Tata’s decision, which again demonstrates that no effective early-warning systems were in place. The Secretary of State should have gone out with Roy Rickhuss and with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) to the Tata board meeting to bat for British steelmaking. The fact that he subsequently went to Mumbai, days after that key board meeting, shows that he knew he had made an earlier error.

The contrast must be made with the events of 2012, when Vince Cable as Business Secretary went to New York to persuade General Motors to make a long-term commitment to the UK, despite overcapacity and loss making in car-manufacturing operations in Europe. As a result of close partnership between the Government of the day, trade unions and local management, GM closed a plant in Germany and committed to build the new Vauxhall Astra at its Ellesmere Port facility. Given the great industrial relations in steel, fantastic trade union representatives at the Corby site. We share that similarity, and I share much of the sentiment that he expressed.

The present situation is of great concern to 600 families in Corby. As the local Member of Parliament, I think about them all the time in the work that I am doing on a cross-party basis in our area to try to support them and the steel industry in general. Margot Parker, the UKIP representative, and I are working closely together to campaign on the issue. That is what local people and those who work at the steel summit, but we have no tangible evidence in the form of new contracts flowing to British plants and mills. Not a single pound of value has been seen. I asked the Secretary of State yesterday after his statement how greater and urgent collaboration was taking place between the Government, the Steel Council and the strategic sector councils such as the Automotive Council, the Aerospace Growth Partnership and the Offshore Wind Industry Council. Will the Minister provide further clarity about that?

Steel plays a major part in the infrastructure of the country. On 23 March, six days before the Mumbai meeting, the Government published the national infrastructure delivery plan. It contains one reference to steel. Will the Government commit to talking to the Cabinet Office to make sure that more can be done? This is incredibly important for my constituency in respect of the steel pipe mills and for the future of British manufacturing. It is important that we move from warm words to tangible action to safeguard British steel.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches will now apply.

2.15 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), whose constituency has a downstream Tata production site. We share that similarity, and I share much of the sentiment that he expressed.

The present situation is of great concern to 600 families in Corby. As the local Member of Parliament, I think about them all the time in the work that I am doing on a cross-party basis in our area to try to support them and the steel industry in general. Margot Parker, the UKIP MEP, Tom Beattie, the Labour leader of the council, and I are working closely together to campaign on the issue. That is what local people and those who work at the local plant expect us to do. I was very pleased that the Minister was able to come and join us in those efforts last week.

I am also pleased to be working with Dougie Fairbairn and the Community union representatives at the Corby plant. That relationship is very important. Their feedback helps me to participate in debates such as this, ask questions and put their concerns to Ministers. That needs to be replicated nationally. There is far too much knockabout. I want to see us all getting round the table, working with the unions, Ministers, Back-Bench MPs and employees to make sure that we find solutions to these pressing problems.

The visit last week was useful not just to meet employees, but to get a briefing on where things stand in relation to the Corby plant. A clear message came across that both investment and time are needed. We should bear that in mind as we move forward. That leads me to the challenges that the industry so clearly faces.

The first one is so evidently the overarching challenge of dumping. The unfair, uncompetitive practices that we are seeing are unacceptable. We have heard a lot about Chinese dumping, but the particular concern in Corby is Russian dumping. We have all acknowledged
that we have a brilliant steel industry. The product produced in this country is world-leading, but it currently cannot compete because the playing field is not level.

That frames the whole of the ensuing debate.

The Chinese objective is clear. It is to dominate the world market and put other suppliers out of business so that the Chinese can raise the price and reel in the profits. For some industries, cheap steel at present might be an attractive prospect, but the longer-term consequences will be much more serious. Industry in this country and around the world needs to recognise that. We need to respond with strong tariffs and emulate some of the actions that President Obama, for example, is taking, although I do not agree with him on very much.

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling point on anti-dumping duties. Does he agree that the issue is not just how high the anti-dumping duties are set? The Government have got the lesser duty rule completely wrong. It is not fit for purpose to deal with the scale of dumped steel from China. Also important is the speed with which decisions are taken. In vetting those decisions, the Government are blocking a more accelerated timetable for the imposition of anti-dumping duties.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. We ought to take another look at the lesser duty rule. It makes sense to refresh our thinking on these matters all the time. However, speed is important. One of the frustrations that I was going to speak about later is the time it took in the European Commission last year to approve the energy compensation package. Those delays were unacceptable. It took far too long. We need quicker action.

Mr Bone: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know was at the Corby steelworks three times last week. Does he agree with the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) who criticised the European Union for being slow and ineffective in dealing with the steel industry?

Tom Pursglove: The former Deputy Prime Minister probably knows better than most how inefficient the European Union is.

Mr Clegg rose—

Tom Pursglove: I am not going to give way, because I am very conscious of the time.

As well as getting the tariffs right—I think we should have another look at them—we should consider the market economy status argument that is being made, which is very important. I happen to take the view that if the Chinese are not going to play by the rules, they should simply not be allowed to have market economy status. I do not agree with the Government; I do not like the lesser duty rule. It makes no sense whatever. I advocated a business rates holiday for the Tata sites, and I think that is exactly what we should do.

Mr Clegg: Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House what is actually happening with regard to the Tata sites?

Tom Pursglove: I am not going to give way.

On energy costs, we have heard a lot in recent years about climate change. We need to be thinking constantly about the consequences of the policies we introduce and the agreements we sign up to. The Government must not act with a silo mentality in relation to these matters; they must be looking constantly at the implications of changes in energy policy. We must always bear that in mind. I welcome the energy compensation package to which I alluded a little while ago, but it did take months and months to approve. Yesterday the Secretary of State mentioned the package of measures that the Government are seeking to introduce in relation to exempting, and we heard about potential delays in that. I would be very interested to hear in his final remarks today exactly where we are with the exemption package, because I think it is an important step forward.

I happen to take the view that we ought to get much tougher on procurement. We have seen some really positive steps, but it is simply unacceptable for any public bodies in this country not to be using British steel at this time. We are seeing big procurement projects and fracking is coming on stream, so we ought to be exploring all the possibilities and ensuring that our procurement policy reflects exactly that. The integrity of the order book is very important, but so too is the integrity of supply chains. We need suppliers to keep on supplying, as well as buyers to keep on buying.

On business rates, at a time when we are trying to find somebody to buy the Corby site and the others that Tata owns in this country, it makes little sense that we are asking investors to step up to the mark and consider buying plant or the portfolio but then penalising them the moment that investment is made. It makes no sense whatsoever. I advocated a business rates holiday for the industry before the Budget, and I would like Ministers to have another look at that, because this is about trying to show signs of confidence that the Government are backing the industry and that we are all coming together to do just that. It is a bizarre anomaly.

In relation to trying to find a buyer for the Tata sites, I take the view that all options must be on the table. We should not rule anything out. I know that people will say, “But you are a free market Conservative,” and I am, but the fact is that our steel industry is not competing on a level playing field at the moment, and that requires action that does not necessarily go with the normal grain. We should therefore not rule anything out. If a short period of public ownership is required in order to find a buyer for the sites, I think that is exactly what we should do.

Angela Smith: Co-investment.

Tom Pursglove: That is absolutely right. I want to hear a little more to be able to ascertain exactly what Ministers are thinking about that. In trying to find a buyer, we must not let state aid rules get in the way. If they get in the way, we should simply ignore them and do what is right by our steel industry. That is the message that my constituents expect me to convey as their local Member of Parliament.
and business rates. I will not talk about co-investment, because many comments have been made about that already, too.

Instead, I want to focus on confidence in the future of the steel industry. We risk seeing the industry undermined by people posing as experts in the field, such as commentators in the print media, and giving the impression that the industry’s day is done. It is not done; it has a great future. One example is the TaxPayers Alliance—let me make it clear that this is not an ideological attack—which stated last week:

“Unlike German plants which produce specialised products used in the car industry, UK plants have tended to produce basic products using out of date technology.”

I just want to put it on the record that every Formula 1 car made in this country, apart from Ferrari, has a bit of Stocksbridge steel in it, as does every aircraft in the sky. It is Stocksbridge steel that lands the planes safely, because it is used in the landing gear. It is Stocksbridge steel that makes up part of the Rolls-Royce engine that keeps the aircraft in the sky. We in Stocksbridge are incredibly proud of what we do, and the workforce are passionate about the industry’s future and they intend to have a long-term future, but they need the Government’s support.

I want to illustrate the other things that the plant in my constituency is doing. We have just secured £50 million of investment so that we can make the steel and remelt it to make even purer steel, at the VIM, or vacuum induction melting, plant, which the Minister knows about, so that we can go even further up the value chain, instead of just aerospace steel.

Just to correct the record, let me say that Stocksbridge is not a downstream operation. Tata Speciality Steels makes its own steel, remelts it and makes some of the best steel in the world. We have four projects at Stocksbridge, one of which involves making powdered steel, which is worth £30,000 to £40,000 per tonne. If we get the investment for that, with the atomizer plant that will go on the side of the VIM plant, our future will be spectacular. We must secure that future.

By the way, I make that point in relation to all the Tata plants at risk. People say, “Let’s go niche. Let’s specialise.” Actually, Stocksbridge is very specialised, but the steel made at Port Talbot is also specialised and very high quality. It is a different type of steel and it is made according to a different process—it uses blast furnaces, rather than electric arc furnaces—but it still makes fantastic, good quality steel. We make some of the best steel in the world.

In conclusion, too many commentators are focusing on steel as an industry of the past, but it is an industry of the future. I will finish by looking at the reports recently published by the Government’s chief scientific advisor, Mark Walport. He made it clear that manufacturing will be transformed over the next 30 years or so. The future of our manufacturing industry is focused on adaptability, in terms of the rapidly changing intellectual and physical infrastructure that we need. The steel industry is very well placed to do that. Tata has been completely focused on doing that; it just needs the support to get there—or rather, the new owner will need that support.

Mark Walport also made it clear that we need shorter and more integrated supply chains, because of issues relating to quality and safety standards. Our steel industry delivers that. Aerospace companies such as Airbus and Boeing know that they need those integrated, short supply chains, and they get nervous if the supply chains are disrupted. That is why we need to maintain confidence in the industry. I call on the Government to play their part by doing whatever they can to save our steel.
Instead of deciding to get rid of the carbon taxes and energy taxes that helped to create the problem in the first place—taxes supported by Governments and MPs of all parties—the Government have brought forward a compensation package. The package is all right as far as it goes, although it had to go through a great big bureaucratic steeplechase in the European Union, which Members on both sides also support, and which I certainly do not. However, having got there in the end, and with the first cheques going out as we speak, what have we actually done? We levied a huge tax on an industry, and now we will give some of that money back, because the tax is having exactly the impact we thought it would, which is to punish the industry. I put it to the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) that it would surely be much more sensible to scrap the carbon taxes in the first place. There is not much point having a tax if one has to compensate people for its effect.

**Mr Bone:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Will he explain how our industry is supposed to compete with the industries in continental Europe when we pay twice the energy price they do?

**David T. C. Davies:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. However, if Members on both sides truly believe that carbon dioxide is a pollutant and is causing runaway global warming, they should stand up, take a bow and explain to steelworkers that those workers losing their jobs is a price worth paying to stop the minute increases we have seen in temperatures—although, in fact, we have not seen any increase in about 17 years. The whole thing is absolute nonsense.

We should say that of course we want heavy manufacturing industries in this country. It is not just steel that is threatened; this is also not just about Tata. The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise will be aware that one other steel manufacturer in south Wales has said that it may face severe economic problems unless something is done about high energy prices. Sanjeev Gupta, a constituent who is head of Liberty House, has said that we need to scrap the carbon floor price. As I said, this is not just about steel; it is about glass, chemicals, cement and all sorts of other heavy manufacturing industries. If hon. Members truly believe that these industries are polluting the atmosphere and causing a great increase in temperature, although we have not actually seen any evidence of that for 17 years, they are doing exactly the right thing. However, I happen to think that all of them and this Government, are doing the wrong thing.

It is high time we stopped trying to tax our manufacturing industries, stopped taxing companies that could be profitable, and stopped handing the money to expensive wind farms that generate electricity at two or three times market rates, particularly when the wind farm companies involved are not even willing to buy steel from this country, and import it all instead. In the Committee, the Minister described the policy as barmy, and she was right, although she was probably being far too polite.

I have no problem at all with CO₂ being emitted. I want a viable heavy manufacturing industry in this country, and I want to see lots of jobs and low taxation. I am perfectly relaxed about CO₂ emissions.

2.35 pm

**Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): This is not just about the obvious news stories about Port Talbot or the strip industry; it involves all Tata sites, including Aldwarke, Thrybergh, Stocksbridge, Shotton, Llanwern, Orb, Corby and Hartlepool; this is a UK steel crisis.

I reiterate that Tata has to behave like a responsible seller, and we need to remind it of its antics in 2010, when Kirby Adams, the then chief executive of Tata in Europe, tried to use skullduggery to shut Redcar. We solved that problem, but it took more than two years—two years in which there was not one hard redundancy. We need to remind Tata of its previous behaviour and not see it happen again.

British steel is not a basket case, a failed industry or a sunset industry; it is a very successful industry. We had evidence of that recently, when Liberty Steel bought Dalzell and Clydebridge—integral parts of any programme for Trident renewal. Teesside Beam Mill, Skinningrove, Scunthorpe, York, Blaydon and, indeed, Hayange in France, which is part of the long products division sold off to Greybull, are another success story of assets that investors want to buy into. They also demonstrate the European aspect of the previous Corus-British Steel envelope, and we still have sites in Umsiden and Hayange.

British steel has always relied for its totemic name on its quality and its research and development. Places such as the Materials Processing Institute in Teesside at the old labs at Grangetown, as well as the research and development capacity in Rotherham and Sheffield, when linked with blast furnaces and electric arc furnaces, gives us the ability to control the destiny of metallurgy in our nation. That means we can innovate and create new products. That must be remembered.

I am interested in the notion of co-investment, whether that is in cash terms, or whether it is about an equity stake, a loan, R and D or, more importantly, Government policy. If we are to have a real discussion in this place, we have to look at the different options for co-investment. That is not about the individual commercial parties that may be interested in purchasing, but about putting ideas on the table so that we can actually plan an industrial strategy, because we have not done that in the last five years.

Let us take the issue of Chinese dumping. This is a new phenomenon; it has been going on for four and a half years. Before that, it was not happening. The circumstances have changed, and that is why the Government have to change the way they behave on the lesser duty rule and other legislation. There are no precedents, and that is why we cannot stick to rigid dogma, or even analytical argument around World Trade Organisation rules. On co-investment, I have to question whether we are properly looking at issues such as shale gas, and whether parties are being honest about the policy on that, because we are talking about gas-intensive industries.

On carbon capture and storage, the Government have to come clean. They have pulled the rug from under energy-intensive industries on carbon capture and storage. How will they maintain energy-intensive industries—whether it is chemical processing, shale, steel, light manufacturing, glass, cement or bricks—without a proper strategy on carbon? Taxes can be implemented
under the EU emissions trading scheme or unilaterally, by bringing in the carbon price floor. They did that in the Budget some years ago, and they promised to give compensation. However, they did not calculate that if they wanted to compensate people for their own unilateral British tax, they could do so only via the European Union. They had not done the requisite work; they looked at the margins that a Treasury civil servant brought forward and just applied a rule, and they are now reaping the consequences of that.

Ultimately, Port Talbot, the strip and every single other site need time. In 2010, Redcar was saved over two years; SSI had six weeks and fell. We have to give British Tata sites time so that they can be saved. We need proper definitions of co-investment for the community to discuss.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman is talking a lot of sense. On the issue of time and co-investment, the Government could provide a bridging loan that extends beyond the period for which Tata is prepared to subsidise the steelworks, until a future buyer is found. Is that the sort of co-investment that the hon. Gentleman has in mind?

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for giving me some more time. I really appreciate his comment.

Continued production is another pillar. If we are to save these sites, production has to be continuous or skills will be lost. In Redcar in 2010, the then regional development agency, One North East, along with Government agencies in Whitehall, provided a £60 million package. That came from RDA and central Government budgets. It retained people in the area on training courses while we—I was a union officer at the time—negotiated with other parties, such as Marcegalgia, Dongkuk and SSI, to get that site bought. It is vital to look at continuous production, time and other elements of co-investment, not just the cash element.

2.41 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this extremely important debate. I thank the Secretary of State and his team for keeping the House informed—in particular for keeping in continuous contact with me and other Members. I thank the Government for the extremely constructive and close way in which they have worked thus far with the unions and other parties.

I congratulate the Community union, whose evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee was very impressive indeed. Representatives were here yesterday. I am pleased that the Government have kept in contact and ensured that everybody has been kept informed at every stage, because this is about livelihoods. As someone who grew up and was schooled with many who went on to the local steel industry, I recognise how important the industry, the supply chain, the steel stockholders and the maintenance companies that look after the Port Talbot steelworks are to families in my constituency of Gower.

The Government’s interesting announcement yesterday about co-investing with a buyer highlights their commitment to the people who work at Port Talbot. That will help to ensure the survival of the steelworks, but it also demonstrates the need to work on a vast number of issues, many of which have been mentioned today and during the past week, to ensure a viable long-term future for the industry.

It is crucial that parties work with each other in this Chamber and go beyond party politics to ensure the survival of steelmaking at Port Talbot. I want briefly to discuss one of the areas that we need to consider as part of our long-term strategy: the use of British steel in infrastructure projects. I know that there are rules and guidelines, but we must think strategically about our use of steel.

The Government’s increased investment in infrastructure means that British steel has had more opportunities to be used, as a result of which our workers, their families and our communities have been supported. For example, 98% of the steel that National Rail has used has been British, while 95% of that used by Crossrail has been British. Indeed, HS2 and Crossrail 2 will provide further huge opportunities for our steel industry. As we have heard, something like 94% of the steel used in manufacturing aircraft procured by the Government has been British and, of course, the Great Western Railway electrification to Swansea will provide a further opportunity to use steel.

We need to ensure that our infrastructure strategy and investment tie in very closely with the use of British steel. I was extremely pleased when the Government and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set up the National Infrastructure Commission, headed by Lord Adonis, to give this country the infrastructure to support future economic growth. Will the commission examine how projects could make use of British materials such as steel and support vital industries? Infrastructure projects support local families, local businesses and local communities.

From the coffee shop to the hairdresser and the baker, businesses across south Wales, particularly in the Swansea bay region, are deeply concerned about their future. We need to look at a wide-ranging and long-term strategy to make the industry viable for south Wales. A joint strategy that supports economic growth in the region could consider projects such as the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, which is the type of infrastructure project that would not only add jobs, but continue to support those workers and families just over the bay in Port Talbot.

We must work together. Political grandstanding will not save jobs, provide a long-term viable future for steel production in Port Talbot or support businesses in the supply chain across south Wales. The history of steel in our communities runs deeper than political point-scoring, which causes confusion. Only last week, I spoke to a lady constituent who is a Tata employee, as is her husband, and both of them were appalled and disappointed by the political rhetoric from certain quarters.

We have a shared history and experience of steel in south Wales. Our communities, our social fabric and our lives have all been built or touched by the steel industry. Only by working as one can we provide the future we all want for steel in Port Talbot. Politicians who grandstand in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with steelworkers will not help. We need action, and that is what the Government are clearly providing, constructively and conscientiously. I applaud their actions
to date and look forward to a positive outcome for the people of Port Talbot and the many employees who reside in my constituency of Gower.

2.46 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Tata’s announcement that it would no longer support its operation at Port Talbot came as no surprise to Labour Members. We had been warning the Government for months that that was coming down the line, but they chose to do nothing. The Secretary of State was on the other side of the world when the announcement came, and he now clings to the claim that he somehow saved the plant while he was in Australia. As workers at Redcar found out, this Government do too little, too late, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) has said, they offer warm words but no action.

This crisis now affects the whole of the UK steel industry, not only Port Talbot. The media have a habit of describing the whole UK steel industry as loss-making, but that is far from the truth for a lot of those plants that add value. Shotton steelworks galvanises and colour-coats steel. It is a profitable business that employs 800 people—quality jobs that are vital to the economy of Deeside. Profitable it may be, but that does not ensure its long-term survival. Shotton relies on steel from the Port Talbot operation. If Port Talbot closes sooner rather than later, it would not be long before Shotton would have to cease its operation due to lack of supply.

The idea that someone can just pick up the phone and buy in from China or anywhere else lots of cheap steel of the quality and quantity needed for a plant such as Shotton is far from reality. To ensure the future of Shotton—I made this point to the Secretary of State yesterday—we need a lot of time. That is a common theme of what colleagues on both sides of the House are saying.

Time is needed not only to find a buyer for the whole of the UK business that will invest and commit to the future, but to allow the downstream businesses to find an alternative steel supplier should the worst happen. I do not want to see that, but the Government have to plan for all scenarios. As many other colleagues have said, we have to reassure the customer base as well. If we do not do that, there will be no businesses to sell to, because the customers will start to leave and walk away. They need assurances.

Shotton, probably more than anywhere else, knows about the impact of job losses in industry. In 1980, despite the gallant efforts of my predecessor, now Lord Jones, and the trade unions, Shotton saw its steelmaking cease and more than 6,500 people lose their jobs. At the time, it was the largest number of job losses at a single plant on a single day anywhere in the history of western Europe. Although the area has recovered and new employers have moved in and grown, the scars of the events of 1980 remain.

On Deeside, nearly everybody has a family member or a friend who worked in the industry. Some people never worked again. The lesson is that such large-scale job losses affect not only the individuals who once worked the industry, but their families and the whole area. Such job losses destroy whole communities, which take many years to recover. The Government have an opportunity to save the industry and assure its long-term future, but they need to act—and they need to act now.

2.50 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): We have two important debates this afternoon: this one on steel, and the debate later on the contaminated blood scandal. As a steel group member, I am incredibly pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) has been able to secure the debate. I gently reassure anyone who has come to lobby on the contaminated blood scandal that hon. Members will be here to speak for them in that debate later. It will be a very long day for those who have travelled from far and wide to get here. Both of the debates remind me of “Groundhog Day”, because we have to come back time and again to rehearse the same arguments and press for action.

Understandably, much of the focus has been on Port Talbot, and I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for his efforts with the steel unions. As has been said, however, this is a UK steel crisis. Steelmaking may have ceased in 2001 in Llanwern, but slab has been imported by rail from our sister plant in Port Talbot ever since. Our steelworkers are proud to roll UK steel, and they want to continue to do so. They are looking to the Government to ensure that happens.

At Llanwern, we have taken a cumulative hit over the last few years. Hundreds of jobs have been lost, to the point where we have 700 left. It has been painful. Many of the Llanwern steel workers have transferred to Port Talbot, and they now face uncertainty there. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) has said eloquently, steel could have a great future. At Llanwern, we have the Zodiac line, which is Tata Steel’s world-class coil galvanising line. The Zodiac line is doing well. Orb Electrical Steels, which produces a type of high-tech electrical steel, is in profit following a period of restructuring a few years ago. As is often said in debates such as this, steel is cyclical, and Orb demonstrates that. The order books are healthy.

We have had much in the way of warm words, with phrases such as “do all we can to help”—that has been said again today—but what do they mean in practical terms? The asks from the unions have been well rehearsed today, and I would like to add to them. The unions want fast action to protect the order books to ensure the businesses are saleable. It is crucial to the future of Llanwern and Orb that they are not undermined by seepage of business elsewhere before any sale or transferring of work. The unions want time for the sale, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) has said. It is important to know the timescale. Long Products took nine months, and Tata appears to be saying four months. As the shadow Business Secretary has said, we need time for an appropriate consideration of offers. What is the news on the Secretary of State with Tata to ensure that it is a responsible seller?

I have many steelworkers in my constituency but also a large number of steel pensioners. Can the Government give those pensioners and future steel pensioners some reassurance about their pension fund, and can the Secretary of State outline the actions that the Government are taking?

The asks from the steel industry in recent times have been for action on Chinese dumping, on which the Government have failed. They have also failed to act on
the lesser duty rule. It is ironic that while our Government have been slow to act on tariffs to protect our industry, the Chinese Government have just imposed 46% tariffs on electrical steel. Although Orb no longer exports to China, companies in other countries do. They will be looking for alternative customers in other countries, and that could mean issues down the line for our electrical steel industry sales.

We have asked for action on energy prices. That took two years to deliver, and is only just coming through now. That is too slow. We need real action on procurement, not simply the souped-up advice note that came out last week. Will the Minister tell us today what specific projects he has in mind? The Welsh Government have done all they can to help with the levers that they have had at their disposal. That has included setting up the steel taskforce to work on practical ways to help. I know from my union reps who came here yesterday how much that relationship is valued.

References were made yesterday to grandstanding, and they have been repeated today. I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House that steel group members have raised issues to do with steel time and time again in the Chamber. It is not grandstanding; it is personal. It is personal because our constituents are loyal, resourceful, highly skilled and incredibly hard-working. We understand what they are going through in tough times. These are the people for whom we are working, and ensuring that they have what they need.

The issue is also personal because I look around the Chamber and see my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who worked at Llanwern, as did his dad; I see my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), whose dad also worked there. I see my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who worked as an industrial chemist in Llanwern. My parents met in the steel industry at Ebbw Vale. There are many others. We cannot let our steelworkers down, and I make no apology for speaking up for them.

2.55 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank all those who managed to get your permission to hold this debate, Mr Speaker.

I was a member of the Scottish steel taskforce, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). The Scottish steel taskforce was a partnership of Tata Steel, local authorities, trade unions, political parties, the UK Government and Scottish Government agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland and Partnership Action for Continuing Employment. The taskforce was put together by the Scottish Government to help to find a buyer for the threatened Scottish plants in Dalzell and Clydebridge. The taskforce did a great job, as some Members and the Minister may well know.

The handover took place on Friday, based on a back-to-back agreement whereby the Scottish Government bought the plants from Tata and sold them on to Liberty House. It was a wonderful day. We were surrounded by all the members of the taskforce, the steelworkers and their families and friends. It was an emotional day. Steel is an iconic industry in my constituency, and it is responsible for some of the specialised steel that is used in the defence industry and in the oil and gas industry. It could not be allowed to go under, and the Scottish Government did not allow that to happen. They took a very proactive approach to the threat. They put forward legislation that introduced a one-year relief on business rates for a prospective buyer. The assessor agreed to look at the state of the steel industry when revaluation takes place next year.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency worked closely with the taskforce to make sure that any prospective buyer or anyone who was interested got the best possible advice as efficiently and quickly as possible. The Scottish Government have produced a new responsible procurement policy, which echoes and, in some instances, better that which has been produced by the UK Government. The Minister chuntered; I am sorry, but I have lost my place.

The Scottish Government are working to reduce overall energy consumption and energy cost. The Scottish Government were very pleased that the EU cleared the energy intensive package in December last year, after the UK Government were prodded into action by the UK steel summit. Skills Development Scotland developed an upskilling programme to help to retain key staff and to help them to move back into employment once a buyer was found. Those were the very people who were there on Friday. Sanjeev Gupta of Liberty Steel said that the transfer of ownership could not have happened without the efforts of the Scottish Government. He has also indicated that 150 jobs will be created to get the plants back up and running again, which gets us almost back to where we were.

The UK Government cannot rely on helping workers after the event. It is the Government’s duty to be proactive, and to be seen to be so, in securing buyers for effective plants, following the Scottish Government model. Scottish Government phoned prospective buyers, kept in touch with the customer base and, at the same time, maintained business confidentiality. They can do it, so the UK Government should be able to do it. The Scottish Government also launched a manufacturing strategy only this February, which proposes to boost the Scottish economy by investment and education in order for Scotland’s businesses to compete globally. What are the UK Government doing in that regard?

Finally, may I give the Secretary of State a piece of advice? He should speak to the Scottish Government to see how saving plants can be done using actions, not words. As the First Minister has said:

“The steps we have taken in Lanarkshire should give hope to those in other parts of the UK that with the right support and a strong Government there can be a future for steel.”

3 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): There have always been the strongest of links between the constituency of Torfaen and the steelworks at Newport. I speak today for not only the steelworkers in Torfaen, but the many more steel pensioners, including my father, whose time at Llanwern was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said: the steel industry can and should have a great future. There are so many
great things about our steel industry. It is an industry that has always involved working together—between workers, management, unions and owners. It is an industry that has some of the most skilled and committed workers to be found in any industry anywhere in the world. It is also an industry that I believe is vital to our national security: we cannot have a country that is secure unless a native steel industry is available to us.

We should not forget that, over many years of change, the steelworkers have been a constant. The industry has gone through change—it was nationalised after world war two; most of it was reprivatised in the early 1950s; it was renationalised by the Wilson Government in the 1960s; it was privatised again under the Thatcher Government—but the steelworkers have always shown their central commitment and demonstrated their skills during that time. It is unthinkable that there should be no steelmaking at Port Talbot, just as it is unthinkable that we should not look at this as a UK-wide problem.

It seems to me that the Government have to look strategically at two things. They must look at what they are doing practically to support the sale process at Port Talbot, and at what they can do to support both the aspects we are now coming to: the expressions of interest and the due diligence period that will follow. There are far wider questions, however, in relation to how the Government will be judged on their actions and what they actually do to help the steel industry.

The lesser duty rule has been mentioned a number of times in this debate. Let us be clear: as long as it is in place, the duty imposed will always be lower than the margin of the dumping. The European Commission wants to scrap the lesser duty rule. The World Trade Organisation rules do not even oblige the European Commission to apply the lesser duty rule. It is for the UK Government to make the case within the European Union for it to be scrapped, but of course the fact is that they are not doing that. The European Steel Association spokesman said:

“The fact is that the UK has been blocking this. They are not the only member state, but they are certainly the ringleader in blocking the lifting of the lesser duty rule. The ability to lift this was part of a proposal that the European commission launched in 2013”.

What has the Secretary of State done on this since then? The answer is absolutely nothing. There is also the issue of market economy status for China. I thought that Mario Longhi, the chief executive of the biggest steelmaker in America, put it best when he said, about even thinking of granting market economy status for China,

“where you have all the evidence in place that denies them that right it’s just ridiculous”.

The Secretary of State should bear that in mind.

The Secretary of State does have a choice, particularly when it comes to the lesser duty rule and market economy status for China. Where do his loyalties lie: do they lie with Beijing, or with the steelworkers of this country? Would it not be the most supreme irony if a Secretary of State who is supposedly ideologically wedded to free markets ends up granting market economy status to a country where 80% of the steel industry is owned by the state? Is that seriously what the Secretary of State is going to do? It is time he put aside his obsession with Beijing and acted for our steelworkers.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) for securing this hugely important debate.

We on Teesside are still reeling from the Government standing by and allowing steelmaking to die at the SSI plant at Redcar. People have very long memories, and it is a shame that it has taken another six months to discover the concept of co-investment, because that has come a little bit late. However, I very much welcome the securing of the long products division, and I congratulate the unions on their initiative in progressing the discussions to such a successful conclusion.

This is the most bizarre of circumstances: we are fearing the collapse of steel production in the UK, but we have the most superb industry, with a brilliantly skilled workforce and an excellent industrial relations history. It is therefore essential that we send out the message that we have a steel industry that is very much worth fighting for. We need to instil confidence in steel customers and suppliers alike that our steel operations are very much open for business. Steel has a bright future if we can get through these next few months.

On development, I am grateful to the mightily impressive Chris McDonald of the Materials Processing Institute for pointing this out:

“Two-thirds of the steels in use today were not even invented 15 years ago, and steel remains a vital ‘economic enabler’ for UK economic growth without which our successful high-value manufacturing sector simply could not exist.”

The automotive, aerospace, defence, nuclear and rail sectors all need the development of new steels in the pursuit of ever improving productivity, and our leading companies undoubtedly benefit from research partnerships with domestic steel producers. He went on:

“If the steel industry were to disappear altogether from the UK, reliance on overseas producers would not only mean the loss of thousands of jobs, but also slow the pace of development and risk the offshoring of the whole manufacturing supply chain”.

We should therefore grasp the opportunities presented by Tata Steel’s sale offering of its assets in the UK.

The debate is about more than just Port Talbot, but that is vital. There is an overwhelmingly strong case for the continuation of steelmaking at Port Talbot, with its advanced steelmaking equipment, its experienced workforce and its capability of making world-leading, high-quality steel for the most demanding applications. Labour Members are in no doubt that the plant can not only compete, but have a highly profitable future. In addition, there is a huge opportunity for new mini-mill operations based around electric arc furnaces, utilising 100% recycled raw materials and offering a step change improvement in carbon emissions.

I plead with Ministers to include all aspects of the future of UK steel in their thinking: the exploitation of, and commitment to, innovation and research and development will undoubtedly pay rich dividends. There is a research and development proposal on the table from the MPI, TWI Ltd and the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining. The proposal will leverage recent and secured future investments, which have been used to upgrade facilities, equipment and support facilities in Rotherham, Port Talbot and Cambridge, as well as on the two sites in Tees valley. I urge Ministers to look closely at that proposal. The automotive industry has
been turned round to become an enormous success, and we can do the same with the steel industry.

The timescale is crucial, but it is ridiculously tight. The kindest thing to say is that the seller is incredibly ambitious to think that such a process can be undertaken in such a short space of time. Crucially, in the final analysis, the state will indeed step in. Call it temporary nationalisation, public sector stewardship or whatever we like, but let the customers, suppliers and workers know that the UK steel industry will endure, and it will not only endure but thrive.

3.9 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): In the middle of 2014, Tata announced that it would dispose of its long products business. It has taken until this week for the conclusion of a process that involved first interest from one buyer, its pulling out and then the work that everyone—trade unions, the management team, Tata itself, Greybull Capital and suppliers, who have also had to contribute to the process—has done locally. The way forward is tough and the process is not yet complete. I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement yesterday that he would do everything possible to ensure that those matters that still need to be resolved are resolved satisfactorily, so that the sale goes ahead and there can be a future—I believe that, although different from the past, that future will be a positive one. That will be positive for all the communities throughout the long products sector, including those in Scunthorpe—the site of the largest steelworks in England, which I am proud to represent.

When the Secretary of State was first appointed I wrote to him to ask for a meeting, because I knew that the steel industry was facing a crisis. Unfortunately there were other pressures on his diary at that time. Back in September I asked the Prime Minister for a steel summit. Eyebrows were raised by Government Members then, but to the credit of the Minister and the Secretary of State, we got a steel summit in Rotherham, which helped to focus on this issue.

Let us look at the issues that we have been arguing about—I have been arguing about them for four or five years now. The Government have moved on energy costs, but that movement has been slow and laborious. They brought in a unilateral carbon floor tax, then the Government brought out and then the work that everyone—trade unions, the management team, Tata itself, Greybull Capital and suppliers, who have also had to contribute to the process—has done locally. The Secretary of State’s mood music has changed on that issue, which I welcome, but the change has been very slow. We have seen action, which should be approved. We have heard from the whole steel community—from Eurofer, for example, which represents steel communities and employers across Europe—about how important it is to tackle the lesser duty rule. That would give a signal about confidence, which is what the industry needs more than anything else—and confidence not just that we are getting warm words, but that those warm words are supported by actions. Such actions should be prompt, not laggardly. Save our steel.

3.14 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Although I thank the shadow Business Secretary for securing this emergency debate, I find myself asking how many times, exactly, we are going to have to debate the crisis facing the UK steel industry before the Government take it seriously. That crisis has not arrived recently, unannounced, or sprung up overnight. The warning signs were there. There has been a constant siren of Opposition voices forewarning the Government that action was urgently needed. The steel industry has been crying out collectively for action to be taken. The all-party parliamentary group, of which I am a member, has made countless representations to the Government, spelling out exactly what action needs to be taken.

Although the Government have jumped into action recently, they are unfortunately still not going far enough. We are yet to see meaningful action on dumping. The steadfast opposition to scrapping the lesser duty rule has meant that little can be done to stem the flow of cheap Chinese imports. The Government have not only been reticent, but have apparently been leading the charge on a European level, actively blocking action. The UK Government are guilty of negligence in their approach to the dumping of cheap steel on world markets by China. While the UK is bending over backwards to accommodate Beijing’s request for market economy status—that would make anti-dumping cases much more complicated—our industry is suffering.

What has just happened in Scotland is testament to how a proactive Government, working closely with industry, unions and the workers themselves, can protect jobs and safeguard this vital industry. It is crucial that the UK Government now follow that example, and make a similar concerted effort to save steel plants in England and Wales. They must work co-operatively
with the EU on anti-dumping measures. We need a credible strategy, not just for steel but for ceramics and all other energy-intensive and heavy industry in the UK. Make no mistake: the industry in Scotland still faces challenges, but the Scottish Government’s diligence in saving it has given a renewed confidence that steel has a bright future there.

On the Scottish National party Benches, we stand in solidarity with steelworkers in England and Wales. Despite all the warning signs, I want to see a bright future for steel right across Britain, and not just north of the border. For that to happen, we need a complete change of tack from the Business Minister. Throughout the crisis, the SNP has consistently called for a comprehensive and revised industrial strategy for heavy industry in the UK. The SNP recently launched a bold vision for a manufacturing future for Scotland, spelling out how industries such as steel are viewed as vital strategic assets in the Scottish economy. Although that might seem like a common-sense approach for any Government, it is visionary by comparison with Westminster’s strategy, or lack thereof.

Last Friday many workers, as well as many union representatives, attended the handing over of the keys from Tata Steel to new owners Liberty House at the Dalzell plant in Motherwell. The sense of relief, optimism and renewed hope for a better future was palpable. Beneath all that, however, there is a resilience—we can call it steely determination if we will. This is a centuries-old industry that has learned to adapt to many changes over the years. As Charles Darwin said, it is not the strongest of the species nor the most intelligent that will survive. Beneath all that, however, there is a resilience—we can call it steely determination if we will. This is a centuries-old industry that has learned to adapt to many changes over the years. As Charles Darwin said, it is not the strongest of the species nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change. The steel industry is up for the challenge, and the Government need to step forward.

I hope that the change for our steel industry in Scotland is a success, but I want a successful, productive future for all of our steelworkers throughout the UK. I really do hope that the Government are listening today and will leave no stone unturned—the phrase of today—to save our steel. Our highly skilled, dedicated steelworkers need a positive future—indeed, they truly deserve that.

3.18 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): First and foremost, I praise my Front-Bench colleagues for securing this debate and Mr Speaker for granting it. I also want to praise the work of the First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, who has worked constructively with the UK Government to try to find a solution. He has been head and shoulders above in speaking out, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Abertavon (Stephen Kinnock) and so many others. I am proud to have him as our First Minister in Wales.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), I want to underline the point that the steel industry in this country has a future, and that future is at the heart of our future infrastructure and defence projects. Just as she is proud of the steel produced in Stocksbridge, I am proud that steel produced at Celsa in Cardiff, in the heart of my constituency, is at the heart of Crossrail and so many other construction and infrastructure projects across the UK. We must never lose sight of that. This is not an industry of the past; it is an industry of the future—if the Government get behind it fully.

I want to touch on three issues. Regardless of the welcome announcements about Scunthorpe and, I hope, Port Talbot, we still need to address the market fundamentals that have brought us to this point in the first place. They affect the UK steel industry as a whole and will continue to affect it if we do not address them. I want to flag up some of the strategic choices and risks we face, and I want to debunk some of the myths that have, unfortunately, been propagated about the role of the EU.

First, I want to mention energy, which is at the heart of the debate. We have the highest industrial electricity prices across the EU. According to UK Steel, they are 89% higher than in other EU countries. Whatever nonsense we hear about the EU being to blame, the fact is that four of the main policies causing the higher prices for industrial energy users in the UK come from the UK Government. I welcome the steps talked about with regard to exemptions and compensation, but the fact is that those prices have come from the UK Government. The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) says we should not do anything about climate change, but that is not the issue. I have made the point repeatedly that offshoring our carbon emissions to places such as China and Turkey would be absolutely absurd. I ask the Government to continue to review every aspect of this tax regime and see what the net result is for industrial energy users in this country. Are they paying more or are they paying less? If they are not paying less, we will face this problem again and again and again. It is all very well talking about a compensation package, but when I went to Celsa in my constituency just a few days ago it still had not received the money. The Government have been far, far too slow to act.

On dumping and tariffs, we heard very powerful arguments about the lesser duty rule from my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and others. I reiterate the question I put to the Secretary of State earlier about the tariffs on rebar. We need to consider whether they are still high enough. He says they have gone down by 99%, but other factors are at play. I welcome what he says, but we need to keep them constantly under review.

I absolutely agree that we should not grant market economy status to China. That would be an absolute absurdity. On procurement, we have to see concrete steps. I was pleased to hear what the Secretary of State said about potential announcements with regard to the defence industry, but they should have happened a long time in advance. We have produced product after product without using UK steel. The Government talk about aircraft carriers, but what about the offshore patrol vessels, tankers and scout vehicles? They have not been produced using UK steel. We need to get in there and make sure that British steel is being used. I await that announcement with interest.

This is not just about the role of the Government in procurement, but construction companies. With other MPs, I have written to construction companies across the UK to ask them whether they will adhere to using UK steel in their products, and whether they will adhere to the BS 6001 standard, which uses high-quality British construction steel rebar. There is a responsibility for both Government and companies. I worry that unless we address these issues and maintain a diversity of production in our steel industry, using blast furnaces
and electric arc furnaces to produce different products, we will lose capacity in certain areas. Once that is gone, it will be lost forever. Others, such as the Chinese, will come in and whack their prices up. That will also be a risk to our national security.

The EU is not to blame. It would be absurd if we took action now to save the steel industry and then dealt it another body blow by leaving the EU. The reality is that half of our exports go to the EU. If we lost the single market, they would be gone. State aid rules apply in the World Trade Organisation as well. We would have less capacity to act on dumping, working with others, than we have at the moment. The EU, working together, has delivered 37 EU measures to tackle dumping, 16 of which relate to China. It is the UK Government who have not done the work. It is with the UK Government that I place the blame, not the EU. We can save our steel, but only if we work together to do it.

3.23 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Port Talbot is an industrial jewel in the crown of Swansea bay. Thousands of people in the community and beyond rely on it. Clearly, we are looking to the Government to support our steel industry in its time of need. The Welsh Government, under Carwyn Jones, have come forward, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has shown leadership. We want guarantees on the socialisation of pensions.

I am not here to criticise Tata. It invested £6.2 billion to buy the Port Talbot steel plant in 2007. It spent another £2 billion to cover losses and £185 million on a new blast furnace in 2013. It is a long-termist organisation. The reality, however, is that worldwide steel production has doubled because of Chinese production. As a result, world prices have halved. Tata cannot compete with the threat of China, which is 80% state owned. We need to hold on in there and do what we can to ensure a sustainable future. China is thinking strategically, whether through very low prices with HS2 and nuclear procurement, or by buying assets globally from its balance of payments surplus. We need to understand what it is trying to do and ensure that our long-term interests are sustained.

Swansea University is investing in new types of steel: multi-layered steel that generates its own electricity. It has a negative carbon footprint when it is used to clad major public buildings. We have high quality Margam coal, which is particularly good in steel production. I want guarantees from the Secretary of State. He talks about co-investment, but what co-investment are we going to have? Will the Government have an equity share in the short term? What guarantees can he give about a more level playing field on energy?

Christina Rees: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could see the current threat to the UK steel industry as an opportunity to change the way to do things, so that a structure can be established to protect the industry for many years to come? The Government could look to other sectors, such as the care sector, and to other parts of the world to learn from tripartite models of delivery involving public-private sector investment, as well as third sector involvement in the shape of a management-worker buyout.

Geraint Davies: We need to look creatively at company structure and procurement. We also need to think about the fact that we are in the process of displacing clean steel with environmental protection for dirty steel. There is a case for considering carbon tariffs on steel and other manufacturing products, because we share a common environment.

On procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon made it clear that we need to know who the Government are talking to and what reassurances are being given. We have been told that this information is commercially confidential, but what those consuming steel to build cars and so on want to know is whether, if they make an order now, in a year’s time the steel will be delivered at the price paid. We need to be able to give those guarantees to secure the future. We need to hold on in there, and with any business, is cash flow sustainability. The Government therefore need to think about financial packages, so that the cash flow of the business can be sustained on the back of future orders at known prices.

It has been mentioned that half our exports go to Europe. It would be a complete disaster for us to leave Europe, with the extra tariffs that might be imposed. It is important that we move past the referendum period, so there is security for prospective buyers in knowing that we are still in the single market without more tariffs being imposed. Our first duty is to secure the livelihoods of our communities, as well as our strategic interests. It is important that the Government do not give the impression that they have given up and simply want a buyer. They need to come forward and offer any of the benefits they would offer to a prospective buyer to Tata Steel. If there is to be pension buy-out to provide security for a buyer and for pensioners, and if there is to be co-investment, it should be available to Tata as well as others. Tata showed before that it was there for the long run, but because the Government showed that they were not, it pulled out. We want a sustainable future, and it is important that Tata is brought back around the table, alongside other prospective buyers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are running out of time, so I am afraid I have to reduce the limit to four minutes.

3.28 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Secretary of State pledged his commitment to the steel industry, which I welcome, but I would like him to spell out exactly why his Government are now willing to consider co-investment with a potential buyer for Port Talbot, when they ruled out anything like that for Redcar—at the time because they said that state-aid rules prevented their supporting SSI, and after SSI was liquidated because they refused to put any British taxpayer money into the Thai banks that owned the site. Why were the Thai banks not suitable for co-investment? It could have bought us time for a sale or enabled the mothballing of the blast furnace. I would like the Government to give us a full explanation of that decision.

In the weeks prior to closure, SSI asked the Government for a loan to enable it to restructure and keep the plant going. It was refused. I sat down with Ministers and
potential investors—a company willing to run the coke ovens and run, or at least mothball, the blast furnace while a buyer was found—who did not want a single penny of Government money, but the Minister said it could not be done. What has changed? Does she now regret not listening to the people of Teesside, the unions and the companies we presented to them in order to keep steelmaking alive on Teesside? The cost of hard closure has been far greater than that of intervention would have been. I want to say something about that cost in the time available.

First, on the local economic cost, 2,200 direct jobs were lost overnight at SSI and over 900 further jobs were lost in the immediate supply chain, from those who provided the parts and maintenance to the companies that provided the gas or loaded the slab at the ports to those who cleaned the oversalls and fed the workforce. Plus, there is no way of measuring the knock-on impact on local shops, hairdressers, builders, nurses—as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) mentioned—and childminders. We know they are all feeling the pain. Unemployment in my constituency has jumped by 16.2%. We now have the tenth-highest unemployment rate in the country. The steelworks were the foundation industry for many businesses large and small across Teesside. For 175 years, that industry powered the local economy, providing jobs and security for local people and a source of immense pride, as our steel built the cities of the world.

Secondly, I want to talk about the cost to the Exchequer and the state. It is currently understood that the Government are paying over £200,000 a week to maintain the site in its unrecoverable coma status. Recovery of the land for future use is expected to cost the state well over £1 billion. As for the British steel industry itself, we have lost Europe’s second-largest blast furnace and coke ovens, in which millions of pounds had been invested and which were in very good shape.

Andy McDonald: Does my hon. Friend agree that trying to land a bill of £1.1 billion on the Teesside communities for the remediation of the site is totally unacceptable? I know that the Minister is ignoring it, but it will be a huge issue for Teesside if it is landed with that bill.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I want a further commitment from the Government that they will maintain their support for the site as it stands, meet that cost and enable local people, businesses and representatives to decide the future of the site and how it can contribute to our local economy.

We have lost our blast furnace and coke ovens, in which millions of pounds had been invested—expense national assets belonging to the British steel industry now laid to waste. We can add to that a loss to the Exchequer of the tax intake from those 3,000 workers; the £50 million—and it is £50 million, not £80 million—paid for retraining; and the further £30 million for redundancies and other costs. We must bear it in mind that the majority of workers are still awaiting payment of their protective award, on which I would be grateful for an update from the Minister. Finally, there is the loss to Redcar and Cleveland Council, which has already suffered a £90 million loss after six years of Tory austerity, of £10 million a year in business rates from SSI alone.

Thirdly and most importantly, I want to speak about the human cost. Six hundred workers are back in work or full-time training, according to Department for Work and Pensions figures. I pay tribute to them, my taskforce colleagues and all those in the jobcentres and colleges who have worked hard to achieve that, but 600 of over 3,000 workers six months after closure still leaves us with a lot of work to do. What about the thousands of others? They are signing on, many for the first time in their lives, and many are approaching the six-month cut-off point for contribution-based jobseeker’s allowance. Those with a partner with an income of more than £114 a week will soon lose their JSA entirely.

People are moving out of homes, cars are being given up and many are reliant on hardship funds to pay the bills. One worker can no longer afford to keep his rented house to have his children stay overnight because of the bedroom tax. He is having to be rehoused in a one-bedroom place and cannot have his children to stay. The effect on family relationships has been huge. There has been a widespread loss of identity, comradeship and pride in a skilled trade. Redcar and Cleveland Mind has seen a 91% increase in mental health referrals in the last year, and is doing a fantastic job, but many of my constituents are under the radar. One has not even left the house since he lost his job last September. Families have been destroyed and lives shattered. Our town has been through a tragedy. The financial and human cost of inaction is far higher than that of intervention would have been. I say to the Government: you let us down last year, but please do not let down any other steel town in the UK.

3.34 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) for securing it when the steel industry is in crisis and it is so important to consider and discuss the issues today. I am sure that all Members are keen to take all the steps necessary to secure the steel industry in our country. Today we have heard a number of options put forward—one energy, business tariffs and various others—but I would like to talk about defence. The last Labour Government had an industrial defence strategy, and at its heart was making British industry and British jobs the first priority in all decisions by the Ministry of Defence. The Government should perhaps reflect on implementing such a policy in this time of crisis for the steel industry.

Wherever and whenever possible, British steel should be used to build equipment, weapons, vehicles and ships that our armed forces need to keep us safe. [Interruption.] I can see that some Conservative Members find this funny, but sadly the current Government abandoned the industrial defence strategy, and at its heart was making British industry and British jobs the first priority in all decisions by the Ministry of Defence. The Government are refusing to guarantee that the Navy’s imports for the majority of its steel requirements. The third new ship for the Royal Navy are being built in Glasgow with 60% of the steel bought from Sweden, 20% from other countries and only 20% from the UK. A £3.4 billion contract to build 590 Ajax armoured vehicles is also using Swedish imports for the majority of its steel requirements. The Government are refusing to guarantee that the Navy’s new Type 26 frigates will be built using British steel; the Defence Minister would say only that there would be an opportunity to bid. All that paints a picture of a Government who are willing to talk the talk, but not walk the walk.
The MOD has a £178 billion budget for defence equipment over the next 10 years, and Labour will continue to press the case that that money should be spent, where possible, to secure British jobs and the British steel industry.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Hollern: No. [Interruption.] Perhaps the Minister will listen, because to avoid a fire sale, which would be an irreversible mistake, the Government must demonstrate to all stakeholders in the industry that they are taking a proactive approach to ensure that continued take-up of operations. The Government must look to reverse the decision to scrap the defence industrial strategy, and they must make a public statement—with haste—to make it clear that they believe in supporting British steel and British jobs.

3.38 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I am pleased to participate in this important debate, and I am delighted that the Speaker granted it. As the son of a Teessider, I am a regular visitor to Teesside and to Redcar. I was there only a few weeks ago, and to see the site of that plant, now empty and derelict, with no flame after 175 years of steelmaking, is shocking. My thoughts are with the constituents of the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and the people in the surrounding Teesside constituencies. As has been said, when 3,900 jobs are lost, many more thousands of jobs and lives are affected. The Government are at least finally taking very slow action; what a shame that they did not take that action then, to try to prevent that closure.

As my parliamentary neighbour the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) has pointed out, what a contrast there is between what this Government are doing and the industrial strategy of the previous Business Secretary, the internationally respected Vince Cable, who sought to ensure that we maintained our existing industry while transitioning to new technologies. That is entirely lacking now. The current Business Secretary was so proud to say that there was now a Conservative Business Secretary, but he simply does not have an industrial strategy for the United Kingdom.

What an extraordinary situation this is. The Conservative party, while preaching free trade, is rolling out the red carpet for, and seeking to do sweetheart deals with, a communist nation whose subsidised basket case of a steel industry is producing steel that no one in the world needs or wants. It is wrecking a perfectly viable situation. The MOD has a £178 billion budget for defence equipment over the next 10 years, and Labour will continue to press the case that that money should be spent, where possible, to secure British jobs and the British steel industry.

I join others in paying tribute to the Community trade union and the leadership of Roy Rickhuss and others. I also pay tribute to Carwyn Jones, the Welsh First Minister, who has been mentioned today, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the hon. Member for Bedfor (Richard Fuller), my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), the hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies), my hon. Friends the Members for Alun and Deeside (Mark Tami) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), my hon. Friends the Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Redcar (Anna Turley), and for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland).

All that the Chancellor is doing is saying to the Chinese, “Can you make a little bit less steel, please?” That is all that he is prepared to do, because of his desperation to court China over projects such as the Hinkley power plant. Although China is closing five steel mills, it will still be producing 1.13 billion tonnes by 2020, according to figures from the Library. That is still far more than the world needs, and it will cause devastation.

Only six months ago, when we were seeing inaction from the Government, the Liberal Democrats called for Ministers to set up a Minister-led steering group to look at the whole steel industry so that a strategy could be delivered to save that great British industry. The Government ignored the call, and failed to act. What we are seeing today is not leadership but panic; the Government are doing too little, too late.

Ministers must now at least do what they can to reverse the present position. They must keep the Port Talbot plant operational while a buyer is sought, and they must be a little less arrogant. They must listen and learn some of the lessons of the past, including the lesson of what Vince Cable did when he went to talk to General Motors. They must ensure that we have a steel industry in the future to support the UK economy.

3.42 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Yet again, we have had a very good debate on the steel industry, featuring plenty of contributions from Back Benchers. I think that I counted 21 Back-Bench speeches during our short debate. We heard from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), the hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies), my hon. Friends the Members for Alun and Deeside (Mark Tami) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), my hon. Friends the Members for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Redcar (Anna Turley), and for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland).

I join others in paying tribute to the Community trade union and the leadership of Roy Rickhuss and others. I also pay tribute to Carwyn Jones, the Welsh First Minister, who has been mentioned today, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), the shadow Secretary of State for Wales, for all her efforts.

Our role as Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition is to hold the Government’s feet to the fire on this issue. Our industry has to have a future, and we must make sure that it has one. We are having to do this because immediately after the general election, the new Secretary
of State for Business, Innovation and Skills signalled, clearly and overtly, that he would not continue the consensus that had been emerging and growing over the last decade on the need for a UK industrial strategy. [Interruption.] I wonder whether the new Secretary of State for Wales wants to learn that his job is to sit there and shut up and listen during this debate. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Let us stay calm. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) may wish—I would strongly suggest—to rephrase what he has just said.

Kevin Brennan: I think that the new Secretary of State needs to sit there in silence and listen to what is being said about a very important issue that affects Wales in particular, which is his responsibility.

The UK needs an active, modern industrial strategy that understands the importance of foundation industries such as the steel industry to the rebalancing of our economy. I understand why the Business Secretary, given his City background and professed laissez-faire philosophy about politics, does not want to use the term “industrial strategy”. He is wrong about that, however. [Interruption.]

From a sedentary position, I am being asked what my background is. I worked at the Llanwern steelworks for six months and my father worked there for more than 20 years, so I do not need questions about my background from a Secretary of State for Wales who cannot sit there and shut up and listen to the debate as he should do on behalf of his constituents in Wales.

I understand why the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills does not want to use the term “industrial strategy”, but I am afraid he is wrong not to do so. Unless the Government are prepared to support British industry strategically, the Chancellor’s so-called march of the makers will simply become a stand-alone industry. We all agree that steel is a vital industry, and that this crisis is not confined to the United Kingdom. We should also agree that, unfortunately, the Government do not have a magic wand with which to control the price of steel. We agree that the industry is vital for not just our national economy but, as we have heard from many hon. Members, the important role that it plays in local communities, through the workers it employs directly and through the supply chain right the way through the regions.

We have been asking the Secretary of State for months to make clear the Government’s view on the minimum strategic steelmaking capacity that they believe must be maintained in the UK’s national interest. They have not been prepared to give that information, which inevitably leads to a suspicion that they do not have a view on the minimum steelmaking capacity necessary for the UK’s long-term economic interest. That doubt at the heart of the Government is like an impurity in steel being poured at a steel plant. If we do not get rid of that impurity, it could lead to a disaster, and it will be a disaster if the doubt at the heart of the Government’s policy is not got rid of.

We need to make sure that the blast furnaces at Port Talbot remain. We also need to ensure that the ability to make new steel—not just to melt down old steel and reuse it—remains in the armoury of UK plc. That is why it is important that we have an industrial strategy, and not just an industrial approach. We need clarity on steelmaking, not just vague warm words. In short, we need strategic leadership, not the laissez-faire laxity now undermining UK plc.

3.47 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I begin by paying tribute to all those who have spoken in the debate. With few if any exceptions, everyone has rightly spoken with passion in their heart on behalf of their constituents and our great British steel industry. It is important that we look to the future and make sure that the message sent out from this place in all our doings is one of confidence in the continuing success of our British steel industry. Over the past seven days, I have had the real pleasure of going to Rotherham.

I pay tribute to the wise words of the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), although I do not always agree with her. I went to Rotherham, and I now understand speciality steels, which are separate from the great work being done at Port Talbot; they are almost a stand-alone industry.

I then went to Corby and had a great day there meeting excellent workers and excellent management, all of whom are rightly proud of the superb quality of the products that they make.

It is really important that this message of confidence should continue to unite us, for the sake of customers and suppliers alike. Despite the unfortunate remarks made by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), there is much that brings us together on this important matter. We all agree that steel is a vital industry, and that this crisis is not confined to the United Kingdom. We should also agree that, unfortunately, the Government do not have a magic wand with which to control the price of steel. We agree that the industry is vital for not just our national economy but, as we have heard from many hon. Members, the important role that it plays in local communities, through the workers it employs directly and through the supply chain right the way through the regions.

In South Wales, for example, the industry is a vital component of the continuing success of that part of the United Kingdom. I want to pay tribute to my Secretary of State for his tireless work and his outstanding leadership throughout this crisis. One of the problems we have had since we were appointed to our positions last May is that so much has been commercially sensitive. I am looking forward to the day when I will be the first to stand up and talk about the sort of work that this Secretary of State has been quietly and privately leading. That work began as soon as we were appointed. The reason why we get so agitated on this side of the House when we have these debates is that we started delivering for the steel industry even before the tragedy of Redcar, which I will deal with in a moment. That is why I ignored the advice of my officials and said that this country would vote in favour of tariffs on dumped steel. That is what we did in July and again in November.

With losses of £600 million over some three years, the situation in Redcar was very different. Debts ran to tens of millions of pounds, and not only did the local company go bust, but so did the parent company in Thailand. The contrast between SSI and Tata is stark.

We would all agree that Tata is an excellent, responsible employer, and we look forward to supporting it in all we do to ensure a successful sale and a successful future for our steel industry.
Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Tata Steel’s decision to sell its UK steel operations; and action the Government is taking to secure the future of the UK steel industry.

Backbench Business

Contaminated Blood

3.51 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that the contaminated blood scandal was one of the biggest treatment disasters in the history of the NHS, which devastated thousands of lives; notes that for those affected this tragedy continues to have a profound effect on their lives which has rarely been properly recognised; welcomes the Government’s decision to conduct a consultation to reform support arrangements and to commit extra resources to support those affected; further notes, however, that the current Government proposals will leave some people worse off and continue the situation where some of those affected receive no ongoing support; and calls on the Government to take note of all the responses to the consultation and to heed the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Haemophilia and Contaminated Blood’s Inquiry into the current support arrangements so as to ensure that no-one is worse off, left destitute or applying for individual payments as a result of the proposed changes and that everyone affected by the tragedy, including widows and dependents, receives support commensurate with the decades of suffering and loss of amenity they have experienced.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate today. This same topic was the subject of the first debate that the Committee scheduled after its establishment in 2010; it is sad that, six years on, we are still fighting for justice for those affected by the contaminated blood scandal. Also in 2010, during the general election campaign, my constituent Glenn Wilkinson came to see me with his wife Alison. They told me about Glenn’s having been given infected blood during dental treatment at Hull Royal Infirmary and how it had affected his life, his health and his opportunities for work and how it had impacted on his family. From then on, I began to find out about the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Last year, my constituent Eddie Quigley came to see me in my office. Sadly, he has since passed away. On behalf of his son James and his widow Sally, I sincerely thank the hon. Lady for her persistence in bringing forward this debate and in ensuring that the issue is properly discussed.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. I have received many emails and letters from affected families from all over the country. Sadly, I cannot refer to them all today. I want to set the scene and comment on the Government’s proposals, and I will try to be brief to allow time for the many other hon. Members who want to contribute and talk about their constituents’ views on the consultation.

Governments of both colours have introduced a patchwork of schemes and assistance over the years, but there has never been a complete package of support for those affected. That is in marked contrast to the response to other medical and treatment disasters, such as thalidomide, where full support and compensation has been put in place. I am sure that the whole House wants to pay tribute to all those who have fought for justice over many years and to the families and loved ones who supported them.
Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the various schemes that have been put in place, but does she agree that the process of applying and getting through those is very difficult, particularly for people who are so ill?

Diana Johnson: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very important point and I shall come to it shortly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Diana Johnson: I will make a little progress and then take an intervention. I was paying tribute to all those who fought for many years. I think we would all agree that they have been fighting for too many years to get a just settlement for what happened to them. Let us be frank: they are weary from fighting. They want to resolve this once and for all, and to get on with their lives. Sadly, more and more people are dying without seeing that justice. Each individual affected has been robbed of many of the opportunities we all take for granted—the opportunities to work, to have a career, to buy a home and to grow old with the person they love. Family members have had to care for their loved ones, perhaps giving up careers to do so, and watch their health deteriorate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has been tenacious in her pursuit of this issue, which has been going on for many years. Like her, I have constituents who have been affected by it, and it is about time this was brought to an end and action was actually taken. She mentioned thalidomide, but that treatment they received from the NHS—by the state. What we need to do now is put together a proper support package to ensure that those affected and their families are at the heart of what we do and whatever scheme is proposed.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I apologise for having to leave very shortly, but I commend the hon. Lady on her sterling work on this cause. In the case of my constituent Mr Tony Farrugia and his brothers, who are campaigning here today, the situation is exactly as she describes; it is about the complexity of all the schemes. Because his father died in 1986, before the trust was set up, his mother never received any money at all, and that remains the case today under what is being

Diana Johnson: And I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, particularly as she has made such great inroads on this subject; I commend her for that. Does she agree that it is completely unacceptable, particularly in the context she has set out, that any reform the Government introduce should make sick people even worse off? That seems to be the height of injustice. One of my constituents will lose £500 a month, and another, Graham Manning, is in the Gallery today. They need to see that justice is being done. That has to be a bottom line.

Diana Johnson: I agree entirely. Let me return to the point I was making about liability and the need now to put in place a proper support package, recognising the wrong that has been done. For far too long, the Department of Health has not done that. It appears to me that it has been far more interested in protecting the institutional reputation of the Department and of the NHS than in looking to right a wrong.

In the last Parliament, a concerted effort, from all parties, was made to seek a lasting settlement for all our constituents. The all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood led the way in producing a report showing that the current financial arrangements were not fit for purpose, were ad hoc and were overly bureaucratic. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) worked alongside the all-party group, with the Prime Minister’s office, to finally get an apology made in Parliament and an agreement that the Government would consult on a proper support package for all those affected. The Prime Minister’s apology a year ago and the announcement that £25 million would be made available for transitional support was very welcome. So, too, was the promise that there would be a full consultation on a comprehensive support package. I must say to the Minister that not one penny of that badly needed £25 million has yet been spent, and that the consultation on the new support scheme was announced only on 21 January this year—some nine months after the Prime Minister’s statement.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Like many Members, I have a constituent here today. Sue Sparks has been visiting the Palace and is now in the Public Gallery. Is it not the case that the consultation does not seem to chime with the apology? What is on offer in no way seems to reflect what I am sure the Prime Minister meant as a sincere apology.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are now a few days away from the end of the consultation period. I understand that the Minister was advised—wrongly, I think—by her officials that she could not meet the all-party group during the consultation period. I know that that was not the case in Scotland: the Minister there met MSPs and individuals. We called for this debate so that the Minister could listen to the comments of her fellow parliamentarians about the Government’s proposals and then feed them into the consultation.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I have many constituents in Taunton Deane whose lives are blighted by this issue of contaminated blood. Although I applaud
the Government for bringing forward this consultation, there are many who believe that it is only adding fuel to the fire. In fact, it could be making the situation worse and causing more pain, not least because, in Scotland, people may get a better deal than those in England. I urge the Minister to look very carefully at the consultation so as not to penalise people who are already badly suffering.

Diana Johnson: I wish to move on now to highlight a few of the problems with the consultation. First, as has already been said, many of the existing recipients will receive lower payments under the new scheme. The Government’s proposals would end all discretionary support, such as winter fuel allowance, child supplements and low income top-ups, which means that many people will lose out, potentially by thousands of pounds a year.

Secondly, most of the current beneficiaries have hepatitis C stage 1 and currently get no ongoing support. They are left begging for individual payments from the Caxton Fund. The Government proposals will provide annual payments for people in stage 1, which is welcome, but those people will be subject to regular individual assessments. That could result in fluctuating payments and reduced financial certainty for individuals. Assessments will also take only clinical factors into account. They will not look at the loss of education or employment, and decades of loss of amenity, ill health and loss of earnings. According to the information from the Government, those assessments will cost £500,000 a year to carry out. Would that money not be better spent on providing financial support to those people?

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her determination and her decision to champion this issue. She highlighted the decades of ill health from which many suffer. There is also the emotional stress and trauma. Does she agree that the consultation process itself has added to that burden for some of those people? That is certainly the message that I have received loud and clear from my constituent, Mike Webster, who came to see me on this issue.

Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I will proceed with my concerns with the consultation, because I would like other Members to speak in the debate.

My third point is about the inadequate provision for the “affected” community—the widows, the partners and the dependants of those infected. The proposals for widows appear to be extremely complex. They create six categories of widows, with big variations in what is offered within each category. Department of Health officials could not explain how they would work when they met the APPG’s secretariat and have not provided an explanation of these proposals as promised. There also appears to be nothing here for dependent children.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I have constituents who have been infected. I have also heard from infected partners who, because of the failure of the scheme, cannot get insurance for themselves. Those who have young children are worried about the long-term implications. Does my hon. Friend not think that the proposal adds extra stress to what is already a very stressful situation?

Diana Johnson: My right hon. Friend makes an important point.

Fourthly, there are concerns that under the plans money will be used to pay for new drugs to treat hepatitis C, which will be bought separately from the NHS budget, so will cost more. Under guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, everyone with hepatitis C should be eligible for treatment with a new generation of drugs from the end of February 2016, so when funds are allocated for treatment, that means once again that money does not go directly to those who need financial support.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend, who is making an excellent speech, agree with my constituent, who is affected and feels that the changes are deliberately punitive and exceedingly cruel, as they use requests for changes to support schemes to affect people in that way? My constituent has had to use the ex gratia payment from the Government to fund treatment refused by the NHS, as many other people have had to do. His annual payment will decrease over time and he will lose the additional support that is currently provided. People such as my constituent are hit again and again, so how can the consultation on reform go ahead on that basis?

Diana Johnson: I shall move on and complete my speech.

Fifthly, there is concern about the fact that beneficiaries in England will be worse off than beneficiaries in Scotland. The Scottish proposals are far more generous to hepatitis C stage 2 and HIV sufferers, who will receive £27,000 per annum or £37,000 if they are co-infected, which is welcome, but are much less generous for hepatitis C stage 1s, who will receive an additional lump sum payment but no ongoing support. The Scottish proposals have been broadly welcomed, partly because of the way in which the consultation was conducted in Scotland, and the clear acknowledgement, for example, that the existing trust structure will be scrapped.

Several hon. Members rose—

Diana Johnson: I am conscious of time, and I am about to reach my allocated 15 minutes, so if hon. Members do not mind I will complete my speech.

Following the scrapping of the trust structure in the Scottish model, may I seek reassurance from the Minister that she will scrap trust structures in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have been subject to much criticism? There is no mention in the consultation of any proposals on lump sum payments, which would enable those affected to make real choices about their own lives, such as paying off a mortgage, clearing debts or helping their children. I reiterate my belief that the £230 million the Government are set to receive over the next few years from the sale of Plasma Resources UK should be earmarked for lump sum payments for those people. This is money from the work by the Department of Health to create blood products, and it would be fitting to use it in that way.
I am disappointed that there is no mention in the Government proposals of allowing those who have been affected to be passported automatically through to the new benefits that have been introduced—for example, moving from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. There is no consideration at all of an Irish-style medical card to ensure that access to healthcare is as speedy as possible.

In conclusion, we have had a chance to consider the detail of the Government’s proposals. I am disappointed, as they do not deliver what we all want: giving people dignity and allowing them to get on with their lives, rather than constantly having to battle to get support. That means they have to campaign to ensure that their lives do not become even worse, let alone see improvements. They need and deserve action in a timely manner. They do not want to end their lives as campaigners. Many of those who are infected have told me that they believe that the Government are just delaying a proper settlement as more and more people die. After their long and bitter experience who can blame them?

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) rose—

Diana Johnson: I am happy to give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman, who is the former co-chair of the all-party group.

Jason McCartney: That is the point I was going to make. I should like to thank the hon. Lady for co-chairing the APPG on haemophilia and contaminated blood with me, and with many others in the last Parliament. Does she agree that the Minister should accept that we have a framework with the settlement in Scotland, which needs tweaking, and the comprehensive APPG report, which looks at the fact that trusts and funds did not operate to support the victims? If we heed experiences in Scotland and our report, we can begin to help the victims.

Diana Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who speaks with wisdom on this matter.

It is now time for the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS to be settled once and for all. I hope the Minister will look again at the proposals in her consultation and think about what is in the best interests of the group in question, who have been so badly treated for so many years.

4.10 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): It is a privilege and an honour to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). I commend her for her leadership in bringing Parliament together on this very important subject.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate on such a sombre and saddening topic. I speak as the representative of a number of individuals in my constituency whose lives and the lives of those they love have been grievously, unfairly and irreversibly affected by the terrible injustice we address this afternoon.

The Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government, has apologised for the infection of individuals with contaminated blood—an apology that is now more than a year old, for a scandal that is more than 20 years old. When he rightly addressed the matter last year, my right hon. Friend said that it was “difficult to imagine the feelings of unfairness”—[Official Report, 25 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 1423.] that those who have been affected must feel. My constituents and others around the country were let down, when they or their family members were at their most vulnerable, by the health service that was supposed to keep them safe. It truly is difficult to imagine.

I am sorry to say that the feelings of unfairness have not been lessened by the proposals in this consultation; if anything, they have been made worse. Lives have been changed and lives have been taken. So much has been lost, but the Government must now focus on lessening and mitigating this loss as much as can ever be possible.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On mitigating the loss, I am here to represent several constituents, but one in particular—Andy Gunn. He is extremely concerned by the Health Secretary’s suggestion that the funding might come from the NHS budget. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that would be highly inappropriate?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have had similar representations from my constituents, and I hope that those on the Treasury Bench take on board the comments of Andy Gunn and of others in my constituency.

The vastness of the loss we are addressing today is such that even the ideal solution cannot do much to address it, but what has been proposed does so much less. The proposals contained in the consultation are far from what the victims of this injustice expected or were led to believe they would receive. I know that many of my colleagues have similar stories to tell. I have had constituents visit my surgeries who have always been so incredibly strong about what has happened to them and hopeful for the potential of a good settlement from the Government, but have now been left in tears. They feel let down and fear that these proposals will make life even harder for them.

Those are people whose lives have turned out to be radically different from what they had planned, through absolutely no fault of their own. They struggle to get insurance or pensions—things we take for granted in this place—and have had their careers curtailed. Even worse, they have been unable to have children, or have seen loved ones die tragically soon. These people should be helped and need to be provided with a full and final settlement that allows them to move on, without being worse off.

There remains much misunderstanding about the medical conditions of the victims and the treatments available. The improvements in care for those with HIV/AIDS have been a blessing for many. However, the disease remains incurable, and haemophiliacs and those with other conditions such as hepatitis C cannot take the medication that could help them. We must also properly consider those infected by more than one disease. Those with both HIV and HCV have a threefold greater risk of progression to cirrhosis or decompensated liver disease than those infected only with HCV. We should not misunderstand, underestimate or underplay the dangers of these diseases.
My constituents, and the constituents of so many of us here today, have suffered a grave injustice. It is an injustice that they never expected to suffer, would never have been able to prepare for, and for which the blame rests entirely elsewhere. They or their loved ones have experienced terrible illness and their lives have been changed or ended. "Unfairness" does not seem strong enough to describe it, but that word is the best we can do.

The Prime Minister was right to apologise, but this consultation does not go far enough. When my constituents only have to look north of the border to see a better deal on the table, with talk about public monuments to those sadly lost, and are then faced with an option here that could leave them in an even worse position, anger and resentment are more than understandable.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a danger that the consultation will undo the good of the apology? The impact assessment states that the intention of the policy is to safeguard the interests of those who are chronically infected and receive an annual payment, but that annual payment is no longer index-linked, and people have made their assumptions on that basis. My constituent, Norah Tracey, has had to take early retirement because she has hepatitis C, and she based her projections on those financial assumptions. If it is no longer index linked, we are making a mockery of what the impact assessment says and we are undoing the sincerity of the apology.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have heard similar representations from my constituents. Indeed, the all-party group found that the representations were very similar across the board. I sincerely hope that those on the Government Front Bench are listening to these interventions today.

The Prime Minister said last year: "As a wealthy and successful country we should be helping these people more. We will help them more"—[Official Report, 11 March 2015; Vol. 594, C. 289.]

I agree with him and support those words entirely. I hope that the Minister and the Department of Health will ensure that the settlement for the victims will meet the intentions of what the Prime Minister said last year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope that we can get through this debate without a formal time limit on speeches. The debate is not contentious, on one side of the House or the other, so I trust that Members will be courteous to each other by keeping their speeches to around seven minutes. That will allow everyone who has indicated that they wish to contribute to do so.

4.18 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I will do my very best to keep my speech within seven minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and the all-party group for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I also pay tribute to those members of the campaign who have travelled to be in the Gallery today. I know that many were unable to stay because of the important urgent debate on steel, but many have stayed and I thank them for their patience.

I am speaking today on behalf of my constituents the Smith family and Lin Ashcroft. Janet and Colin Smith lost their son Colin in 1990, when he was just seven. Just a few months earlier, Lin lost her husband Bill Dumbellton.

I have spoken about Colin before in these debates, which many hon. Members have called to consider what has been described as the greatest treatment disaster in the NHS.

Colin went to hospital when he was eight months old for a minor ear infection. As a haemophiliac, he received factor VIII, which, following a freedom of information request, the family later learned had come from a batch from an Arkansas prison. He spent his short life fighting illness and died aged seven of AIDS and hepatitis C, although the family did not find out that it was hepatitis C until three years after his death. No parent should have to go through what the Smiths have gone through. As they have said, they want justice so that their son can rest in peace and they want justice for those who remain.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): That story is just one of the many we have heard from constituents. I heard from a constituent, David, who similarly spoke passionately about his circumstances. He will not even be affected by the consultation that is going on. Clearly, this is a UK legacy issue and a UK historical injustice. We have heard about the difference in Scotland and elsewhere. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to make sure the UK Government lead on working with the devolved Administrations—in Wales, that means the Wales Office—to ensure that we do not end up with a postcode lottery, with some people potentially in worse situations and some not getting the same justice as others?

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly valuable point, which I hope the Minister will listen to—I know it will be heard by the large contingent of Welsh campaigners who have come here today to listen to the debate.

Bill, the husband of another constituent, Lin Ashcroft, was one of the first haemophiliacs to treat himself at home with cryoprecipitate. He contracted HIV and hepatitis C from blood, and he lost his job with BT in the 1980s, after telling the occupational health department about his HIV status. Bill had no life cover, as no one would insure “people like him” as it was put at the time. Following his death, Lin had to grieve and cope with the financial commitment she was left with. She eventually received some support from the Skipton Fund, but she found the process involved absolutely brutal—she felt she was jumping through hoops to get the money.

We have to keep telling these stories, because we have to remember what many people went through. We have to remember that they need a proper settlement because that can help to draw a line under this period, in so far as we ever can. These people have lost their loved ones, and they have lost great friends they have made during the campaign. As they have told me, it just becomes too
difficult in the end to attend the constant funerals, as members of the community pass away. These people want proper support for those who are still with us.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Prime Minister's apology gave my constituent Sandra Molyneaux hope that the wrong done to her and her family would finally be righted. Does my hon. Friend agree, though, that subsequent developments fly in the face of that? Sandra and thousands of others are telling the Government through us today, "Don't tell us you're sorry. Show us you're sorry."

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point [Interruption.] And it is very well received. He anticipates the point I am coming to.

There was some hope last year when the Prime Minister made the much-needed apology for the contaminated blood disaster. He promised then to improve the financial support for the victims and their families. As he said, we are a “wealthy and successful country” and we should be helping these people more. There was some hope, and the consultation was launched into what the support should look like.

A year on, however, the victims have been let down again. Despite the headline announcement about the additional budget of up to £125 million in support, not a penny has been spent, as has been said. The majority of people currently receiving financial support will be worse off under the new scheme. Removing discretionary payments may mean that many lose to the tune of thousands of pounds a year. They will be significantly worse off than those affected in Scotland. Individual assessment could reduce financial security. Widows, partners and dependent children who have been bereaved will receive limited or no support. Lastly, the proposed reforms would just not deliver the sustainability and security the affected community so desperately needs. This is not the package that is needed. It is also not clear whether payments under the new proposals will be exempt from tax and benefit assessment.

What has been proposed is very different from what will be offered by the Scottish Government. For widows who have lost their loved ones, the difference is not just stark—the proposals are poles apart. I will leave it to SNP Members to elaborate on that, but the difference is very pointed.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the hon. Lady not accept that this is one occasion when there should be close working across the Administrations? I offer her the example of a constituent who was infected 35 years ago in Staffordshire. Although he has lived in Scotland for all that time, he will get compensation under the scheme devised by the Department of Health in England. Where is the sense in that?

Jessica Morden: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right and I am sure he will get the chance to elaborate on that point later. For parents and families who have gone through the trauma of losing a child like Colin, there is nothing at all.

Nigel Mills is here from Wales today and he is now receiving a new treatment for hep C. He has been able to access that treatment, although, mercifully, his condition has not resulted in cirrhosis of the liver. All those in Wales who developed hep C and could benefit from those new drugs are now receiving them. The Haemophilia Society is very anxious that all those in England who could benefit should have access to them and that funding for new treatment should not be diverted to cover existing treatments.

How many times do we keep having to tell these very personal stories, and how many times do we keep having to call these debates and table questions? How many times do victims have to come to London to lobby MPs? The Haemophilia Society has responded fully, highlighting the weaknesses in what is being proposed and saying that the consultation should be withdrawn.

I ask the Minister please to reflect deeply on this, because what is proposed does not meet the needs of widows, partners, parents, children and those affected. But she should not reflect on it for too long: this has been an ongoing nightmare since the 1970s for thousands of families. The Government cannot bring back the dead or restore health, but they can award a package that will ensure that survivors and families are secure. The apology was a step forward, but let us not prolong the agony further for those who have suffered for far too long. Please listen to this campaign and give the campaigners what they deserve. Please right the wrong.

4.26 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Backbench Business Committee’s selection of this important topic, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie) on their efforts in securing this valuable debate.

I want to acknowledge the tremendous campaigning work of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. Its efforts have helped to pave the way for the current Department of Health consultation to secure a lasting financial and support settlement for those thousands of people infected with HIV and hepatitis C through contaminated blood in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Let me say at the outset that my heart goes out to those people who have been affected by the contaminated blood scandal, both in my constituency of South East Cornwall and across the country. The devastating impact on patients and their families and friends is immeasurable and lasts for a lifetime. We must all do what we can to ensure that those affected have as secure a future as possible.

I have personal experience of trying to help one constituent who has sadly been impacted by this terrible tragedy. My constituent was infected with contaminated blood in 1985 at the age of 35 and subsequently contracted full blown hepatitis C, which has now developed into cirrhosis of the liver.

My constituent, who understandably has asked not to be identified, has undergone three courses of arduous interferon-based treatment. The last course caused a life-threatening infection that required a month in hospital and some invasive surgery and extensive abdominal surgery.

Now aged 65, my constituent suffers from severe fatigue, physical weakness, brain fog, which means that she is unable to read anything vaguely complicated,
constant itching, fever, sweats, depression and total and permanent hair loss. The stress of living with those conditions on a daily basis for 30 years must be immeasurable. The Government must do all they can to support patients and their families.

My constituent wanted me to highlight her case as an example of where anomalies in support for patients suffering from cirrhosis of the liver have led to financial hardship and additional worry at a very distressing time. She was very grateful for the lump sum she received and an income of £14,760 per annum. However, that figure would be £26,000 in Scotland, nearly double the sum offered in England. That is iniquitous.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): A constituent of mine—Janis Richards of Sudbury—has written to me, and hers is a very tragic case similar to that highlighted by my hon. Friend. I am struggling to explain to her why there are such different arrangements for constituents across the United Kingdom, given that this problem originally arose under a UK Government.

Mrs Murray: I completely concur with my hon. Friend. My constituent is particularly concerned about proposals to withdraw index linking from annual income and to refuse to increase it by any meaningful amount. I understand that there is a recommendation to fix annual payments at a flat rate of £15,000 a year, which would leave my constituent with a nominal financial increase of about £240. There are also proposals to withdraw back-up services for emergencies and to withdraw support, which my constituent will certainly require, given the severity of her condition.

May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to clarify the position, and to take my constituent’s concerns into account when formulating final proposals? My constituent previously enjoyed a successful career in the legal profession, but she became too ill to pursue it after her infection with contaminated blood. Her career was, sadly, cut short, as was her considerable earning potential and professional development.

Patients must be treated with fairness, and each case must be assessed and supported on its merits. I am grateful that the Prime Minister acknowledged the scale of the tragedy and apologised on behalf of the UK Government. I welcome the additional funding for England that was announced in 2015 to ease the transition to a reformed scheme and ensure its sustainable operation with patients at its core. That scheme must provide a robust and fair system that supports and compensates patients at its core. That scheme must provide a reformed scheme and ensure its sustainable operation. I welcome the additional funding for England of the tragedy and apologised on behalf of the UK Government. I am grateful that the Prime Minister acknowledged the scale of the tragedy and apologised on behalf of the UK Government. I welcome the additional funding for England that was announced in 2015 to ease the transition to a reformed scheme and ensure its sustainable operation with patients at its core. That scheme must provide a robust and fair system that supports and compensates patients at its core. That scheme must provide a reformed scheme and ensure its sustainable operation.

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Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): At the start of her speech, the hon. Lady mentioned the excellent work of the APPG. It is right to highlight that, because it has shed a lot of light on the issue. In every constituency, there are heart-breaking stories like that of her constituent. I have two constituents who, through no fault of their own, received contaminated blood products, and one of them feels as though he has a death sentence hanging over his head. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should not, quite literally, add insult to injury, and that a just and fair settlement must be found as soon as possible? I know that the Conservative Government were not necessarily responsible for the blood products, but it is in the gift of this Government to sort the matter out once and for all.

Mrs Murray: I sincerely hope that the Minister is listening to what the hon. Gentleman has to say, and that she and the Government will take action to make it easier for affected people to live as good a life as they can expect to.

There are currently five different organisations funded by the Department of Health to which affected individuals can apply for support. It is encouraging that staff in those schemes have said that the system would be more efficient and consistent if the organisations were combined. Other concerns that have been raised should be addressed through the consultation and subsequent proposals. Those concerns include the fact that beneficiaries are not individually assessed, and that bodies operate different payment policies. The APPG is quite correct to state that the system is not fit for purpose. The consultation that the Department of Health is conducting, which concludes this week, is a helpful step. I am pleased that the Department of Health has reached out to, and sought views from, affected patients and their beneficiaries, and I congratulate the Minister on that. The outcome must lead to a fair and sustainable solution for my constituent and for impacted individuals and families across the country.

4.33 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I want to express my admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and the sterling work that she has done in raising the matter. I know from personal experience that she is a formidable campaigner on this issue.

An MP has no greater responsibility than to give a voice to those who feel as though they are not being heard, and I want to use this opportunity to tell the story of my constituent Alex Smith of Chadderton. Quite a lot of the debate has been about finance, and that is important. It is evident from the consultation and from the Government that the driver from their point of view is to squeeze this for every penny they can. However, I want to talk about the real human cost—the everyday cost for those affected.

Alex is ill. He struggles to get out and about. He often feels worn out and unable to live the fulfilling life that we take for granted. Despite his physical difficulties, he is to many, including me, an inspiring man. He has shown great strength of character, resilience and a pride that is the culture of many in our town. His story is not just heart-breaking, but unjust. In a fair society, those who are wronged should have fairness and the wrong should be put right.

Alex and his wife Brenda celebrated the arrival of their son in 1980. To put on record how long the family has waited for real justice, let me say that during that period—from the blood contamination to getting answers, getting proper compensation and, now, fighting for enough money just to pay the bills—I was born in a hospital down the road, went to nursery, went to primary school, went to secondary school, went to college, went out to work and had two sons of my own, of whom the eldest will leave school in two years’ time. In the period
that Alex has had to wait for justice, I have lived my life, and I have done so without many of the difficulties that Alex has had. That justice is no justice whatsoever.

A year after her son’s birth in 1980, Brenda was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She received treatment for that, including a blood transfusion. Separately, Alex, being a good citizen, gave blood in 1995, like hundreds and thousands of others. From the sample test, it was discovered that he had hepatitis C. To be honest, he did not really know what it was. He had been told it was a condition, but with treatment, it might well clear up. He went for treatment, and received most of it, but it was stopped early for other reasons. He thought that that was it.

Over the course of three years, Alex noticed he was becoming forgetful. He put that down to getting older and having a few senior moments, but it got worse and he became increasingly worn out, tired and lethargic. He struggled, but he had the support of his wife and family by his side. To fast-forward 10 years, the family had another tragedy when his wife Brenda passed away. The coroner ruled that the case was inconclusive and the cause of the death was recorded as “unascertained”. We can imagine the grief the family went through, and throughout this time Alex continued to struggle, each and every day, with things we might take for granted.

In 2011, Alex visited his doctor again and underwent a routine blood test. He discovered that the hepatitis C had not gone away and was still there. He went through further treatment, but instead of making him feel better, it made him feel much worse. At that point, he was determined not just to get treatment, but to get answers. His quest started at the hospital where he felt it all began. The records had been destroyed, so he realised that if he was to get real justice and to get answers, he would have to track down the people who were there at the time.

Alex’s mission led him to Bangor in north Wales, where the retired surgeon living there confirmed that Alex had had a blood transfusion with what was likely to be contaminated blood. That made him think, “If I received contaminated blood, could it be that Brenda, who received treatment in the same hospital, also received contaminated blood and may have had hepatitis C as well?” He went to the hospital to find the records, and the records said that Brenda had had hepatitis C. Cruelly and inexplicably, the hospital had not told Brenda and Alex that. It was only when he went back through the medical records later that that was discovered.

Alex applied to the Skipton Fund and received compensation for himself and his wife, as a surviving stage 1 widower, but that did not make him feel any better physically. He describes every day—let us just imagine this—as waking up with aching flu. Imagine waking up every day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, with the flu and no end in sight. How would that drag us down and make daily life feel?

Alex and Brenda did not ask to be infected. Alex did not ask to spend his life in pain and poverty, or to be made to feel, during this consultation, as though he is begging for something that he is not entitled to. His life has been taken away. He has been told that he is not entitled to any treatment, that he cannot have his day in court. He wants to be able to stop the campaign that has been necessary to get justice, and to live a decent lifestyle.

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Gentleman is making a very serious and sympathetic case. As well as suffering, is there not also the issue of their unrealised potential—the hopes dashed, the dreams never lived, the potential never reached? It is on that account that we really owe it to these people to speak up—I do so on behalf of an unidentified constituent who does not want me to give his name—and urge the Minister to address the issue.

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Lady makes an absolutely excellent point. When Alex came to my office in Oldham, he told me that with his compensation payment he had bought a van to go and work self-employed, but his illness stopped him and eventually he had to sell the van, which had ended up sitting on his driveway. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people have been denied opportunities that many in this House would take for granted. It is far more than simply an aching pain, or not knowing whether tomorrow will be better than today; opportunities have been stolen from people. Given that it is the state’s responsibility to put this matter right, we owe it as a nation to do so once and for all.

The payments we are talking about will seem quite small to many people here. In some ways, that is what makes this so unfair and so cruel. In one of the richest nations in the world, we are talking about penny-pinching from the poorest people in society, who did not choose to be in this situation and who need a way forward. A £2,000 payment taken away, or a winter fuel allowance, or prescription payments—support is being taken away. It is important to say that the £2,000 payments do not go to everyone, but are for people whose income is 70% below the average in that area. I do not want to make party political points, but it is a bit difficult not to do so when the Government of the day could put the matter right but are choosing instead to drag it out and prolong the agony and pain.

When Members vote in the Lobby of this House, we will be voting after having received a pay rise this year. Well done, all of us—aren’t we fantastic? Well, the people out there are not asking for a pay rise. They are asking just to get by—to have the money to pay the bills—and for justice. The Minister has the opportunity to put the matter right once and for all. She should take it.

4.42 pm

**Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con):** I am very glad to be able to take part in this debate, having secured it along with hon. Members from both sides of the House. It is on an important and sombre topic.

Back in 2015, I spoke in this House on behalf of two constituents. One is, I believe, in London today. One has passed away—Annie Walker of Norwich. She was one of thousands of people nationwide given infected blood by the NHS during those decades. It left her fighting illness throughout her adult life—she contracted hepatitis C from an otherwise routine blood transfusion at the age of just 19. That caused cirrhosis of her liver and led to cancer in later years. Despite a liver transplant in the months since I last spoke for her in this House, she died from the cancer that had spread and was given just months to live. Like many others, throughout her illness she campaigned to increase hep C awareness and for better treatment of
those affected by the scandal. The first thing I want to do is to pay tribute to her courage and tirelessness in campaigning for others while she was suffering so badly herself.

I will add just a few points to the arguments that have already been raised, urging the Minister to do everything she can to put right this historical wrong. I urge her to look again at indexing. It is important to maintain the value of the payments made to those who are suffering. I also urge her to stick to her guns and make future payments simpler and more dignified, rather than people having to go cap in hand to a motley collection of charitable funds.

I urge the Minister to stick to what she laid out in this House, when she established her aim to get annual payments to those who had not, to date, received them. There are those who have not yet been included in the funds and they currently receive no regular support. It is good to seek to include some of those people in the scheme. Her other aim—not to remove payment from any person—is equally crucial. She has set out her aims to the House and we will all hold her to them. Like other Members, I welcome the doubling of the funding available through the NHS. I also welcome the action the Minister has laid out in relation to treatment, something I have argued for a number of times.

A third constituent came to see me after we last held a debate on this matter. He suffers from severe cirrhosis of the liver and needs the new generation of drugs. We should make those drugs available as soon as possible for those who could suffer less. The dreadful dilemma for doctors is whether they should treat the sickest first or those who could be prevented from getting sicker. I welcome the opportunity the scheme represents potentially to prevent that dreadful dilemma in doctors’ surgeries and hospitals.

It is a very delicate matter to argue about who, among those who need treatment, should be prioritised. Unfortunately, that is exactly what we have to do in this place on behalf of our constituents. Doctors have to make such decisions every day. On balance, I think it is right to seek to fast-track those who are in the early stage of disease. The dreadful dilemma could perhaps be stopped, given such a historical wrong done to our fellow human beings. I could not possibly look the third constituent of mine in the eye and say that today I argued against possibly stopping that dreadful dilemma by arguing against the Minister’s proposal. She is doing a courageous thing with that particular proposal.

In closing, I want to return to my constituent Annie Walker who has passed away. I supported my constituent and corresponded with her over many years. My heart goes out to the family and friends she leaves behind. Every individual death emphasises the tragedy of this scandal. It is a national scandal and a national tragedy. The fight must go on. Annie fought that fight during her lifetime, with my support. Many who have spoken today and the many who are able to be in London today are also fighting the fight. I urge anybody affected who has not yet come forward to do so and to look at the consultation before it runs out in a few days. We in this place can only attempt to get this right if we have information from those affected. That is our job.

[Chloe Smith]

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree with the sentiments of my constituent Steve Bertram, who I believe is here today, who came to my office last week? He has a face that many would recognise. He looks like someone who has been repeatedly kicked in the teeth. He said:

“Our government needs to act for English Haemophiliacs—a generously and properly. Like me, I hope anyone who responded to the consultation told the government in no uncertain terms how paltry, mean and demeaning the offer is.”

Chloe Smith: I will let the words of a fellow Norwich person speak for themselves. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has been able to vocalise them for his constituent.

It is up to us in this place to get this right and to listen to all such points carefully. Annie Walker once said to me that she did not have the strength to keep on fighting. Sadly, that has now come true. It is up to us to continue to speak out. It is up to us to right this historical wrong. It is up to us to do that with both finance and NHS treatment. I urge the Minister to listen carefully to what has been said today, but to listen even more carefully to the consultation.

4.49 pm

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): One of my first actions, following my election to this place, was to highlight the plight of those infected with contaminated blood in the 1970s and 1980s. I did this by writing to the Department of Health, following discussions with Julie, a constituent of mine. In July 2015, I also tabled early-day motion 334 to recognise “the ongoing hardship and challenges faced by those infected with contaminated blood” and to encourage “the Prime Minister to implement promised arrangements to distribute an additional £25 million to those affected as soon as practicable.”

Infected blood is one of the most terrible chapters in the history of the NHS. Many people have died or suffered long-term disability and hardship as a result of infection. Relatives have had to sacrifice careers to provide care and support, and in some cases partners and loved ones have become infected. Patients, families and carers have dealt with those difficulties with immense and enduring courage. My constituent Julie was born with a rare genetic condition known as Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which requires treatment, including blood transfusions. She was infected with contaminated blood in 1974—42 years ago—while a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. Following a transfusion that September, she quickly developed symptoms of hepatitis and suffers today from a range of chronic and debilitating health conditions that have rendered her unable to remain upright for longer than 10 minutes at a time without becoming fatigued, owing to liver and lung damage arising directly from the transfusions.

Although now living in Scotland, Julie was infected in England. The liability for the current ex gratia schemes is based on where the individual was infected, rather than residency. This means that the English schemes and the consultation recently launched by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), are responsible for supporting Julie and delivering the financial support she will require.
Julie is currently classed as Skipton stage 1 and has received an ex gratia payment of £20,000 but receives no annual award. Her medical condition means that she has great difficulty meeting the qualifying criteria for stage 2, which would increase her ex gratia payment and provide approximately £15,000 per annum in badly needed support. I have reviewed her correspondence with the Skipton Fund on the reassessment and have found it unhelpful, perhaps even deliberately obtuse.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to raise the case of my constituent Susan Webster who lost her partner, Charlie, almost five years ago, after he contracted hepatitis C as a result of contaminated blood, leaving her and their now 14-year-old daughter without any financial support. Since Charlie’s death, Susan and her daughter have received little or no Government help and have had to approach the Skipton Fund themselves. Today, they remain in a state of limbo while the Government dither over the future of the UK scheme. Does he agree that the Government, having dragged their heels for years, must now act to support the survivors of this scandal without any further delay?

Dr Monaghan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is a tragic case that he outlines, and I will come to his specific point shortly.

On 21 January 2016, the Health Minister stated that the UK Government wanted to increase the amount of money on offer for victims of infected blood by £100 million, in addition to the £25 million announced in March 2015 by the Prime Minister. This takes the total to £225 million over the five years to 2020. As we know, there is a 12-week consultation on these proposals that closes this week, on 15 April. However, the proposed payment schemes have been heavily criticised by many of those affected for being outdated and confused in structure. That is my experience of them too. They also appear unfair.

The UK Government have estimated that the Department will spend a further £570 million over the projected lifetime of the reformed scheme, but analysis shows that the Department wants to cap annual payments for victims in England at £15,000 and that these will no longer be index linked and so will not increase with the cost of living. The UK Government also want to remove regular discretionary payments, including the winter fuel allowance and the £1,200 per child annual payment.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): On the point about the cost of living, I have several constituents in the same situation. One suggested that pension payments be increased to at least the level of the living wage. What does the hon. Gentleman think of that idea?

Dr Monaghan: I would absolutely support that suggestion. I would also note that many victims in England now face cuts of up to £7,000 a year, together with cumulative losses from the freezing of six annual payments to patients of £15,000 a year, time-limited support for partners and spouses after patients’ deaths, and the ending of help for the children and parents of those affected. Moreover, victims will no longer have access to grants for support with such things as mobility issues and modifications to property; nor will they have access to free expert advice.

The Haemophilia Society, which campaigns on behalf of victims of this scandal, has said that it has deep concerns about the proposals for England. It compared the proposals for England to those in Scotland, saying:

“...These concerns are compounded by the fact that similar proposals in Scotland offer more generous payments to its affected community. There is a risk that, if both sets of proposals are accepted (as they currently stand), affected people in England will receive much lower incomes than those in Scotland.”

The Scottish Government have already provided £32 million over the last 10 years to the current UK-wide schemes, so they are already committed to support those infected in Scotland. Nevertheless, on 18 March this year, the Scottish Government announced a substantial package of increased financial support for those affected by infected NHS blood and blood products in Scotland, amounting to an additional £20 million over the next three years alone. The new Scottish scheme will see annual payments for those with HIV and advanced hep C nearly double from £15,000 to £27,000 a year, and those affected with both HIV and hep C will have their annual payments increase from £30,000 to £37,000.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): This is a pure inquiry. Would it have been open to the Scottish authorities to say that the increased levels of compensation would be available to all those affected within Scotland rather than on the basis of where people had acquired the infection?

Dr Monaghan: I do not think that would be possible because it would be an admission of liability, and these are ex gratia schemes with no liability in response to the payment.

In addition to the measures I have explained so far, a new support and assistance grant scheme will be established in Scotland to administer and provide more flexible grants to cover additional needs. Scottish Government funding for this scheme will increase from £300,000 to £1 million a year. In real terms, the new arrangements will mean additional financial support is available for all categories of infected people and their dependants in Scotland. In Scotland, we are clear that this is not the end of the process and that there will be ongoing work with patient groups on this matter.

In overwhelming contrast to the Scottish Government, the UK Government are proposing to cut funding for victims of this scandal, leaving vulnerable people thousands of pounds a year worse off. It is extremely disappointing that the UK Government do not think it important to support those who were infected in England, and it is clear that the proposed cuts demonstrate that the UK Government’s priorities lie with austerity, not with the victims of this terrible scandal. It is time for the UK Government to support those whose lives have been ruined by this unprecedented scandal. For people such as Julie, anything less literally heaps insult on injury.

4.58 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate and on the valuable work that her all-party parliamentary group is doing in this area.
All Members, I am sure, receive a huge number of letters and emails from constituents, and hold face-to-face meetings with them on a huge range of issues. Just occasionally, an email arrives that has the power to stop us in our tracks, simply demanding the wider attention of the whole House. On 2 June last year, just four weeks after being elected to this place for the first time, I received just such an email. It came from my constituent Sue Threakall, from Barnstable. Mrs Threakall is in the Gallery this afternoon, one of many who have travelled long distances to be here today. I pay tribute to them all.

With her permission and with the leave of the House, I would like to read a short extract from the email I received from Mrs Threakall, which sums up better than I could the real human impact of this national tragedy:

“my late husband was a haemophiliac who”,

in the 1980s,

“was given contaminated blood and...died in 1991 with AIDS, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. His death ripped my family apart and to this day the effects are still there.”

Her children lead

“compromised lives compared to the ones they should have led. I have severe financial difficulties to this day, despite doing everything possible to help myself recover from a wrecked career as a...teacher, followed by retirement at 50 on a tiny pension. Since then I have worked in hospitals, but following three major surgeries in seven years have now more or less retired.

I have been campaigning for thirty years for truth and justice”.

Those are two crucial elements that we must discuss today: truth and justice.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s generosity in giving way, and I share his concern about the impact on spouses. My constituent Mr Thomas Farrell was given 11 units of contaminated blood in 1989, and tested positive for hepatitis C nine years later. One of his biggest fears is that his wife will not have the security of knowing that she can pay the mortgage should he pass away before her. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that bereaved partners and spouses should have security and proper financial support for the rest of their life?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I absolutely agree that we must look beyond those whose are immediately affected personally by the health effects of contaminated blood, and take account of the effects on their wider families and loved ones. I shall say more about that later.

Truth and justice are what this is all about, and I believe that we have reached a stage at which we really could deliver both. The Government’s consultation is under way; the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend made her announcement in January; and there is now a groundswell of public opinion. Those three factors mean that we are at a crossroads, and we may never find ourselves in an impossible position. I do not seek to extend this process unnecessarily, but the 15 April deadline cannot and must not be the end of the story. It cannot be a deadline after which a decision is simply handed with the options on the table. The status quo—the existing scheme, with its confusing and inadequate provision—is not acceptable, but neither is the alternative, which would seem to fail to tackle the fundamental problem of fair financial provision both for those who received the contaminated blood and are living with the health consequences and, importantly, the families and loved ones who care for them or grieve for them.

We must be realistic. Like nearly every decision that we make in this place, this does in the end come down to money, and we know that money is tight. It would be unrealistic, indeed irresponsible, to stand here today and ask for a blank cheque to be written, or for funds to be taken from equally worthwhile projects elsewhere in the health budget. What I appeal for today from the Government—on behalf of my constituent, and other constituents who are with us—are two commodities that are perhaps even more precious: time and understanding. I ask for time for these people, including my constituent, to have their cases adequately heard by the Government, and not to be bounced into accepting one of two options, neither of which they believe to be fair or adequate.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech on behalf of his constituent. Does he agree that it would be a tragedy if, at the end of the consultation, some of the victims were worse off as a result of it?

Peter Heaton-Jones: None of us, of course, would want that. We must wait to hear what the Minister says at the end of the debate, but I am sure that we are all aiming for the same result. The least that the people who have fought so hard for truth and justice deserve is a fair hearing, but for many, time is running out. They find themselves in the heartbreaking position of facing the inevitable health consequences of what was, after all, an historical failure of the national health service.

Rebecca Pow: I, too, massively applaud the work of the all-party parliamentary group, which has been working for so long. My hon. Friend has mentioned time. I have just received a text from one of my constituents, who does not want to be named, but who points out that the stark reality is that those infected are dying at the rate of one a month. For these people, time really is of the essence.

Peter Heaton-Jones rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I believe that there was an informal time limit of seven minutes, and the hon. Gentleman has a minute to go. If we cannot get it down to six minutes, I will have to impose a formal time limit, which I do not want to do.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I understand. My Deputy Speaker, thank you.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) makes the perfectly reasonable point that time is running out, and that those people find themselves in an impossible position. I do not seek to extend this process unnecessarily, but the 15 April deadline cannot and must not be the end of the story. It cannot be a deadline after which a decision is simply handed
down. Let us give a proper, respectful hearing to those who believe that an injustice is about to be done, and let us try to put this right.

I also said that we needed understanding. These events have devastated the lives of many people, including my constituent, Sue Threakall. I shall end as I began, by quoting her words in an email. She says:

“At the moment I haven’t the slightest idea how I will be able to manage and am in complete despair. Over the last week it has occurred to me several times that after fighting this for over three decades...I really don’t want to carry on.”

I say to my constituent and to the other campaigners who are with us today: do carry on, and do keep telling us what we need to know. As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who has just left her place, said, it is by hearing the true life stories of those who have been affected that my hon. Friend the Minister, who I know is listening, will be able to take very careful note. Let us do all we can to deliver what my constituent and many thousands of others want and deserve: truth, fairness and justice.

5.6 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to join other Members of Parliament in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her work on this matter, which, among other things, has enabled us to take part in this debate.

Everything that we deal with in this House of Commons is about people, whether they are Syrian refugees or steelworkers from south Wales. Whatever we do deals with the lives of people, and we are somehow led to believe that the larger the number of people involved, the more important the issue will be. That is a basic problem about this issue. There is not, sub specie aeternitatis, a huge number of people who are affected by blood contamination, but those involved have been affected in a way that damages their lives every minute of every day. I would not have known about this issue if it were not for a person in my constituency called Mohibul Islam, who has been in contact with me year after year—I now have a file of correspondence so enormous that I could not bring it into the Chamber—and who has asked me to participate in the debate and to ask a specific question.

Let us be clear about this: I do not accuse the Government of being heartless. It would be easy to do that, given the suffering of the people involved. However, the Government do not seem to grasp the fact that a solution—frankly, I do not believe that there is a solution—would to some extent alleviate the financial consequences. As I said, every one of us in this House, either personally or through someone in our family, has suffered the effects of some kind of health-related problem. In my case, my brother and one of my sisters died in suffering after a long experience of Alzheimer’s disease. There are many ways in which the human condition can be hurtful or troublesome. I am not looking for a solution—frankly, I do not believe that there is a solution in health terms—but I am looking for the Government to show that they care, that there will be an outcome, and that that outcome will, as a minimum, alleviate the anxieties and concerns of those who live with this affliction every single day.

5.14 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), and to be able to follow on from all the work done to bring this debate to the Floor of the House. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing it; it was a pleasure for me, as a proxy member of the Backbench Business Committee, to support the proposal that this debate be held today.

Contaminated blood and the impact on victims was one of the first issues to come into my inbox after I was elected. Someone came to my surgery who had had a
condition but had been otherwise healthy, only to find that they were to have decades of pain and disability because of the treatment they had for that condition—that is almost heartbreaking. Virtually all their life prospects have disappeared because of a treatment they received that they thought would make them better.

It is worth examining the scale of this disaster in our NHS system. We are talking about 4,700 people with bleeding disorders and 28,000 other people becoming infected with hepatitis C; and 1,200 with bleeding disorders and 100 other individuals getting HIV. Of course these people were getting that condition at a time when the medical understanding of it was very limited and the life expectancy was incredibly short. Thankfully, many people have benefited from the advances in medical science since 1985, which have allowed them to keep living, but they still face all the issues that come with that illness and—let us be candid—the stigma that still comes with it from those ignorant about what can cause it.

The issue is about looking at the time that has elapsed. I am sure that, like me, my predecessor, Adrian Sanders, who pursued a number of cases diligently during his time as the MP for Torbay, would not have expected that after 18 years his successor would still be talking about this issue and still be having to speak up for the constituents affected by this scandal, at least one of whom is in the Gallery today. We know that a patchwork of five schemes is in place, and reference has been made to that. To be fair, £390 million has already been paid out, but the impact on these people has been so devastating that it is right that we are looking again at what the appropriate level of compensation is.

It was appropriate that last year the Prime Minister issued an apology. That is something so simple, but it took until 2015 for it to happen. I agree that we are not in a court of law today, but it is right that we seek to provide some form of justice to those who for so long have found themselves on the receiving end of life-changing conditions.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): We have used the word “justice” all the way through this debate. I have listened to it all and I was not intending to intervene, but I must say that in fact there is no justice we can give people who have contaminated blood—that has been taken away from them. All we can do is give them the best possible help, financially and in care terms. They will never get justice, and it is improper to suggest they can—we cannot do it, it is too late, they have had that taken away and money will not compensate.

**Kevin Foster**: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for such a thoughtful intervention. We cannot give them justice; we cannot restore them back to where they were before the impact of this scandal, but we can compensate them. We can try to mitigate the impact and give them a life that is appropriate, as best we can. Today’s debate is right to focus on that.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Kevin Foster**: Briefly, but I am conscious of Mr Deputy Speaker’s guidance.

**Mrs Drummond**: My hon. Friend has mentioned some of the impacts, and I think there is an impact relating to housing. A lot of people with very low incomes are finding it difficult to access reasonable housing, including my constituent Sally Vickers, who has been told by Portsmouth City Council that she cannot be rehoused, despite a threatening condition caused by receiving contaminated blood. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the Minister needs to advise local authorities to make sure that the housing is adequate for such people?

**Kevin Foster**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. This is also about making sure local authorities are aware of the support packages and the possible impact on benefit calculations. During my time as a councillor in Coventry I was approached by someone who was constantly being invited in for a fraud interview because they were receiving funds from one of the trusts. Those trained in these trusts have mostly retired now because of the time that has elapsed since this was put in place; the numbers involved are very small so new members of staff would not be so familiar with this. To be fair, that particular incident was resolved.

Initially, my constituents were pleased to hear that a consultation was going to happen and that £25 million would be available. They waited for it, but when it was announced it is safe to say that they were extremely disappointed. The problems, which have already been listed, include the fact that recipients could receive less than they do now, as some of the top-ups and support may be abolished. Some of the support could rely on assessments. I say that tentatively, as I have looked at this issue of repeated assessments. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I have looked at the work of the Department for Work and Pensions, and there is no great enthusiasm to see more people going through an annual assessment, particularly when, for many of these people, only a miracle cure will make any form of difference. The conditions are lifelong and permanent. They have been with them for decades and are not likely to be something from which they will recover.

I hope that the Government will relook at the proposals they put out for consultation, and take on board the comments from the all-party group, which have been put forward in a constructive and genuinely helpful way. I ask the Minister to take a view on what is being done in Scotland, and to explain why the UK Government do not think that the Scottish model would be appropriate here. If there is a particular reason, let us hear it. For me, it seems that the model has been welcomed and could be taken forward here.

I do hope that, after 30 years, we can finally take a step forward, deliver justice and ensure that people get the compensation for which they have waited so long. They need a resolution to these matters, which have been going on for decades.

5.21 pm

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am extremely grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate today and to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing such an important issue to be brought before the House. I add my praise to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her
outstanding leadership. As a member of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, I feel strongly that it is right that the House consider this matter and that more should be done. I also feel that it would be unconscionable if any reform that did come about actually reduced the support currently being received by people who have been victims of this appalling episode in the history of our public health system.

As we have heard, between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, 4,670 people with haemophilia were infected with hepatitis C through their NHS treatment and the transfusion of contaminated blood. Of those, 1,243 people with haemophilia were also exposed to HIV. Almost half of those infected with hepatitis C, and almost three quarters co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C, have since died. Many have experienced poverty and discrimination as a result of their infections. For so many of the victims, the simplest of daily tasks can become difficult and, in some situations, frightening. Such a scenario can be seen in the life of one of my own constituents, Mr Michael Gee, with whom I have worked on this issue since I first met him at a constituency surgery in 2013. Alongside many other victims, Michael has travelled to be here today to listen to this debate. The determination to be here is testament to the importance of these decisions. I pay tribute to Michael and to everyone else who is here today and who has been placed in a similar situation.

As a young boy, Michael was accidentally scalded when reaching for a pan of boiling water on the cooker while his mother was making dinner. Rushed to hospital, he underwent a number of blood transfusions. Due to the shortage of blood donors, the Government of the day had purchased blood supplies from abroad, and one of the bags used contained contaminated blood.

Michael was diagnosed with hepatitis C in 1987, and it is a condition that he has had to live with throughout his adult life. Hepatitis C causes chronic fatigue, organ damage as well as significant cognitive impairment and damage to the auto-immune system causing arthritis and muscle problems. There are also a whole range of significant practical everyday problems. Hepatitis C sufferers, for instance, struggle to get mortgages or proper insurance.

Michael is now a father, and due to the nature of his condition he is restricted in his interaction with his own child. Terrified that an open wound could transfer his virus, he often has to wear gloves to put his mind at ease, and keep the safety of his children paramount. Such a scenario is difficult to comprehend for any of us who are parents and we would not wish to see anyone placed in that position.

I do not think that any Government have done enough on this matter. In 2009, the Department of Health reviewed the support for the victims of the disaster, but 80% of those who were infected with hepatitis C were excluded from the financial help. That was on the grounds that their illness was considered to be at stage 1. They had been categorised as stage 1 because they could not prove a certain stage of liver disease. To make things even more unfair, there were serious differences in the help given to people with HIV and people with hepatitis C. One of the biggest and most obvious anomalies was the fact that if someone with HIV died their spouse could apply for ongoing financial support, albeit means-tested, but if someone with hepatitis C died their partner received nothing.

The entire support system is inadequate, and is administered by a multitude of charitable trusts with different rules and criteria, which makes it harder to access. In 2016, the Government are in danger of repeating the errors of the past and once again letting down the victims and their families. Last month, victims of the disaster received letters from the Department of Health consulting them on reforms that could leave some of them up to £7,000 a year worse off. This is not acceptable, and it must not be allowed to happen.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the impact on families. My constituents, David and Vincent Farrugia, tragically lost their father Barry after he contracted HIV and hepatitis C from contaminated blood. The families and the bereaved are not included in the consultation—there is no provision for children, dependants or bereaved families. Does my hon. Friend agree that children and dependants who are now adults should be included in the consultation?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. When we learn the details of these cases it is clear that people’s entire lives have been grievously affected, and it is only right that everyone associated with those injured parties is given the opportunity to take part in the remedy that is required. I would point out to the Department of Health that almost all of the victims of this disaster were infected at least 30 years ago, and there is substantial research evidence showing that by now they have suffered significant damage to their health and earning potential. That must be taken into consideration.

The cap proposed by the Government on annual payments once again shows the lack of compassion and reasonableness faced by these people. The fact that infected spouses will stop receiving payments is grossly unfair. The Prime Minister apologised in the House to the victims last year for what they had had to endure, saying that it was “difficult to imagine the feelings of unfairness that people must feel”—[Official Report, 21 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 1423.]

Given the latest proposals, do not those words now ring somewhat hollow? The chilling truth of this tragedy is that about half of the estimated 5,000 haemophiliacs who were infected have died without ever seeing justice.

I would ask all Members in the Chamber to think not only of those affected, such as Michael, but of the victims’ families, who rely on financial support, which provides the security and stability they need and deserve, and which we as Members of this House have a duty to protect. This is one of the worst episodes in the history of public healthcare and the NHS. Any sense of natural justice leads, I believe, to the conclusion that it must be addressed. We cannot give these people back their health or their dignity, but we can give them closure. We can give them proper financial support—and, frankly, it is time we did.

5.28 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): In my view, real progress has been made, culminating in January 2016 with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon.
Craig Mackinlay:

Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), outlining an additional £100 million, with principles laid out as part of the consultation.

As the Minister knows, I have followed this issue incredibly closely during my time in the House. It has been raised with me repeatedly by my constituent and victim Steve Dymond—the Minister is familiar with his case. Another constituent, Mr Lee Stay, has made himself known to me, and I am here to speak for him too. In the 1980s, he attended the Lord Mayor Treloar college in Hampshire, which was a specialist boarding school with a wing for haemophilic children. He was given factor VIII, but the blood products contained HIV and hep C. He had a liver transplant, and now suffers from Burkitt lymphoma. He cannot work, and his house has been repossessed.

I know rather more about Mr Dymond, who is a tireless campaigner and advocate for his fellow victims. He has not been able to attend today. He is extremely unwell as a result of his hepatitis C infection, but I know that he will be watching and that the whole House will wish him and all the victims we have heard about today recovery where at all possible. Steve Dymond was afflicted by hepatitis C through no fault of his own, having received contaminated blood as treatment for haemophilia, as we have heard from many cases this afternoon. Every day of Steve’s life since his infection has been lived through the lens of that condition. His capacity to work, to enjoy time with his family, to travel, to holiday and to do all those normal things that we take for granted has been fundamentally affected by his infection.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My hon. Friend refers to family. I want to raise the case of a constituent of mine, which I had the opportunity to talk about when we last discussed this matter in July 2015. My constituent, who was affected by contaminated blood, was trying to have a child through IVF. The couple were entitled to one round of IVF through the normal procedures, but they applied for a second round. Despite the fact that their fertility was affected by contaminated blood, they were denied a second round of IVF and had to spend £8,000 of their family money in order to conceive a second child, who has just been born, to their delight. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the context of family and support, it is extraordinary that my constituent had to go through such hardship to extend his family?

Craig Mackinlay: I entirely agree and thank my hon. Friend for his comments. That example highlights the issues faced not only by the victim, but by the family from young to old. It is remarkable that special cases such as he describes are not recognised by the system. I hope that as part of the review those instances will be resolved.

What happened to Steve, Lee and all the others whom we have heard about today was wrong. In many cases it was avoidable. They were blameless victims who were handed debilitating, dehumanising—as my hon. Friend the example shows—and degenerative infections that have caused heartache to all those affected. Although responsibility obviously lies with the commercial suppliers of the products, the NHS unwittingly administered them, and society owes the victims a debt. We must do the best we can to alleviate the pain and illness that victims have suffered. The decision that this House and the Government take should place those victims front and centre.

There are two threads to the approach that we should take. First, we must provide treatment for the victims, who suffer from various complex conditions and symptoms that require advanced and expensive care. It is right that we invest in the care and treatment available for those conditions, and in research. Thankfully, medical advances are making rapid progress. Secondly, we must ensure that as much restitution as possible is made to those who have suffered in that way.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly talks about the blameless victims and the need for compensation. My constituent, who wishes not to be named, asked me about her husband, who was infected in the late 1970s and 1980s. He was a mild haemophilic whose life was not previously at risk, but he is now living with conditions caused by contaminated blood. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the consultation on the proposals it is important that we consider the long-term impact on such families?

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The issue is not just money or the obvious conditions. A holistic approach is needed to what those families have faced. The example that she gives of a minor condition is truly shocking.

Money has been discussed at length this afternoon. Money can never bring back what victims have lost, but it is important that the Government do what they can to bring dignity to the shortened lives of many of those who suffer.

I welcome what the Government have done in relation to treatment. On the new generation of drug treatments, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is developing guidance on three further treatments, and NHS England announced last year that it had made available £190 million so that patients with confirmed cirrhosis from hepatitis C can benefit from new treatment options. The Department of Health estimates that around 550 individuals infected with hepatitis C through NHS-supplied blood and blood products can now access the new treatments under the NHS’s interim commissioning policies.

Medical advances will continue, and there will be beneficial new treatments around the corner, which I hope will stem much liver damage. They may prove to be the salvation for many, but it is early days in this pioneering field of research. There remains some confusion from victims about where the money is coming from, so I would welcome the Minister’s clarification on that. I will continue to push for the best treatments available, and for research so that even better treatments are around the corner.

On support for victims, I await the Government’s conclusions on the current consultation. Central to all of this is the need to bring dignity to all those afflicted. Victims tell me that they feel that the current system has in some way belittled them and that it is insufficient. Clearly a more suitable settlement for such victims is needed. Care for bereaved next of kin, as we have heard this afternoon, remains at the forefront of victims’
minds. The settlement needs to be flexible, and I await the proposals that the Government bring forward to address these concerns.

It saddens me that some victims, including those in my own constituency, do not view the Minister as being committed to this cause. I personally refute that. I have found her to be diligent and dedicated to this tragedy. She has been honourable throughout. She has spoken honestly with me, and with great compassion. On every occasion I have spoken with her about the issue, often late in the Division Lobby, she has been both knowledgeable and committed to righting this wrong. Campaigners and victims, such as Steve and Lee, will not settle for a halfway house. Although we can never turn the clock back, I am confident that the Government will do what they can to give dignity to all those affected.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We are now getting closer to five minutes as the informal time limit on speeches. I ask Members to keep to five minutes, because otherwise we will not get everybody in.

5.36 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her amazing campaigning work, and indeed to the other hon. Members who have fought on and on for justice, often in very difficult circumstances.

The Minister should reflect on the extraordinary unanimity of view in this debate, on the reflections in the consultation, on the proposals that the Government have put forward and on the need to think again. This is not a party political issue, because all Governments are to some extent culpable—Labour Governments, Conservative Governments and, indeed, the coalition Government. This is a moral imperative—there is no doubt about that. We have to offer these people justice, and the Government must accept that.

The Government set out the principle right at the start, in their introduction to the consultation, by stating that they accept and recognise their responsibility to everyone infected as a result of NHS treatment, but that leaves out those people affected. This is about not only those infected, but those affected. What about all the loved ones, the children, the spouses and the partners bereaved as a result of loss of life? The Government should accept responsibility for them as well. They have to accept that when they respond to this consultation exercise.

Serious concerns have been raised about this set of proposals. The Prime Minister said—his words were very clear—that: “We will help them more”—[Official Report, 11 March 2015; Vol. 594, C. 289.]

Yet the proposals, when we see the detail, include a proposal to cut the amount of money that individuals receive. That is not consistent with what the Prime Minister said, so surely the Government must think again. It is surely unconscionable that people in very real need will lose out financially as a result of these proposals. What assessment have the Government made of the winners and the losers? How much will some people lose? It is really important that the Government are open about that. If the Minister cannot respond today, I would be grateful if she wrote to hon. Members to set out the assessment of the amount some people will lose, and of how many people are likely to lose, as a result of these proposals.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and others have said, it is surely not right that people in Scotland benefit more than people in England. Surely everyone should be treated exactly the same as a result of this scandal.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I will not, because I am concerned about the time.

Ending inflation-proofing actually means that we plan a cut to what people are paid every year for as long as there is inflation. Surely we cannot begin to justify that.

I have a problem with the principle of funding new medical treatments at an early stage by taking money from people’s financial support. That surely confuses two principles. We should leave intact the money that is available for people’s financial security.

I am concerned that the money will come from the Department of Health. The impact assessment talks about the other things that cannot be done as a result. Surely the money should come from the Treasury. In the Budget, the Government cut capital gains tax. I heard recently of one individual who will benefit to the tune of nearly £1 million as a result. These are political choices. Do we as a country want to cut capital gains tax and give large sums to very wealthy people at the same time as cutting financial support for people who have lost out as a result of a national scandal? That is surely unacceptable.

I therefore say to the Minister: accept what the Haemophilia Society says, withdraw these proposals and think again.

5.41 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I thank fellow members of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood for securing the debate. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who chairs the group superbly, and I start my remarks the way she ended hers—by saying that we are debating compensation proposals for what has been described as the worst treatment disaster in the history of the national health service.

Some 80% of victims are critically ill as a result of receiving contaminated blood and blood products. They suffer the side effects of past treatments, and they are in financial hardship, having been forced out of employment precisely because of the health issues caused by infection. They, their families and the families of those who have died should be treated with equal primacy.
Only weeks after my election, I was contacted by my constituent Cathy Young, who is a stage 1 widow. Cathy is a member of the Scottish Infected Blood Forum and a passionate advocate on this issue. When I met her last week, I asked her to give me her thoughts on what I should say this afternoon, so let me describe them for the next few moments.

Cathy said:

“I don’t know due to the Scottish Government’s recently accepting the review group’s recommendations what can be said, but what I would say is how can the UK Government consultation regarding other UK widows be so far off the mark compared to Scotland. There is more work to be done particularly in relation to extra hepatic manifestations, other illnesses caused by hepatitis C other than liver disease. What will the UK Government do to address this?”

She sent me an email today saying she was sorry that today sees the funeral of another victim of contaminated blood.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) have pointed out, the Scottish Infected Blood Forum has identified 25 families resident in Scotland who would be covered under the proposed UK Government scheme, as the original incident took place while they were resident elsewhere in the UK. Therefore, MPs representing constituencies in Scotland may find themselves representing constituents with two distinct offers of compensation. That is not fair—it is completely unjust.

The Haemophilia Society has sent an email, which I think the Father of the House has touched on, about the differences between the UK and Scottish Government proposals. It is worth emphasising those differences for the benefit of those watching these proceedings. Those in the rest of the UK with advanced HIV or hepatitis C will get £12,000 less in annual payments. Those elsewhere in the UK who are co-infected with hepatitis C and HIV will get £7,000 less in annual payments, and there will be limited or no support available for the widows, partners and children of those infected. There will be substantially reduced ongoing support for those elsewhere in the UK.

The Scottish Government are, in effect, committed to almost doubling the support they give to victims, widows and widowers, and dependent children. The Haemophilia Society is concerned that, without significant revisions to their proposals, the UK Government will fail to offer the example set by the Scottish Government in offering victims of this terrible tragedy and their families the support they deserve. I hope that Ministers in this place recognise that and that they will address the issue.

There is now a very real concern that the UK Government have broken their promise to deliver improvements to the current scheme of payments. In early 2015, the Prime Minister said:

“I want us to take action. I am not sure whether that action will ever fully satisfy those who want this wrong to be righted, but as a wealthy and successful country we should be helping these people more. We will help them more, but we need Penrose first, and if I am standing here after the next election it will be done.”—[Official Report, 11 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 289.]

Where do we go from here? The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, who represents part of my constituency in the Scottish Parliament, has summed it up beautifully:

“In total, of course, hundreds of people in Scotland died after being infected through blood transfusions and even after all this time it is still hard to imagine the difficulties, the anxieties, and the hardships that people and their families have had to contend with.

In addition to dealing with the illness itself, you’ve had to cope with uncertainty, with sorrow, and with grief. Many people, of course, feel stigmatised despite being utterly blameless. And I know that people still fight daily battles, both physical and physiological, to achieve some kind of normality in their lives… We as a society have a moral obligation to help people who are infected with an illness by the Health Service”.

Let us use those words as a guide to how we take this issue forward, compensate the victims and their families, and provide for them what they truly deserve.

5.47 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It was 1958 when Dr Garrott Allen at Stanford started discovering the risks of contamination in blood. Over the next 20 to 30 years, he spent his time trying to persuade people that commercial blood companies probably knew early on—they certainly knew later on—that one in seven of those from whom they were taking donations was at high risk of contamination. It was not until 1991 that Crown immunity was lifted from the blood products laboratory. If people look at the taintedblood.info website, they will see the chronology, which is pretty accurate and very useful.

That does not solve the problem faced by the Government, Members of Parliament and those affected. I propose that, while the national health service should be treating people, responsibility for dealing with the compensation and trying to make up for the costs to those affected should be taken away from the Department of Health and held jointly by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. I think that that is the only way of solving the problem of Scotland having to determine where those affected got the infection, rather than their actual situation and where they live. If we are going to have a national approach that not only recognises the autonomy of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish health service but treats people fairly, we have to find a way of getting the non-health aspects away from the Department of Health. I ask the Government to consider whether there is any way of doing that effectively.

Moving on to how people should be treated, I have received a message from someone on behalf of the nearly 200 co-infected people and the 2,220 mono-infected hep C stage 1 victims. Here are some words directly:

“Now about the way they are blackmailing us over the drugs! I and every other Haemophiliac have never paid for our Factor VIII, I have never paid for any of my HIV anti viral drugs, and my other prescription charges are covered by a pre payment certificate, my blood tests, ultrasounds scan, Fibrosans, and all my appointments are covered by the NHS! So why would they even consider asking us if we think the money should come out of the additional £100 Million they have offered as financial help?”

The answer to that is that it should not. By the way, to those for whom the proposals on which the Government are consulting would lead to a reduction in income, the Government certainly should say that they need to be red-circled—that their money will remain the way it
is—and no one should have their money reduced as a result of the changes. We are trying to extend help to people, not to reduce it.

I turn to another quote:

“Co-infected Haemophiliacs need a voice in the debate, we are so few left, dealing with two viruses as you know has increased complications. We need to be respected and remembered as are the Scottish Haemophiliacs in the midst of all the mono Hep C victims.”

Being co-infected with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C is the equivalent of 2nd stage Hepatitis C, but at the top end where someone has received a liver transplant, has a limited life expectancy and has to take medication every day for the rest of their lives or die, but the co-infected also has the additional problems of having the illnesses both these viruses can cause—even to the point doctors cannot tell which virus is causing the problem. On top of this we have the life-long secrecy and stigma attached to HIV/AIDS virus.”

It seems to me that we have got to say to Government that they may be trying more now than Governments have tried before, but it is not appropriate for Department of Health Ministers to have to balance this against other treatments. It must come out of the Department of Health so that the money can go properly to those who have suffered because we made mistakes and the American blood companies made mistakes. We need to recognise that. I am not talking about liability; I am trying to deal with what should happen now.

As it happens, the first person in my family to take an AIDS test was my mother, who had a serious operation and received lots of blood. The second was my wife, who received eight units of blood in 1975 when the issue started to come out. I have my blood tested for HIV/AIDS and hep every 10 weeks as a blood donor. I only wish that we had remembered what Richard Titmuss said in his book about giving blood, “The Gift Relationship”. We do it for free, and we do not know who is going to benefit. The people who benefit do not know where the blood comes from, but at least it comes from people who have been tested to make sure that it is safe for our blood to be passed on.

5.52 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I add my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on what she has said today and on her outstanding leadership on this issue. She will be encouraged by the commonality of view—it goes further than consensus—across the House, and I hope that the Minister will take note. Back-Bench debates are often not party political, but I cannot remember another debate in which Members’ sympathies have been so clearly at one. I am sure that many Members feel, as I do, quite let down by the consultation. I will not personalise the matter by referring to the Minister. It is a Government responsibility, and this Government are now in power.

We need to bear some basic facts in mind. This is an NHS scandal. The Secretary of State, perhaps more than any other Secretary of State, has been keen to identify where things have gone wrong with hospitals, practitioners and events in the NHS, and to point the finger and say that what happened was not right. This is the clearest case of that, and it is the biggest scandal in the NHS. We are talking about innocent victims. Many of us—even if the Government do not admit it—believe that there has been negligence and there is culpability, but I think we all agree that there is a moral responsibility.

I hope that we all still believe in the welfare state that was set up after the second world war, and that we all think that the state should act as a safety net. The matter goes further than that, however; it is about state error. It is about the state making mistakes that it is bound to correct. The state has made a variety of mistakes—Equitable Life, flooding and many others—after which it has been able to dig into its pockets and find money because it believes that there is a compelling case for doing so. Perhaps a closer analogy is mesothelioma. Mesothelioma victims have not had the complete compensation that they need, but at least the responsibility to make provision for those people has been recognised, even if one cannot point the finger and say that it is anybody’s fault in particular.

I want to say that this has been a very long struggle. I have been engaged in it only since my constituency boundaries changed in 2010 and I found that I had some sufferers, victims of incidents of contaminated blood, in my constituency. Since then, I have been pretty active as a Member by taking part in meetings, debates, reviews and the all-party group. There have been some important interventions. I credit the Minister for Community and Social Care for the work he has tried to do, and the Prime Minister for the apology he made in relation to that. There have also been concessions, such as that the existing schemes are inadequate and badly run, and that there are too many of them.

We have asked for a full and final settlement, for the overall impact on victims to be assessed and for each victim and their family to be dealt with as individuals, so I do not think that we expected to be in the position we are today. It is a position in which the Haemophilia Society can write quite baldly that “the majority of people currently receiving financial support will be worse off under the new scheme.”

How did we get into this situation?

If I and other Members feel let down, what do our constituents feel? What do people such as my constituent Andrew March feel? His whole life has been fundamentally altered by this. His health, his life expectancy, his earnings ability and his career, as well as aspirational things such as the ability to own his own home and to live a normal life—I thought the Government believed in them—are all out of his reach now. This is a fundamental change, but it has been going on not for years but for decades.

I would say to the Minister that the issue of reduced income must be looked at in full, whether that reduction is because of discretionary payments or other reasons, as must the overall impact on the individual and their family, and the implications, more widely than simply health, on their whole lifestyle. We should not confuse treatment, including the good and innovative schemes that are now available—anybody should receive such treatment from the NHS, to which we all pay in, as of right—with paying proper compensation and ensuring that people are properly rewarded.

Let me end by making two quick points. First, it has been said that Scotland has set an example. It is not a perfect example, but I strongly believe that we should at least be able to match what happens in Scotland. Secondly,
my constituents have told me that they do not feel comfortable filling in responses to the consultation. They do not believe the consultation is presented clearly and honestly, and the questions are phrased so prescriptively that they are unable to communicate what they think. The Government can do what they want—it would have been better if they had withdrawn the consultation, but that has not happened—but they do have the power to respond by saying, “We have made a mistake. We haven’t taken into account everything that should be done. We have to act with compassion and with honesty, and we have to give proper compensation.”

Finally, I must say that I disagree, as I rarely do, with the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). This is about justice, and justice can be delivered by recognising the needs of the community who have been infected in this way. I think that the Government have a duty to act.

5.58 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am very glad to be able to participate in this very important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing it.

I am slightly sad to have to say this, but it is a shame that the debate is happening at this time of day. I know that constituents of many MPs around the country have travelled a long way to come to Parliament today. Some of my constituents were in the Gallery earlier, having got up at 3 o’clock this morning to come down from Glasgow, but they have had to leave to fly back up and go back to work. [ Interruption. ] I appreciate that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), says, it was the Speaker’s decision. I am just reflecting on the fact that that is quite sad, and perhaps the procedures of the House should be looked at, particularly when already vulnerable constituents who do not have an awful lot of money have had to travel a great distance to hear what their MPs have to say. I went to join the lobby outside earlier this afternoon and spent a lot of time speaking to people, and their sense of frustration at having to wait so long for justice was compounded by their not being able to stay for the whole of this debate, after waiting for so long for a chance to come to the House to listen to us.

To move on to the more substantive issues, many of us are wearing ribbons given to us by the campaigners, so I will tell members of the public who may be watching at home what the ribbons mean. The red is for sufferers of HIV, the yellow is for people who have suffered from hep C, and the black is to remember those who have died waiting during this process. It is very profound to see the number of people who have lost their lives, over the piece, waiting for justice and for some answers.

The constituent of mine who was here today is Maria Armour. She contracted hep C in 1981 when she suffered a miscarriage in hospital and needed a blood transfusion. She did not find out that she had been infected until she turned about 35; she took ill and had to find out what was wrong. People did not know and could not tell her. She had to wait two years for a diagnosis, when she found out that she had hep C. The treatment that she began at that time further compounded her ill health. She now has fibromyalgia and lupus, and also has issues with her bowels. That causes her great distress. She cannot go out and her life is on hold.

Despite all that, Maria is a very inspiring individual. I spoke to her today. She continues to campaign. She, like many people, has dedicated her life to others, and now wants to be able to spend time with her family rather than having to continue to fight this fight. I asked her what she would like to be highlighted this afternoon in the brief time available to us. She said that she is looking for fair and equal treatment. She does not want to be a charity case—to have to go to funds such as the Caxton Foundation, or send them begging letters for very simple things that most of us would take for granted.

In particular, Maria mentioned that she was turning 50. She applied for funds for a dress to wear to her 50th birthday party, because, unlike many of us, she did not have the general funds to go out to the shop and buy herself a dress. She has to put in three quotes for that dress—they choose which dress she gets—and gets vouchers to pay for it. She mentioned that when, in the past, she has asked for furniture, she had to have vouchers, so she had to go to the shop to buy the furniture and count out all those vouchers in the shop, in front of people, to pay for it. That is very stigmatising. It is unfair that people have to do that, and do not get money, which the rest of us have to go and buy the things we need to make our lives easier. She has a lack of choices in her life. She cannot go on holiday with her grandchildren, as she would like to. She does not have the funds to do all the things she would like.

It would be easier for many people in Maria’s situation if they got the fair funding that they deserve. I am glad that the Scottish Government have recognised that funding should be available at a higher level. It has been said that it is a shame that constituents in England, and the few in Scotland who are affected, will not get that higher level, but that is not an unfairness on the part of the Scottish Government. They have recognised the issue, listened to people, consulted, and done a lot of work, and have decided what they think is fair. The ball is now in the UK Government’s court—they need to decide what is fair.

Some people have waited a long time—in the case raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan), 42 years—since the initial infection. They need to have what is fair and what is due to them. They are not at fault here. We need to recognise that and find the funds to enable those people to live their lives with dignity as we wish to live our own lives. People should not in any case have to write begging letters to get what they need to live their life with dignity. I commend that point to the House.

6.3 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Jim Dobbin, who worked tirelessly on this issue on behalf of his and my constituents in Heywood and Middleton. As many Members have already identified, this scandal has affected thousands of people who were infected with hepatitis C and HIV through NHS blood products in the 1970s and 1980s. It has been described as “the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS”,...
and was responsible for the deaths of thousands of haemophilia patients. It has, quite simply, been a nightmare for sufferers and their families. It is a nightmare that continues. It has taken away the careers, hopes, dreams and aspirations of thousands of people, including constituents of mine, just because they needed blood.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), the co-chairs of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. Their inquiry into current support for those affected by the contaminated blood scandal in the UK is a superb analysis. The current system for administering compensation is a nightmare and a scandal in itself. We are still in the absurd position of having five trusts, two private companies and three registered charities which give various kinds of assistance to the people affected. The people who should be helped most, the victims, are very far from happy with the present situation.

The all-party group’s report highlights that many beneficiaries are in poverty. At present, the widows and widowers of hepatitis C infectees receive no ongoing financial support whatever. The majority of people with hepatitis C—namely, those with chronic stage 1 hepatitis C—also receive no ongoing payments. People can apply for discretionary payments for all manner of items through the three charities, but, as has already been highlighted, many find the process of having to provide evidence of need for help deeply frustrating. They feel as though they are begging. Registrants report being left completely in the dark about what discretionary support is available to them. This has meant that some people have not received payments they were entitled to. Many more people with hepatitis C are aware of the trusts’ existence, with considerable issues of low take-up. Many people with hepatitis C are unable to obtain payments from their trusts because the NHS has lost their hospital records, or because the trust has denied they are at the sufficient stage of hepatitis C infection to warrant support, even though their own hepatologists have insisted that they are.

The report recommends that the Government second a public health doctor to the five trusts to ascertain the needs of beneficiaries and set Government funding at the level commensurate with need. This also means extending some form of ongoing payments to those with stage 1 hepatitis C and giving the widows of hepatitis C infectees entitlement to the same payments as those of HIV infectees. The trust system has to be reformed and nobody should be left in the dark: they should be told precisely what support is available to them. Those facing difficulties providing proof that they were infected should also be able to get help with their applications.

During the Westminster Hall debate on contaminated blood on 9 September 2015, the Minister was questioned on the commencement date of the public consultation on support for those affected by infected blood. She stated it would occur before the end of the year. It was announced on 21 January 2016. The statement on the launch of the public consultation announced funding of £100 million for the proposals set out in the consultation. That is in addition to the current spend and the £25 million already announced in 2015. The Department of Health previously estimated £455 million as the future cost of meeting payments for the assorted schemes. It is not clear whether the £125 million is in addition to that, or represents projected funding being brought forward.

We wish to know how the Department of Health intends to distribute the £125 million. I appreciate that the consultation has not concluded yet, but a rough outline would be appreciated. Is it intended to end all discretionary or top-up payments to those who receive ongoing payments? Are there plans to allow special discretionary payments for dependants—either partners or children? Will there be a review mechanism regarding the freezing of the level of payments at £15,000, or will the sum remain at £15,000 regardless?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), I should emphasise that I want to be able to call the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) by 6.26 pm. I am sure the hon. Lady will factor that into the equation.

6.9 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing forward this debate, along with the co-signatories. I was pleased to be one of them.

Today’s debate is the latest in a number of discussions we have held in the Chamber and Westminster Hall on the support arrangements required for people infected with contaminated blood. I pay tribute to the many advocates throughout the UK on the vexatious subject of tainted blood and to the Haemophilia Society. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said there was striking unanimity across the Chamber that this was not a party political issue but one that impacted on the lives of many people, not only the direct victims but the families, spouses, partners and children who, in many instances, have become carers. It has forced many people into poverty and destitution, which should never have been the case.

There has been a renewed urgency to this debate, particularly since last July’s urgent question, and in that regard I would like to put on the record my thanks to and praise for the work of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. However, I would not overstate that urgency, given that publication of the consultation has been repeatedly delayed since its announcement last July and the Prime Minister’s apology on 25 March last year. None the less, I welcome the long-awaited publication of the consultation. I do not necessarily agree with many of the contents, but it is one further step to a full and final settlement for the victims of this tragedy and their families.

Sadly, many have died from their viruses, and for others, every additional day they live is a bonus. This must be dealt with comprehensively once and for all. Let no one be in any doubt: there is no scope for delay. We have spoken at length in previous debates about the impact that the use of contaminated blood products imported back in the 1970s and 1980s has had on people’s lives. Lives have been devastated following the contraction of hepatitis C or HIV as a direct result of these contaminated products.
Ms Ritchie: I have spoken before, in Westminster Hall, about one of my constituents, Brian Carberry, from my local town of Downpatrick. I grew up with him and his family. He and his brothers were born with haemophilia. He received blood transfusions in the 1970s and 1980s, and as a result, his health condition became particularly complicated and he ended up with hepatitis C. Only five or six months ago, he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer for which he now receives an aggressive form of chemotherapy.

I have also met two other constituents, twin brothers, from South Down, Michael and Seamus Sloane, who have met many difficult health, financial and interpersonal relationship challenges as a result of their haemophilia combined with contaminated blood transfusions. Their lives have been turned upside down. In all our meetings, they asked for a full and final settlement for people like them. It struck me what amazing advocates they were: they took a very sunny approach, they saw a better day ahead. But that better day ahead can be achieved only if the Minister indicates unequivocally that there will be a full and final settlement for people like my constituents and the many others described in this debate.

Ms Ritchie: I am sorry, but I cannot take any interventions because time is limited.

The health problems that thousands face as a result of this tragedy have been exacerbated by the distress and uncertainty around the support arrangements. Irrespective of how bad things have been, I would urge the Minister, having listened to the reasoned demands of Members of all parties, to state clearly that there will be a full and final settlement, that there will be proper transitional arrangements hereafter, and that people so affected will have the right and direct access to the medication required to help them live with their medical conditions, while the families affected by these problems will also be helped. The tragedy of this scandal must be ended and a curtain must be drawn on it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think three minutes will suffice for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) have still to contribute, and we must try now to get back in time. It falls to the hon. Member for Strangford to exercise Executive leadership in the matter.

6.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to make a few comments in the debate. Let me first thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for setting the scene so well.

Let me start by quoting:

“You can’t give us back our health. But you can give us back our dignity. This tortured road has been too long for many of us. But for the rest of us, please let this be the final road to closure.”

Imagine going to a British hospital in a British city in the middle of one of the richest and most advanced countries in the world for an operation or procedure, and looking forward to getting home, but through no fault of your own, coming out infected with haemophilia or worse. We just cannot imagine what that must be like. For that reason, we must do everything we can to give people back their dignity, as one victim said to the all-party parliamentary group.

The current trusts and systems are not working as well as they could, and they are talking of doing away with aspects of the support for those affected. That is simply outrageous. Of course there are people affected by hepatitis who had nothing to do with the contaminated blood. I understand that we are talking about some 40,000 people across the country, and sadly there is an ever-growing number in Northern Ireland. Scotland has a strong track record through its “Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Framework”. It has set an example for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow.

Let me conclude quickly with these five points, because I am conscious of the timescale you have set me, Mr Speaker. The survivors are calling for a full public inquiry to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005 to investigate fully the events that led to thousands of British haemophiliacs and others with bleeding disorders becoming superinfected with a multitude of viruses and pathogens over many years. Full compensation for haemophiliacs and others with bleeding disorders and their families should be awarded in such a way that closure can be achieved for the majority of those infected and affected, including the widows and dependants of those who have died.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made an important point about the families. He said we should not forget them, and we are all saying the same thing. We hope that the Minister will respond to that, and we want a full and comprehensive acknowledgement by the Prime Minister. He has apologised, but the apology has been lost in the delays that there have been. There are also lessons to be learned from what happened to the haemophiliacs, and measures should be put in place to protect the patients of the future. There have been missed warnings, failures to pass on test results to patients, procedural errors and non-consensual testing.

Let me conclude. Imagine being one of those innocent people, and imagine the difference that delivery on some of these aspects would make. As the testimony I quoted earlier said:

“...you can’t give us back our health. But you can give us back our dignity. This tortured road has been too long for many of us. But for the rest of us, please let this be the final road to closure.”

On such a sensitive matter, we need to be able to give our full empathy and sympathy to those affected. I really believe that the Government need to deliver.

6.18 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We have paid tribute to many of the people who have come from across the UK to listen to today’s debate, but there is one group missing: members of Haemophilia Scotland, who are in Tayside attending a funeral of one of their members, the second of three brothers who have haemophilia. The remaining brother has had a transplant because of liver damage. I expect that everyone here would want to send their condolences to the family.
Let us recall that this scandal has been going on for over 40 years. People have been dying without being recognised and without being looked after for all that time. It really is a disgrace. We talk about not accepting liability. I have my specs on because I want to read out some quotations, which, as Members know, I do not normally do. I have a letter here. According to a leading doctor in the Food and Drug Administration in America, in May 1985, heat treatment of blood products had been available for some time, but non-heat-treated blood could continue to be produced with the current licences because the FDA was not going to do anything about it. It could have regulated the practice out, but it wanted things to be tidied up quietly. The doctor explained that although the FDA could revoke the licences through regulatory process, it did not want any attention to be paid to the fact that the practice had been allowed to continue for so long; it wanted the issue to be “quietly solved without alerting the Congress, the medical community and the public.”

I have a copy of a letter from John Major, the former Prime Minister, who was at the time Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In 1997, he wrote to Tony Newton, then a Health Minister, raising the possible consequences of a sympathetic response to the Haemophilia Society:

“It could lead to an open-ended commitment of huge dimensions and
“give rise to court action against the Government because of the implication of negligence”.

He asked Tony Newton to “consider the points” made by the society, but

“with no implication that the Government will take action.”

Here we are, nearly 30 years on, in almost exactly the same situation.

As has frequently been mentioned, this is the biggest treatment disaster in the NHS, and it happened because we were importing American coagulation products and American blood—blood taken from prisoners, or units of blood that were sold. Who sells their blood for donation? People living on the streets; people who are drug addicts. The main reason haemophiliacs and others are suffering is that making factor VIII meant using the blood products of multiple donors, which meant an increase in the risk of a positive result. Moreover, the haemophiliacs received those products over and over again.

Here we are, all these years on. When I graduated in 1982, and when I worked as a young surgeon throughout the 1980s, this was just beginning to emerge and be discovered. It certainly left me, as a surgeon, with an absolute fear of transfusing blood. I used to go to great lengths to use electrocautery and other techniques to avoid shedding blood in elective cases, because we did not know what other problems were there.

Some of my colleagues have drawn attention to the exact terms of the Scottish settlement, but the first three can be summarised thus. People who are suffering from hepatitis C, HIV or co-infection will receive more money, allowing them to receive at least the equivalent of an average income of £27,000. People with stage 1 hepatitis C will receive £50,000 instead of £20,000, and those who have received compensation of £20,000 in the past will be eligible for £30,000 now. It is totally accepted by the Scottish Government that focusing solely on cirrhosis is a rather bizarre way of assessing people, and they are entirely open to an evidence-based piece of work in the future looking into how people should really be assessed.

I think that one of the biggest differences in Scotland is the recognition of the bereaved families. They will receive the money for another year, and will then receive a lifelong pension of 75%. Our flexible fund will continue to be topped up to the point of £1 million a year. As has already been said, that will not give people back their lives, but it can allow them to live with dignity.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) suggested, with a degree of criticism, that Scotland had gone ahead rather than seeking a United Kingdom solution. How long should we wait? Scotland was criticised because although we were ready to screen blood in 1990, we waited until 1991 so that there would be UK screening of blood donations. We made that mistake then, and we cannot make it again now.

Norman Lamb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: I am sorry, but I do not have enough time.

I do not think that we would be debating this matter with the same urgency if there were not the contrast with what Scotland is doing. This is not just about financial support and recognition. All patients in Scotland with hepatitis C for whom Sofosbuvir is appropriate can receive it. I find it shocking that people in England who have been infected with contaminated blood should have to use any of their funding to buy a drug that can increase their quality of life and reduce the risk of giving the condition to their family. We are doing this not just for those patients but as a public health measure. If we reduce the burden of virus in the community, we will reduce the number of new cases.

A year ago, the Prime Minister and our First Minister responded to the Penrose inquiry. That inquiry was carried out in Scotland; the UK has never had a public inquiry on this matter. Both of them apologised, and our First Minister has used this first year to set up a group to look into changing support, and ensuring that people can access treatment and that families are recognised. I call on the Prime Minister to honour his apology and to ensure that patients in the rest of the UK receive the same treatment.

6.25 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to the 21 hon. and right hon. Members who have today provided a strong voice for the victims of contaminated blood. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who has been tireless in her pursuit of justice. I remember her forceful arguments when she asked an urgent question on the subject about a year ago, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) responded on the Opposition’s behalf, and when she asked her urgent question in December, to which I responded for the Opposition. She does real credit to the cause of those who are suffering as a result of this scandal. We must never ever forget the personal tragedies behind scandals such as
this issue means that many of the victims have lost through loss of earnings and the cost of treatment. The on their lives and those of their families, not least scandal. Many of those people were being treated for illness caused by the negligence of public bodies. I am
not frequently on the same side as the editorial line taken by the Sunday Express, but I congratulate that newspaper on its tireless campaign for justice. This scandal has seen families torn apart through death and illness caused by the negligence of public bodies. I am willing to accept that, over the years, the response of Governments of all colours has just not been good enough. When the consultation was published in January, I was clear that while no amount of money could ever make up for the impact that this tragedy has had on people’s lives, the victims deserved some form of justice. We have three days until the consultation closes and I want to use my remarks to push the Minister on four points relating to the current proposals.

First, in the 1970s and 1980s, around 7,500 people were infected with hepatitis C or HIV as a result of this scandal. Many of those people were being treated for haemophilia. The viruses have had a devastating impact on their lives and those of their families, not least through loss of earnings and the cost of treatment. The failure of successive Governments to accept liability for this issue means that many of the victims have lost financial security through no fault of their own.

Mims Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I am afraid that I will not; I do not have enough time now.

The current system of support is only partial; it does not offer the full and final settlement that those affected and their families need in order to live with dignity. Indeed, it falls well below the level of support available in the Republic of Ireland.

We must be honest that the development of support, financial or otherwise, for the victims has been haphazard over the years, and support is always delivered too slowly. However, I remain concerned about aspects of the Government’s proposals. A number of those affected have made it clear to me that removing discretionary payments will make them worse off, potentially by thousands of pounds a year. It makes little sense to announce more funding for a reformed scheme only to remove the critical day-to-day support that so many people rely on. I wrote to the Minister a few weeks ago on that point, so she will know that this is a real issue of fairness and openness. The victims of the contaminated blood scandal deserve better than this, so I will be grateful if the Minister confirms what is intended for the future of the payments.

Secondly, I welcome the introduction of support for people at stage 1, as so far they have been denied the annual payments to which they should be entitled, but I want to ensure that the impact that a person’s illness has had on other areas of their lives, such as employment or educational opportunities, will be taken into account. Many people have had their professional lives cut short or have missed out on higher education, so I hope that the impact on quality of life will be considered as a fundamental part of the settlement. Furthermore, an assessment every three years strikes me as excessive given that, generally speaking, these conditions will not improve. Many beneficiaries will be receiving either employment and support allowance or personal independence payments and will be regularly assessed for them, so it is unnecessary and punitive to impose a further layer of assessment on the victims. Why not have some form of joined-up approach with the Department for Work and Pensions to make life easier?

Thirdly, I am concerned about the plans to freeze the existing annual payments. Many victims of the scandal had promising careers cut short or were not given the chance to embark on one after being infected. They had that taken away from them in the most damaging of circumstances, and it is just plain wrong of the Government to fail to recognise the loss of standard of living, as well as the effects on health and longevity.

Finally, I want to mention the discrepancies between the responses of the Scottish and UK Governments. As we have heard, the Scottish Government will increase annual payments for those with HIV or the hepatitis C virus, increasing the initial lump sum from £20,000 to £50,000. Will the Minister elaborate on what alignment there might be with the English system?

I do not doubt the sincerity of the Prime Minister when he made a pre-election pledge to do more after the publication of the Penrose report, nor that of the public health Minister, who is doing her best with a constrained spending envelope, but I am sure that she will understand the real disappointment that people have been feeling. This drawn-out process has only exacerbated the despondency in the community. Will the Minister tell me when any new scheme will be implemented? The community of people affected need assurances that any improvements to the system will be introduced as soon as possible and sustained long beyond that. Will she commit to a debate in Government time to allow for appropriate scrutiny of the package? We should have a full day of discussions on the matter once the Government have responded to the consultation.

I am sure that the public health Minister appreciates that the longer this goes on, the longer we leave in place a system that does not work and leaves victims without adequate support. No amount of money will ever fully make up for what happened, but we owe to those still living with the consequences the dignity of a decent lasting settlement. It is time to act.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I thank the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the SNP spokeswoman, for granting me a little of their time to respond to many of the points made during this excellent debate. I congratulate members of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, in particular the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), on securing the debate and on their campaigning work, to which tributes have rightly been paid. I also wish to thank those who have taken considerable time and trouble, and made considerable efforts, to travel down to London today to express their feelings to their Members of Parliament; some have been able to stay to listen to the debate. I am going to spend as much of my time as possible responding to as many of the factual questions I have been asked as I can, so let me move swiftly on to that.

The consultation on infected blood scheme reform seeks views on what a reformed scheme should look like. This is the first public consultation on this matter by a Government, although there have been other consultations led by parliamentarians. Obviously, it has attracted a lot of interest from Members, as indicated by the presence of those contributing today. I know that many Members, myself included, have had personal frustrations and concerns expressed to them over many years by constituents.

Members will appreciate that, as the consultation is still open, I am not in a position to give any commitments or guarantees on the shape of scheme reform today. Indeed, I want to reassure the House that no decisions on scheme reform will be made until the consultation has closed and all the responses have been carefully analysed. I have listened with keen interest to the various points that have been made and I will carefully consider the contents of this debate, alongside the responses to the consultation.

None the less, I am aware that there are some concerns—they have been expressed today—about the consultation and some of the proposals, and I will try to address those today. First, let me deal with any lack of clarity on the additional funding committed. To be clear, when I launched the consultation I announced £100 million of new funding for the scheme. That is in addition to the current spend of about £22 million per year and the £25 million announced by the Prime Minister in March 2015, so it will more than double our annual spend on the scheme in England over the next five years.

To date, we have spent more than £390 million on support for those affected, and the additional funds I have announced bring the budget for the next five years to £237 million. That means that, over the lifetime of the schemes, we project that more than £1 billion will be spent on support for those affected. The money comes from the Department of Health budget—I hear the points that have been made about where people think the money should come from, but that is where it is coming from and that is the funding we have been able to identify. We are more than doubling the budget for the next five years. This financial assistance is voluntarily provided by Government to help those infected and their dependents. I wish to ensure, as the key aim of the scheme is to ensure, that the money is distributed in a fair and equitable way within that budget envelope and within the legal framework within which I am working, in a way that is also sustainable for the future.

With that in mind, I want to emphasise to Members and to the House that this is a truly open consultation; I genuinely want to hear from all those who have been affected. It has been very useful for me to hear the points made in this debate. I want to hear what support would be most beneficial within the parameters I have set out.

To give some idea of how widely we reached to try to get responses to the consultation, I should say that letters have been sent to all 3,482 registrants of the existing schemes to make them aware of the consultation and provide them with details of how to access it. Letters were also sent to almost 180 Members who have at various times, by various means, contacted us on behalf of constituents over the past year or so, and they have been urged to respond, too. We have already received more than 1,200 responses to the consultation, and I hope that reassures some Members, including the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who were worried that people might have found the consultation difficult to respond to. That is a very good level of response and it is enormously helpful. I am very pleased that so many people have taken the time to feed their views into the process. It might be helpful and, I hope, reassuring for Members to know that a specific team in the Department has been established to ensure that every response is read in full and captured in the analysis, and given that respectful hearing to which one Member referred.

It has been very valuable in the contributions to the consultation we have already received to hear from the quieter voices in the affected community that I have spoken of before. Indeed, I have been struck—in some ways shocked—by the number of affected individuals who were not aware of some of the support potentially available to them, such as the discretionary financial support and non-financial support provided by the three charitable scheme bodies. That has reinforced my sense, which I think is shared across the House—I say that especially in the light of today’s debate—that scheme reform is necessary, especially with a view to simplification and transparency. That point was put very ably by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). There are still a few days left in which to submit responses, and I encourage anyone who has not responded but would like to do so to respond before midnight on 15 April.

Let me turn to some of the proposals in the consultation. I know that some of the charitable scheme bodies wrote to their beneficiaries to help clarify the consultation proposals, but some of the nuances were lost in the letters. A number of speakers, including my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), have reinforced that point. Let me confirm that the crux of the consultation is the proposal that every chronically infected individual would, for the first time, receive an annual payment under a reformed scheme. At the moment, those who are registered with the Skipton Fund at hepatitis C stage 1—that is 2,424 people, which is more than 70% of the total number of infected registrants—are not eligible for annual financial support. We are proposing a new annual payment for everyone in that group, reflective of the level of ill health they experience.
Should the proposal be taken forward, we anticipate that a large proportion of the additional money committed will be used to provide these new payments.

The proposed reforms would continue annual payments to those who currently receive them, which is, approximately, 840 people. Those who are currently registered with the Skipton Fund at hepatitis C stage 2, and those with HIV registered with MFET Ltd would have their payments increased to a rate of £15,000 annually, and those co-infected with HIV and Hep C would benefit from an uplift to £30,000. That means that, over the next 10 years, someone with hepatitis C stage 2 would receive £150,000 in addition to any payments they have received to date. Someone co-infected would receive £300,000 in addition to the support they have already received. None of those payments is taxable, nor does it affect a person’s entitlement to any state benefits.

There has been mention of the link to the consumer prices index. I know that there is some concern about the proposal to remove the linkage to CPI. CPI linkage can result in an annual increase or, in theory at least, a decrease in payments. This year, CPI was negative, but we decided to freeze payments to ensure that support for infected individuals did not decrease as a result. Fixing the payments at a set rate would provide more financial certainty over this spending review period for those receiving annual payments. However, I will take very careful account of the concerns that have been raised in response to the consultation when making my final decision on this matter.

Norman Lamb rose—

Jane Ellison: I will give way if the right hon. Gentleman is really brief.

Norman Lamb: The Minister has explained that many people will benefit, but will there also be losers? If there are, will she write to confirm how much they will lose by and how many people will be involved?

Jane Ellison: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that clarity today, and there is a specific reason for that. I will move on to discretionary support for infected individuals. Obviously, I have heard the concerns—I have had a number of letters and held a number of meetings. Some people came to the surgery that I organised. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North was not able to make it, but other Members came and talked about this point. In the consultation, we did propose providing discretionary payments only for travel and accommodation costs. We addressed this issue because, prior to launching the consultation, one of the main criticisms of the current system raised by different groups of beneficiaries and their MPs and by the all-party criticism was that discretionary grants and the process of applying for them was “demeaning”.

However, I am aware that, through the consultation responses, a number of beneficiaries are troubled by the consultation question on discretionary payment, and those voices have been heard today. In principle, discretionary support should be means-tested, which means that it will vary with circumstances over time. However, it has become clear that, through the independent charitable schemes, a relatively small number of individuals are receiving regular and significant levels of discretionary—as opposed to regular—support. I encourage anyone who feels that they are in this position, or would lose out as a result of the consultation proposals on discretionary support, to reply to the consultation explaining that. No decisions have been made about some of the other discretionary elements on which Members have touched. I hope that clarifies the distinction between our assessment of the impact of annual payments and the impact of discretionary payments, some of which could not be known to us because they were put out through independent charitable schemes.

I welcome any suggestions that respondents may have in relation to the proposals and what would be of benefit to them. This, along with the rest of the consultation responses, will help us to decide what we might be able to do within the budget. We are well aware that some of the non-financial elements of support, which are currently provided by the charitable schemes, are valued. I want to reassure colleagues that we are entirely open-minded about this provision. As I have emphasised previously, it is up to people to tell us through the consultation what they most value in that non-financial support.

Let me touch on the Scottish reforms. Clearly, that has been quite a key theme today. I have been asked to consider matching the recent reforms. The Scottish Government established a financial review group, as we heard, and they announced their plans on 18 March. The package announced by the Scottish Government differs from the proposals on which the Department is consulting. One major difference is in relation to annual payments provided to infected individuals. The Department of Health proposals for England are intended to ensure long-term stability and security to all infected individuals. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) made a point about long-term security and sustainability. To reiterate, in England, there are about 2,400 individuals with hepatitis C stage 1 who do not receive any annual payment. Our proposal is to provide a new ongoing payment to all those individuals that reflects the level of ill health that they experience. The Scottish Government have chosen to provide a lump sum payment.

Sir Gerald Kaufmann rose—

Jane Ellison: I am really sorry—I will barely get through the points that I have to make.

Sir Gerald Kaufman: Is the hon. Lady going to answer the questions that I put to her?

Jane Ellison: I am sorry. I have made a note in the margin of my speech to respond directly to the point made by the right hon. Gentleman, if I can get to it. I will try to deal with all the points that were made, and if I do not, I will write to Members after the debate.

The Scottish Government have chosen to provide a lump sum payment, and they currently have no proposals for annual payments to the hepatitis C stage 1 group. To give an idea of the difference, in England, over a five-year period, a stage 1 Hep C sufferer who currently gets nothing but is awarded the highest proposed annual payment of £15,000 would receive £75,000. Officials from the Department of Health and the Scottish Government continue to exchange views on scheme reform, and we will reflect on the points that have been made today.
Let me touch briefly on the point about Wales and Northern Ireland. It is a matter for the Welsh and Northern Irish Governments to decide how support is provided for those infected in their areas, but they could opt to make the same reforms as the Department of Health and, indeed, participate in some administration arrangements following scheme reform. My officials hosted a meeting on 24 March with officials from each of the devolved Administrations to discuss scheme reform, and they will continue to work with their counterparts from the DAs on that.

Let me touch on treatment. I understand the points that have been made. Since I launched the consultation in January, the NHS has committed to doubling the number of patients treated with new therapies to 10,000 in 2016-17. NHS England has allocated £190 million from its budgets for 2016-17 for rolling out treatment with these new therapies. I will take into account this significant recent development, along with the responses to the consultation, when making decisions on treatment and payment for it from the scheme’s allocated fund when the consultation has closed. I have noted the clear steer Members have given me about treatment being taken forward by the NHS. I emphasise, however, that legally, the NHS cannot prioritise patients according to route of infection, and can only do so according to clinical need, as Members will understand.

Turning to where we go next, the outcome of the consultation will be crucial in informing our final decisions on how to proceed. We will analyse and reflect on all the responses, and although the scheduling of a debate is not in my gift, I will seek to provide an opportunity for colleagues to discuss the proposals with me before any final decisions are made. I will continue to keep Opposition Front-Bench teams closely informed, as I have sought to do throughout. I give the House, and those affected, my commitment that we will proceed as rapidly as possible to implementation. However, I recognise that any reforms must be implemented in a measured way, to give those affected time to adjust, and at the same time ensure that there is no disruption to the provision of ongoing support.

I said when announcing the consultation that my intention was that the new annual payments for the current stage I cohort should be backdated to April—this month—regardless of when an individual’s assessment took place. I stress that we are very keen that any assessment is simple and light touch. We do not anticipate any interaction with the benefits system, but I will raise with the Department for Work and Pensions the points made by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) in his thoughtful contribution. We are aiming for simple, light-touch assessments every few years, and if someone’s health deteriorates we want to be able to respond appropriately.

I have tried to address some of the concerns, but I am conscious that I have not covered all of them. After the debate I will review them and respond if I can. I hope the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) will appreciate that I am not able to answer the points that he raised before the end of the debate.

The consultation will be genuinely open and I urge everyone with an interest to respond. I hope to take matters forward in a constructive and open way.

Diana Johnson rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady will have two minutes because I am here and I will insist on it.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. We have had an excellent debate. We had more than 23 speakers in the three hours that we were allocated. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us that time. I also thank the many people who travelled from all around the country for the debate to listen to what another Member referred to as the striking unanimity across the Chamber about the problems with the consultation proposals that have been put forward. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) phrased it well when he said, “Don’t tell us you’re sorry. Show us you’re sorry.” That was an excellent phrase.

Finally, let me quote Rudyard Kipling to the Minister. He said:

“Nothing is ever settled until it is settled right.”

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady, who was commendably succinct.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises that the contaminated blood scandal was one of the biggest treatment disasters in the history of the NHS, which devastated thousands of lives; notes that for those affected this tragedy continues to have a profound effect on their lives which has rarely been properly recognised; welcomes the Government’s decision to conduct a consultation to reform support arrangements and to commit extra resources to support those affected; further notes, however, that the current Government proposals will leave some people worse off and continue the situation where some of those affected receive no ongoing support; and calls on the Government to take note of all the responses to the consultation and to heed the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Haemophilia and Contaminated Blood’s Inquiry into the current support arrangements so as to ensure that no-one is worse off, left destitute or applying for individual payments as a result of the proposed changes and that everyone affected by the tragedy, including widows and dependents, receives support commensurate with the decades of suffering and loss of amenity they have experienced.
Transport for London Bill [Lords]

Bill, as amended, considered.

New Clause 1

TfL ASSETS (CONSTRAINTS ON DEVELOPMENT)

(1) TfL, or any subsidiary of TfL, shall not lease land to third parties which:
(a) has been used in the preceding 10 years,
(b) has been considered by TfL in the preceding 10 years as suitable, or
(c) is adjacent to land in use or in use in the preceding 10 years, for the provision or maintenance of transport services for passengers.

(2) Before TfL, or any subsidiary of TfL, enters into a contract involving the development of land for other than the provision or maintenance of transport services for passengers, it must carry out a public consultation seeking views on the impact of so doing.

(3) Any consultation under subsection (2) must include consultation with:
(a) local communities likely to be affected,
(b) the Greater London Authority,
(c) London boroughs,
(d) the City of London,
(e) relevant trade unions.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.51 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Amendment 1(P), page 1, (Recitals) leave out lines 6 and 7.
Amendment 9, in clause 1, page 2, line 4, leave out “two” and insert “three”.
Amendment 10, page 2, line 5, at end insert “save as provided for in subsection (3).”
Amendment 11, page 2, line 6, at end insert “save as provided for in subsection (3).”
Amendment 12, page 2, line 6, at end insert—
“(3) Sections 4, 5 and 6 of this Act shall not come into force until save as provided for in subsection (3).”
Amendment 13, in clause 3, page 2, line 17, after “TfL”, insert “following consultation with the Greater London Assembly, and the publication of a report of such, and”. Amendment 14, page 2, line 19, leave out “two” and insert “three”.
Amendment 15, page 2, line 25, leave out “two” and insert “three”.
Amendment 16, in clause 4, page 2, line 37, at end insert—
“(1A) The consent of the Mayor under subsection (1) may only be granted after the Mayor has consulted, and published a report of such consultation:
(a) the Greater London Assembly,
(b) the London boroughs,
(c) the City of London,
(d) passenger representative bodies, and
(e) relevant trade unions.”
Amendment 17, page 2, line 38, leave out “all or any” and insert “no more than 25%”.
Amendment 7, page 2, line 38, leave out from “borrowed” to end.
Amendment 8, page 3, line 4, leave out from “borrowed” to “indemnity”.
Amendment 18, page 3, line 13, leave out “Except for the property identified in the Schedule to this Act”.
Amendment 19, page 3, line 15, at end insert—
“(6A) Any consent of the Secretary of State given under subsection (6) above shall be given in an order made by the Secretary of State.

(6B) A statutory instrument containing (whether alone or with other provisions) an order under subsection (6A) above shall not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(6C) An order under subsection (6A) above shall in each case include—
(a) the land registry title number or numbers of any property or properties to be charged, and
(b) a specification of the proprietor or proprietors of the charge.

(6D) The proprietor or proprietors of the charge under subsection (6C)(b) may not be a joint venture partner of Transport for London or one of its subsidiaries.

Amendment 2(P), page 3, line 24, leave out clause 5.
Amendment 3(P), in clause 6, page 4, line 19, leave out “or a limited partnership”.
Amendment 4(P), page 4, leave out line 21 and insert “a member; or”.
Amendment 5(P), page 4, leave out lines 37 and 38.
Amendment 6(P), page 4, line 39, leave out “(c)” and insert “(b)”.
Amendment 20, in the schedule, page 6, paragraph 1, sub-paragraph (c), at end add “subject to the Secretary of State’s satisfaction that TfL has undertaken, or caused to be undertaken, an effective risk assessment in respect of the impact on public health of such use.”
Amendment 21, page 6, paragraph 1, leave out sub-paragraph (d).
Amendment 22, page 6, paragraph 1, sub-paragraph (i), at end add “provided such property is not located within the curtilage of a bus, rail or underground station.”
Amendment 23, page 6, paragraph 1, sub-paragraph (o), at end add “provided such property is not located within the curtilage of a bus, rail or underground station.”
Amendment 24, page 6, line 19, paragraph 1(k), after “machines”, insert “and other property which is exploited for commercial purposes other than within stations.”
Amendment 25, page 6, line 19, paragraph 1(k), leave out from the first “stations” to the end of the sub-paragraph.
Amendment 26, page 6, paragraph 1, leave out sub-paragraph (k).
Amendment 27, page 6, paragraph 1, leave out sub-paragraph (m).
Amendment 28, page 6, paragraph 1, leave out sub-paragraph (n).

**Andy Slaughter:** We have a single grouping of amendments to deal with in what might be the last outing of this interesting and important Bill, after some five and a half years of its progress through both Houses. I shall speak to the large number of amendments in my name. The remainder stand in the name of the promoters of the Bill, and no doubt the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) will address his reason for tabling them. I welcome the concessions that are marked by the promoters’ amendments, which may shorten considerably the length of the debate today.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will recall from our discussion in November that one of my particular concerns about the way in which Transport for London has engaged on this Bill and other property development matters related to the future of Harrow-on-the-Hill station and the access issues pertaining to it. My hon. Friend may not be aware that I have had the opportunity to meet Graeme Craig, property director of TfL. It was a helpful meeting, but it left me worrying that although TfL has plans to improve the access arrangements at Harrow-on-the-Hill station, it does not plan to put any resource into them. Is there anything in my hon. Friend’s amendments or in the remaining parts of the Bill that might help to deal with that concern, which my constituents are likely to be very worried about?

**Andy Slaughter:** That is a complex question—perhaps even more complex than my hon. Friend divines, despite his huge knowledge and intellect. It goes to the heart of the Bill and the fact that TfL has got itself into a sort of spiral with property developers and, as a result, does not know where it is going or where its best interests and those of its customers lie. Is its primary objective to uphold and improve its infrastructure, stock and services? Is it to compensate for the billions of pounds being withdrawn very cynically by the Chancellor, or is it going into a whole new area of operation where it will become some kind of poor man’s property developer? Does my hon. Friend think that this Bill will achieve that objective in such a way that we can have confidence that TfL can use its resources to best effect to achieve its core aim?

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Certainly, my amendments—I will go through them one by one—are designed to improve the Bill in the way she suggests. I will add a slight rider to what she says, however, because I think that TfL, as a public authority, has a slightly wider duty. We see that in the way it has disposed of assets in a cavalier fashion, entered into inappropriate deals with property developers and—perhaps most worrying of all in the context of the Bill—set out at this stage to say that its future priority, perhaps understandably, given the amount of money it is losing to the Treasury, will be to maximise the commercial opportunity of the land it holds. That sounds fine, if the money is going to subsidise fare payers. However, if it produces the type of development that is harmful to the London economy as a whole, and to Londoners—for example, by excluding affordable housing from its prime sites—then I think it needs to be brought up short. The problem is that TfL is trying to do several things at once. Yes, I am sure that it is trying to do as much as it can to subsidise its operations, but at the same time it is taking very risky steps in the deals it is doing with property developers. Part of that will be cured by the withdrawal of clause 5, but not all of it.

Mr Gareth Thomas: I take my hon. Friend back to Harrow-on-the-Hill station, because it is clear that TfL will have to go higher in any housing development, potentially reducing the amount of affordable housing, in order to pay for the access works required. Does he not think that it would be better if TfL, using the funding it currently has for making stations accessible, matched the funding that Harrow Council is willing to put into those access requirements, rather than just building ever higher blocks of housing to pay for it?

**Andy Slaughter:** I am always pleased to be taken back to Harrow-on-the-Hill station, although my hon. Friend normally cons me into going there for canvassing sessions that tend to go on for four or five hours. He is absolutely right that there has to be a balancing act between the needs of the travelling public and whatever development TfL is doing, and I think TfL has abdicated its wider responsibility in trying to get that balance right.

7 pm

I do understand the problems TfL has, which have become very clear since the comprehensive spending review and the last Budget. There has been a massive withdrawal of funds, so there will be no revenue subsidy whatever, which puts TfL in an invidious position. However, it cannot simply abdicate any responsibility and say, “We will build as high as we can. We will build Harrow-on-the-Hill will be foremost in my mind. I have visited Harrow-on-the-Hill and know that it could do with a great deal of improvement. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to fight strongly for that.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Surely the purpose of TfL is to provide the best, most efficient and most cost-efficient transport services for this great city of London. Is it not therefore right that it uses its assets in the best way to achieve that aim? Does my hon. Friend think that this Bill will achieve that objective in such a way that we can have confidence that TfL can use its resources to best effect to achieve its core aim?

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Certainly, my amendments—I will go through them one by one—are designed to improve the Bill in the way she suggests. I will add a slight rider to what she says, however, because I think that TfL, as a public authority, has a slightly wider duty. We see that in the way it has disposed of assets in a cavalier fashion, entered into inappropriate deals with property developers and—perhaps most worrying of all in the context of the Bill—set out at this stage to say that its future priority, perhaps understandably, given the amount of money it is losing to the Treasury, will be to maximise the commercial opportunity of the land it holds. That sounds fine, if the money is going to subsidise fare payers. However, if it produces the type of development that is harmful to the London economy as a whole, and to Londoners—for example, by excluding affordable housing from its prime sites—then I think it needs to be brought up short. The problem is that TfL is trying to do several things at once. Yes, I am sure that it is trying to do as much as it can to subsidise its operations, but at the same time it is taking very risky steps in the deals it is doing with property developers. Part of that will be cured by the withdrawal of clause 5, but not all of it.
the sort of accommodation that is least useful to ordinary Londoners, because that is the way the land lies.” That is not the way a public authority should behave. I hope that the sort of innovative proposals my hon. Friend is putting forward are exactly what the new Mayor will put pressure on TfL to adopt.

Let me start to look at the proposals in more detail. I have some more general comments to make about the Bill, but assuming that we get through Report, which I think we will, we have Third Reading, so I will reserve those more general critical comments until then.

Mr Thomas: Moving on from Harrow-on-the-Hill station, will my hon. Friend deal with the concern that he and many others of us alluded to last November regarding the so-called tax-efficient limited liability partnership model that TfL wanted to use for its property developments? Can he shed any light on how TfL’s plans have changed in relation to that vehicle in the light of the obviously devastating disclosures in the Panama papers?

Andy Slaughter: A lot of the credit must go to Lord Dubs, who obtained a substantial concession in the other place when clause 5 was withdrawn. The chronology is that that preceded the Panama papers, but I suspect that TfL is breathing a sigh of relief, given that its proposals may have come under even more scrutiny had the clause remained in the Bill. I wait with interest to hear what the promoters say about the reasons for the withdrawal of clause 5. Personally, I am just glad that it is has been withdrawn, although I am puzzled they appeared prepared to die in a ditch for it over a period of years and then, following the debate in the main Chamber and the revival motions in the other place, decided to give in gracefully. What their reasoning was for doing that, I am still not quite sure, but I am grateful that it happened.

To that extent, the issue, which was of concern to the large number of Members who attended the last debate here, has gone away, but not entirely, as my hon. Friend will see when I talk about clause 4, which still tempts TfL—if I can put it that way—to enter into relationships with companies that may have a dubious past, present or future. Amendment 7 and consequential amendment 8 are designed to remove that temptation.

Mr Thomas: Before my hon. Friend turns to his proposed amendments, may I take him back again to our debate last November? There was substantial concern among Labour Members about the lack of commitment shown by the TfL management to building a significant amount of affordable housing in any large housing development. I understand that TfL is seeking to move on from that position—I am thinking of a particular site that my hon. Friend knows very well. Has he received confirmation that TfL is now more committed to affordable housing?

Andy Slaughter: Like my hon. Friend, I recently had a lengthy meeting with Graeme Craig and other TfL lawyers and senior managers. The reasonable assurance that I was given was that no firm decisions would be taken on any of the London sites—save for one, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford)—until after the mayoral election, which I think is right.

London Members in particular were concerned that TfL was being disingenuous. It was saying in the free pages it gets in the Metro paper that part of its development strategy was to build affordable housing, but the reality was that it planned to build no affordable housing whatsoever on its prime sites in zones 1 and 2. It said that there might be elements in zones 3, 4, 5 and 6, but that was simply not satisfactory. Let us consider the issue after the mayoral election. It is clearly a matter for each individual planning application, but I would hope that Labour councillors in London would look askance at any proposal that did not include affordable housing.

One of the first three sites proposed was in Parsons Green, which is not quite in my constituency, but it is in my borough. That application has been withdrawn and is being rethought, because the proposals were either not sufficient or not the right type of affordable housing. We know that “affordable housing” is now a term of art and that, when used by this Government, it usually means housing that is affordable to nobody who is not on a seven-figure income.

Let me turn to the amendments standing in my name. I am very grateful for the substantial support I have received from a number of people at the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers in preparing the amendments and, indeed, throughout the whole Bill process. They have been extremely assiduous in providing their expertise, obtaining counsel’s opinion and providing briefings on the Bill. The three public petitioners—Richard Osband, Jos Bell and Anabela Hardwick—not only contributed to that important part of the process, but have been stalwarts in scrutinising the Bill and providing briefings on it. Many Members, not just members of the RMT and London MPs, have also shown an interest; when we last debated the Bill, there were 20 to 30 Members present. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who will get a special TfL Bill badge for being here tonight.

Mr Thomas: A further concern that was aired when we last debated the Bill in November was that the advisory board that TfL had set up to help it with its property development contained no significant social housing providers. Does my hon. Friend sense that TfL has now changed its position and that it is now balancing out the interests of those hard and fast traditional developers with the need for proper social housing to be part of the mix on the sites overseen by the Mayor and TfL?

Andy Slaughter: I am not aware that that has happened. To give TfL the benefit of the doubt, it, like many in London, awaits the outcome of the mayoral election and will take its lead from that. Although I strongly anticipate that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting will be the Mayor—so, I believe, do the bookmakers, who have started paying out on him—I do not think, whoever wins the mayoral election, that we could be worse off than we are at the moment with a Mayor who has set his face against affordable housing. He, and the people he has appointed to be his agents in the matter, have cynically allowed the term “affordable housing” to become more abused than used.
Mr Thomas: I intervene again on my hon. Friend. Friend to suggest that he might want to use at least a portion of his speech on the amendments to encourage the promoter of the Bill to take back from the debate the concern that TfL has no social housing providers in its property development group. That needs to change. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) is elected, we might be able to go directly to him. Perhaps we can encourage the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to use the influence he has on TfL in the drafting of the Bill in that regard now.

Andy Slaughter: I entirely agree. My hon. Friend has made the point very well, and I cannot add anything to it. I intended to say one or two things about housing, but I think I will say them on Third Reading. They relate more to the general principles of the Bill and TfL's approach to the Bill than to the amendments that we are dealing with.

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend has a modest style, but may I encourage him to say two further things on the question of whether social housing providers are invited to sit on TfL's property board? First, will he urge my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) to encourage TfL to listen to our concerns about the absence of a social housing provider? Secondly, will he encourage the Minister to use his influence with TfL to persuade it to put social housing providers at the top of its property development work and on to its property development advisory group?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely concur with that. I suspect that, like me, my hon. Friend finds housing to be the single biggest issue in his constituency at the moment. We have reached a ludicrous stage in London whereby, in many constituencies, including his and mine, it is simply impossible and unaffordable for anybody—not just those who have low incomes or average means, but those who are earning good wages—to access property of any kind. That applies to private rented, owner occupied and even what is cynically called affordable housing. That position has been exacerbated by Government policy and by some local authorities in London over a number of years.

It will take a long time to turn the situation around. It is possible, but it is difficult, and one of the quickest ways to do it is by the use of public land. TfL, as it constantly tells us, is one of the major public landowners in London. There are many others. I have the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation in my constituency, and 70% of that land—the largest regeneration site in the UK—is owned by Network Rail. It will shortly be owned by the OPDC. It is not just TfL that owns land; Government Departments also do so. That is the most immediate and instant solution to the problem, which I suspect Members from all parts of the House would admit of. Even Members who represent constituencies outside London probably have experience of the London property market and know that the situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Even with its current budget constraints, it is wrong for TfL to say, “Nothing to do with us, guv; we are just a railway company.” Of course it is primarily a railway company, and of course its job is primarily to make sure that we have a safe, secure and efficient railway that has capacity. That is a difficult enough task, but TfL cannot abdicate its responsibility, and it certainly should not be making the situation worse by engaging in development that involves no affordable housing.

Mr Thomas: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy Slaughter: I will give way one more time, but then I must get on.

7.15 pm

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend is right to say that housing is a huge issue in my constituency, as it clearly is in many constituencies across London. Like him, I want the public land that TfL has available to be used to create more affordable housing in particular, as well as housing units more generally. Does he accept that TfL needs to take into account a further consideration, which is the character and conservation needs of the space in which such public land will be available? In that context, I think of Harrow on the Hill—not Harrow-on-the-Hill station, but the area in my constituency. Any large TfL blocks of flats will still need to allow local people to see the iconic views of Harrow on the Hill. It is crucial to preserve the character of such areas.

Andy Slaughter: That is right. I am afraid that almost every planning application for residential development I now see ignores all the basic principles and tenets of building on a human scale, with sufficient amenity space and in such a way that impossible constraints are not imposed on existing neighbourhoods in terms of congestion, overlooking and environmental pollution, while also almost entirely excluding social infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools.

This is not the way London was built. Ironically, in the Victorian era—when the railways were built, and the suburbs expanded along those routes—we had far less town planning than we do now, but they somehow managed to build liveable communities, with all such factors. The combination of greed on the part of the developers and desperation on the part of much of the public sector means that we are now building monstrosities that nobody will want to live in.

Ruth Cadbury: To make another observation, if I may, about liveable communities, TfL owns a lot of shopfronts and high street properties. Is it not beholden on TfL, when it develops properties, to give some consideration to the kind of uses that such retail frontages are put to so that we ensure that they provide a usable range of businesses and services for the communities living in the new flats, which will of course include a significant proportion of affordable units?

Andy Slaughter: That is another very good point. I am afraid that it is another one on which TfL does not have a terribly good record. In Brixton market or Shepherd’s Bush market, which I am very familiar with, there are many historical amenities, including retail areas—they have been there for decades, if not, in some cases, for centuries—of which TfL has been the custodian, that are now under threat. Again, that is simply because the bottom line always has to take precedence.

Such an approach is often self-defeating, because we end up building a white elephant. The best example I can give is the Hammersmith Broadway. TfL pressed ahead with that development some 30 years ago. Nobody wanted it, and it ruined the town centre, as we thought,
for the foreseeable future. However, we have now found out that there are plans to pull the whole thing down and start again. Even within its own rather limited and pedestrian view, which is to make the maximum capital out of it, such an approach often does not work. We must have schemes that actually work—work with existing communities, and work in terms of long-term commercial prospects—rather than something that looks as though it will provide a quick subsidy for the sort of works at Harrow on the Hill that were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West.

Let me press on. I am almost the last man standing in this debate—not quite, because I have had the assistance of my hon. Friend and of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth, who have a particular interest in this matter—but it has had a glorious number of supporters so far. I see that the shadow Chancellor has joined us on the Front Bench. I will spare his blushes, but I was just about to pay tribute to what he and the Leader of the Opposition have done. They have really cracked the whip on the Bill. If he has looked at the amendment paper, he will have spotted that I have filched quite a large number of his amendments to propose myself. I would not have done that if they were not excellent in their own right. I will not speak to them at great length.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend like to comment on the drafting quality of the amendments?

Andy Slaughter: They are much better than I could have done. They could not be improved upon by the Clerks, so they get 10 out of 10, not just for their eloquence and presentation but for their content.

If I may, I will deal with the consolidated amendments in three parts, and will come to the promoter’s amendments last of all. In a moment, I will look at two amendments in particular; amendment 7 and amendment 8, which is consequential on amendment 7. I will be looking for a response from the promoter on those. They contain a serious and, to some extent, new point. To show my hand at this stage, amendment 7 is the one amendment I am thinking of pressing to a vote. I am only thinking of doing so, however—it will depend on what the Front-Bench spokesperson and the promoter say. I will explain my logic in a moment.

I will go through the rest of the amendments at some speed. A few might be probing, but they are mainly what we might call improving amendments. They try to make sure that the Bill’s deficiencies—it is rather hasty and secretive, and tries to provoke unwise decisions that have not had proper consideration—can be mitigated in some way. I ask the promoter and the Government to look at them in the spirit in which they have been tabled. I am not very hopeful, because when that same point was made in the first part of Report, in March 2015—my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) was proposing the amendments at that stage—the promoter said he was not going to accept any of them, which I thought was a little churlish. They are genuinely intended to be improving. Let me explain what I mean by that.

I will start with new clause 1. That measure is slightly different. It flushes out one of the problems that we thought we had got rid of with TFL, but I am now not sure that we have. In its enthusiasm to sell off its assets to the highest bidder and to maximise commercial return, TfL sometimes ends up selling off land that it needs now or might need in future. That is slightly counterproductive, because with London property, when it is gone, it is gone. Any public authority that tries to buy back land that has been used from a commercial developer—even if, as in this case, that might be a joint partner—will find the price very high. The developer knows that the railway will absolutely need that piece of land so it will be treated as a ransom strip.

New clause 1 says:

“TfL, or any subsidiary of TfL, shall not lease land to third parties which...has been used in the preceding 10 years...has been considered by TfL in the preceding 10 years as suitable, or...is adjacent to land in use or in use in the preceding 10 years, for the provision or maintenance of transport services for passengers.”

Let me give one example, a very big one and probably the one that the promoter thinks I am going to give: Lillie Bridge depot.

Lillie Bridge depot is one third of the Earls Court and West Kensington opportunity development. As is the case for many others, much of my interest in the Bill has been engendered by that very development, which, until Old Oak and Park Royal comes onstream, is the biggest in London. It is a multibillion pound scheme. It consists of three parts, two of which are, or were, owned in entirety by TfL. I will not talk about this now; I will talk about it on Third Reading. The way that part one of the scheme has been handled—admittedly under the existing rules, because the Bill has not been passed into law—has been so disastrous and cataclysmic for my constituents and the wider London economy that it bodes very badly for what may come forward.

It could be even worse from TfL’s point of view, because Lillie Bridge depot, the second part of the site—the two or three parts are roughly the same size, between 20 and 25 acres each—is a working depot for TfL. It employs about 550 people. It has stabilising for District line trains, and major manufacturing and workshop areas. To all intents and purposes, it is an essential part of the operation of TfL. Unfortunately, the view put forward by TfL’s property division is that it can all go. I have a letter here from Graeme Craig, whom I referred to earlier, from 26 March 2014. It says:

“TfL is committed to bringing forward the development of LBD”—

Lillie Bridge depot—

“In accordance with the approved masterplan or such updated planning permissions as may be approved by the Council. TfL is not able to commit at this stage to how and with whom the development of LBD is to be delivered if it is proved feasible to do so. However, given the establishment of JVCo to develop Earls Court Village and ECP’s control of other interests, it would make commercial sense in due course for both parties to fully explore the potential benefits which could arise should we combine our respective remaining land interests.”

That was a scandalous letter to write and I am pleased to say that Mr Craig gave me an assurance that no deal has been, or would be, entered into with Capco for the development of the Lillie Bridge depot before the mayoral election. What has happened in that area is on the basis of no ownership of that portion of land and on the basis of a masterplan devised by Capco itself. TfL, in a
that new clause 1 is designed to prevent.

It is not only because of the points made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West that we need to worry about what type of development is going on at TfL land; we need to worry about what is going to happen with current usage, either in the case of Lillie Bridge where there is current transport usage, or if there is a potential transport usage. This is absolutely recognised in the HS2 Bill, where HS2 is able to compulsorily purchase, acquire and protect land ancillary to the line, stations or other essential infrastructure that is being developed—for good reason.

Whatever we think of HS2, we cannot allow major infrastructure projects and essential lifelines of the transport system to be put at risk by private development in this way. I therefore ask, without a great deal of hope or expectation, for support for new clause 1. Even if there is not to be support in that way, I still ask for a clear statement of policy from the sponsor on behalf of TfL as to how it intends to protect the operational benefits of TfL. This is not a pious or notional idea. TfL is going into the property development game big time. It is looking at thousands of acres of land across London with transport or ancillary transport uses—by definition, most of its non-operational land is adjacent to its operational land—in a way that I do not believe it is prepared for and that would be a quantum leap in how it operates. All we are saying is that there needs to be safeguards. We need to ensure that it does not shoot itself, or the travelling public, in the foot by giving away, tying up or otherwise compromising land in that way, which I am afraid, is exactly what has happened in the past.

7.30 pm

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend makes a strong point about the risk of taking land out of operational use or losing land that could be put into operational use should transport demands change. Would it not therefore be appropriate to undertake a fully transparent assessment of all TfL’s land prior to any deals being done by the private sector that might take land out of operational use?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful for that intervention, because transparency is very important here. We have asked several times for a terrier of TfL property so we can know exactly what sites are owned and where they are. I certainly think that all London MPs should be entitled to know what sites reside in their own constituencies. That is the first point: we need to know what we are dealing with here. I agree entirely.

Subsections (2) and (3) of new clause 1 would introduce what is a theme in other amendments: the need to consult. We need to consult the public, who fund TfL through their taxes and fares, and the responsible elected bodies—the GLA and the London boroughs—before these decisions are taken. It is absolutely the case that TfL, in the past, certainly before it came under the Mayor’s control, behaved like a medieval baron. It was extraordinarily unaccountable. There is nothing as unaccountable as a public body with no democratic accountability. At least one can sit down with private sector organisations, talk to them and reach a deal. When dealing with organisations such as TfL, as was, or the NHS, as is, one often finds oneself intruding on the privacy of these organisations. Despite their being fully funded by the taxpayer, they have no mechanism for such engagement, which takes us back to the point made by my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Harrow West about ensuring that the boards of these organisations have proper representation of the public and other interests. I therefore say in new clause 1 that the public, as well as the London boroughs and the GLA, should be consulted before contracts for development are entered into.

Part of the role of the Mayor should be to ensure that that democratic element is put in train. I have to say I have not seen any sign of that under the current Mayor. I have found that TfL’s decision making has been just as opaque, and I am hoping we will see a sea change in that. I believe that all public bodies, irrespective of their primary function, have a wider public duty. With local authorities, that is generally accepted. Indeed, there is now legislation saying that they have a community role and function to look after the general interest of their communities, as well as specific individual functions. We have moved a long way from the Nicholas Ridley days of their meeting once a year and handing out contracts. Similarly, other public bodies have a wider role. At the end of the day, such public bodies are taxpayer funded and have a responsibility to the communities in which they reside. We require private developers, through the community infrastructure levy and section 106 agreements, to make a contribution in that way, and I believe that public bodies should equally make a contribution. That is what I am asking for.

That theme is continued in my amendments 9 to 16, which I will deal with more briefly. I feel that this is rather a pinched Bill that wants to do things in a hurry. Whenever steps are to be taken, they are taken within two months, but I think three months would be the normal and more appropriate period of time. I am not sure where the two-month period has come from.

So far as amendments 9, 10, 11 and 12 are concerned, the Bill grants TfL substantial new powers. It is right to say that the two major operative clauses have now been dropped. The first, dropped at a relatively early stage in the House of Lords, was a scandalous attempt to get land sales done without any oversight by the Secretary of State or anyone else. The other is the clause being dropped today, which would have allowed these rather dubious property ventures to be entered into. However, there is still quite a lot of substance here, and we are right to look critically at what the Bill says in those respects.

Clause 1 states that the powers given in clause 4 will come into force at the end of the period of two months, while clause 3 states that the appointed day is at the end of that same two-month period. I see nothing wrong with three months. I am sure that the promoter will enlighten me if there is a particularly good reason for
having two rather than the more common three months. I also say—this is provided for in amendment 12—that none of these provisions should come into force until there has been a review of the...potential risks to the assets of Transport for London arising from the exercise of the relevant powers...and...likely effectiveness of measures put in place by Transport for London in mitigation.”

Some may say that this is rather belt and braces, but I tabled this amendment because of experience. My experience is that TfL has not always behaved with the degree of probity or reserve that is necessary, and has got itself into a mess; later I shall quote the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, who put it in slightly less polite language than that. It is a case of once bitten, twice shy. Where a public body does not have a good track record on consulting and making the right decisions on matters outside its core remit, and where it proposes a massive expansion in the work it does, we are entitled to ask first for a longer pause for proper assessments and reviews, and for consultation. Amendment 16 is relevant here. I am not asking for consultation not with every Tom, Dick and Harry, but with those who have a legitimate interest as the elected representatives of the people of London.

I shall say no more on that. I shall not dwell on those amendments any further. They are improving amendments. They do nothing more than that, and I say the same about amendment 19, which adds to clause 4. It simply sets out in more detail what should happen when consent is given by the Secretary of State under the clause. It says that there should be a proper process, and that it should be dealt with through a statutory instrument.

Amendments 7 and 8 relate to what I shall call my major residual concern; most of my concerns about the Bill have been dealt with. Let me be clear that nobody—no Labour Member in the hall of fame of those who have worked on the Bill—doubts the need for TfL to be as solvent as possible, or to subsidise fares as far as possible. In proposing amendments to clause 4(2), we are not suggesting that it should not be open to TfL—this is a major change in the Bill—to use its property as security for money that it borrows. The idea is essentially to enable TfL to borrow cheaply. It has the power to borrow at present, but it does not have the power to secure that borrowing against its substantial assets, and I see no reason why it should not be able to do so. However, I do think that the phrase “Those things are the charging by a TfL subsidiary of all or any of its property as security for money which it borrows” goes a little bit too far, although it may be simply a term of art. That is why, in amendment 17, I have proposed the substitution of the words “no more than 25%” for the words “all or any”. That is still a substantial proportion of TfL’s property, and I should have thought that such sums would be at least sufficient to fund anything that it could be required to do. The Minister may say that the Government do not intend to allow TfL to mortgage its entire estate, but I think that a little clarity would be advisable.

The main purpose of amendments 7 and 8 is to ensure that, while TfL is permitted to borrow against its own property for the purpose of legitimate investment opportunities, it is not allowed to borrow for the purpose of providing guarantees or indemnities for third parties. The reason for that is, I should have thought, pretty obvious. While debating this Bill, we have engaged in long discussions about TfL’s conduct in the context of its new-found policy of joint venture with its private sector partners. I do not, in principle, oppose that new policy. The logic of it is that, rather than disposing of assets, TfL will acquire a capital sum that could be invested to give a return. It will embark on a joint venture with a development partner of some kind, and will then have both a retained stake in the land and a revenue stream from its development. I see nothing wrong with that, and it seems to fit better into the picture in which TfL needs such a revenue stream more than ever before. Our objection is to the type of partner and the type of deal with which TfL has been involved.

However, the same logic could be applied to TfL’s borrowing. Borrowing for its own purposes and its own uses against its assets is one thing, but borrowing in order to guarantee or indemnify a third party strikes me as completely different. I should like reassurance from the Bill’s sponsor before deciding whether the issue should be put to a vote. In explaining why I say that, I must return to the experience of Earls Court. Not only is it the experience that is most familiar to me, but it is a massive project.

A deal was done whereby a piece of land wholly owned, freehold, by TfL, with some leasehold interests—in some cases quite short leasehold interests—is held by its development partner, Capco. That has been converted into a joint venture. TfL is the minority stakeholder, with 37%, and therefore does not have a controlling interest in what happens to the land. The joint venture company’s purchase price of the TfL land, with the Capco leasehold interest, appears to be substantially below the market price—perhaps by as much as a factor of three, if we compare the price paid, £335 million, with the current valuation of the asset by Capco, which is in excess of £1 billion. Moreover, it is being paid for by the interest-free loan from TfL. Where is the risk, and where is the cost to the private sector partner?

Let us remember that the private sector partner is not the international property company Capco; it is, in that hallowed phrase so often used by the petitioners, and particularly by Mr Osband, a £2 company based in Jersey with no other assets, and which could disappear off the face of the earth, leaving TfL to pick up any liabilities at the end of the day. I and many others were worried that that was the type of property deal that TfL was entering into, and we hope that that worry will now be removed, certainly for any new ventures, by the withdrawal of clause 5. However, such arrangements remain a possibility in relation to how the secured borrowing by TfL would be put to work.

7.45 pm

What is the rationale behind allowing TfL to indemnify or guarantee third parties by borrowing against its own assets in that way? What do the fare payer and taxpayer get out of that? TfL owns the asset, which it is putting up as security. It is borrowing the money and using it for the guarantee or the indemnity. I can see how that will benefit the party that is being offered the guarantee or being indemnified, but I cannot see how it will sufficiently or safely benefit TfL. I need an answer on this point.
I also need to deal with amendment 18 and amendments 21 and beyond. I do not intend to press these amendments to a vote; I am simply looking for explanations. Clause 4(6) states:

“Except for the property identified in the Schedule to this Act, a TfL subsidiary may not charge any property for any of the purposes mentioned in subsection (2) without the consent of the Secretary of State.”

I do not understand why such a division is being made, and I have therefore made some suggestions. I use the word “I” in the broadest sense here, because this was originally the concept of the shadow Chancellor, who is much wiser on these matters than I am. However, I have adopted his logic and his argument here. I do not see why the consent of the Secretary of State should not be needed in all cases. That is why I propose in amendment 18 to leave out the words:

“Except for the property identified in the Schedule to this Act”.

Failing that, I have set out certain points in the schedule that could be changed. I shall not go into detail here.

I am assuming—perhaps “guessing” would be a better word—that there is some rationale behind this decision, and that a property that may be charged without the consent of the Secretary of State would be more remote from the ordinary operational duties of TfL. That is to say that the Secretary of State would have more of an interest in land that was being used for railway purposes than in land that was simply lying fallow or being put to some non-railway use. I am not quite sure of the logic behind that, however, because both types of land would still constitute a substantial public asset. This seems to be going back to the intention of the original clause, now withdrawn, which would have allowed anything to be sold off without the consent of the Secretary of State.

I have suggested that certain modifications be made to certain parts of the schedule, particularly in relation to land that might ostensibly be non-operational but might still be within the curtilage of or adjacent to operational land. However, I am still looking for an explanation as to why the consent of the Secretary of State should not be needed in all cases. A concession was made earlier by TfL, and I am not quite sure why, having made that concession, it has effectively gone back on it by listing substantial parts of its property in the schedule. That is all I have to say about that.

The withdrawal of clause 5 is welcome, although I do not understand the timing or the logic. We may get an explanation, but perhaps I should not look a gift horse in the mouth, as it appeared to be at the heart of the Bill. After the old clause 4 was dropped early on over the Secretary of State’s consent, clause 5 appeared to be the heart of the Bill and TfL fought tooth and nail for it. TfL made some concessions in Committee under severe scrutiny from the public petitioners and following the sterling work of the Committee’s members, but it did not withdraw the clause entirely. We had long debate on it here, but it did not withdraw the clause. The time for the Bill elapsed, and the previous Parliament ended. The Bill then had to be revived, and that revival debate took place both here and in the other place, and the clause was suddenly dropped. That is welcome, but I ask why, and why at this stage.

I will not go through this again, because I covered it, in parentheses, earlier, but we know what the problem was. It was set out time and again to TfL in private meetings, in this Chamber and elsewhere. It was set out by the RMT in negotiations, and by members of the public. We do not believe, either as a commercial matter or a matter of public policy, that it should be open to TfL, or any other public authority, to go into the sort of deals that it was contemplating doing with limited partnerships, which allowed the sort of partners that Capco was setting up to do the deals over Earls Court.

Although that is a big scheme, it would have paled into insignificance beside the many hundreds of schemes that TfL is preparing to run.

I say thank you, because the change is a positive step, but I wonder why it is has happened. We obviously do not oppose it, and are pleased that it will be made tonight, but let us shine a light on it, and get a bit of the transparency that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth was talking about a few moments ago. TfL fought for more than five years to retain the clause, so why is it disappearing now?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport
(Mr Robert Goodwill): I reiterate that the Department supports TfL’s commercial programme. We want TfL to maximise its unique position to ensure that its assets generate revenues to their greatest potential. Giving TfL greater financial flexibility will provide it with the opportunity to run its business in a more efficient way, to the benefit of taxpayers and fare payers. For those reasons, the Government continue to support the Bill and do not support the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), which would generally have the effect of watering down the Bill.

Ruth Cadbury: That aim is creditable, but my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) gave a number of examples of where he has concerns about TfL’s ability to negotiate effectively and to make the best of its opportunities. The Opposition have some concerns about the private sector’s ability to pull the wool over the eyes of public sector bodies—even those as large and experienced as TfL.

Mr Goodwill: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I may be a bit old-fashioned, but I quite like a principle called democracy. London has devolution of power, democratically elected Mayors and other democratically elected members around the city. Giving people the power to make decisions is something that we should do around the country. We should trust the people to elect the right individuals and then trust them to make the right decisions.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I will probably regret it, but I will.

Andy Slaughter: I take slight exception to the term “watered down”. I could have gone on longer, but I thought I had explained pretty fully that this is about not watering down but strengthening the Bill—putting in exactly those democratic elements that the Minister says he wants. I ask him to explain in detail why he objects to the majority of the amendments standing in my name, which simply do what he says: give a surer footing to the Bill.
Separately, on my important amendment 7 and what the Minister says about that, I should say that watering down has been done already by TfL, which has withdrawn the two substantive clauses to the Bill.

Mr Goodwill: Her Majesty's Government believe that, rather than strengthening the Bill, the hon. Gentleman's amendments have the effect of watering down the Bill's provisions or making it more difficult for TfL to use them.

I also note the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to remove clause 5. The clause would have enabled TfL to join with others in setting up limited partnerships. However, it had been amended, following scrutiny of the Bill by the Opposed Private Bill Committee, to provide that the Secretary of State must consent to the formation of the limited partnership by way of an order debated by both Houses. Given the burden that that would have placed on both Parliament and my Department, and the fact that it would have made it difficult in practice for TfL to enter into any limited partnerships, we support the principle of these amendments. I understand why they have been tabled and support them, perhaps slightly reluctantly.

We have already spent a lot of time talking about these amendments—indeed, we have spent a lot of time talking about this Bill altogether. I will therefore quickly conclude my remarks so that we can make progress.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think it is fair to say that this Bill has had an arduous journey through both Houses; a petition to introduce it was presented to Parliament on 29 November 2010. Plenty of people have aged during its passing—some of us visibly. One who has not is my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter); I pay tribute to him as he has clearly improved the Bill during these lengthy discussions. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for their contributions tonight.

Let me take a little time to deal with the amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith has tabled, as they deserve detailed responses. New clause 1 would ensure that neither TfL nor any subsidiary of TfL would be able to

“...lease land to third parties which:

(a) has been used in the preceding 10 years,
(b) has been considered by TfL in the preceding 10 years as suitable, or
(c) is adjacent to land in use or in use in the preceding 10 years, for the provision or maintenance of transport services for passengers.”

That would safeguard significant, useful land from being leased to developers for private profit at the expense of public transport passengers—those who rely on London's transport system in their everyday lives. However, it would not prevent land from being sold; TfL already holds the power to do that.

The new clause would also compel TfL, or any subsidiary of TfL, to carry out “a public consultation” before entering into a contract involving the development of land for anything other than the provision or maintenance of transport services for passengers. A process of consultation before using TfL's land for anything besides transport services is very important, to make sure that local communities have their views and voices heard. The development of land should come from the bottom up, rather than the top down, and with the backing of local people. One need only look at the Earls Court development, for which TfL leased out its assets, to see why my hon. Friend believes that prior consultation before lease and development is so important.

Let me turn to clauses 3 and 4. An insertion to subsection (1) of clause 4 that the consent of the Mayor may be granted to a subsidiary of TfL only after the Mayor has consulted, and published a report of such consultation with, a variety of bodies, including the London Assembly and the London boroughs, is surely welcome. Discussion and collaboration with a range of stakeholders will ensure that a balance between public and private interest is retained. Similarly, the insertion into clause 3 that TfL must consult the Greater London Assembly and publish the report provides greater accountability and transparency. That is important, although we must also beware that the measures imposed on TfL do not become draconian.

A balance must be struck between scrutiny and freedom, and while TfL must act in the public interest, it should also not be restricted more unfairly than other public and private sector bodies. We are sympathetic to the aims of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith. He, along with other Members, has campaigned tirelessly to ensure that this Bill provides the best outcome for Londoners. We are grateful that these amendments will give Ministers and the Bill promoter the opportunity to discuss further provisions in the Bill and to alleviate any remaining concerns, and I welcome their thoughts on that.

Let me turn now to the vexed question of the removal of clause 5, which I understand will happen and which we advocated. Undoubtedly, it was the most controversial element in the Bill, which in our view would have risked TfL entering into opaque limited partnerships. It is quite understandable that, although the clause has been withdrawn, some of my hon. Friends still have reservations about certain elements of this Bill, which is why they have a continuing desire to tweak its text—not least because of the bitter experience of the Earls Court development, to which frequent reference has been made tonight.

With TfL potentially morphing into the role of property developer, I quite understand why my hon. Friends remain concerned and seek reassurance on how new powers will be used. Even without clause 5, these are still significant changes, with significant implications for local councils and communities as TfL comes to exercise these new powers. However, we are pleased that, following the strong objections from Labour Members expressed in previous debates, clause 5 is to be withdrawn.

I must also mention the context against which this Bill has come to fruition. Transport for London recently said that, from 2019, its objective is to cover all of the operational costs of running the tube and bus networks in London through non-Department for Transport grant sources of income. It says:

“We have planned for some time to achieve operational break even by running our business more effectively and efficiently.”
That operational independence—for want of a better word—is happening far sooner than anticipated. TfL says that its overall income is being reduced by £2.6 billion over the period to 2020-21. Its resource grant from central Government, worth around £700 million annually, will be completely wiped out by the end of the decade. I would like to stop momentarily and point out, as I have done previously, that this means that London will be the only major European city transport network that will operate without an operational subsidy from Government. The Campaign for Better Transport put it succinctly:

“Almost nobody anywhere in the world runs a sizable public transport network without” subsidies.

It could well be said that this Conservative Government are cold-shouldering our capital’s transport system. TfL is keen to limit the damage.

8 pm

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is talking about subsidies from the Government. Does he not agree that these are subsidies from taxpayers? They are paying for the subsidies.

Daniel Zeichner: That is a fine distinction. Most of us understand that the reason we pay our taxes is for exactly the kind of high quality transport system that a capital city such as London needs, and it is a huge risk that this Government are taking. The Government are forcing TfL to limit the damage, and they are using ingenious means and utilising existing assets to do so. The Budget indicates that there will be a move towards the full retention of business rates by local authorities, and we welcome the ability of local councils to have control over funding, but this is uncharted territory and we should be in no doubt about the risks to our transport system in London—risks that are a direct consequence of the political choices of this Government.

We want TfL to be modernised and to become a highly efficient public sector organisation. TfL has been making savings, some very difficult and controversial, but in its annual budget in 2014, TfL said that it is “becoming progressively more difficult to achieve this without compromising our core services.”

This pattern of cuts is visible not just in the capital, but across the country. Cuts to local authority budgets have been extreme, leading the Local Government Association to point out that even if councils stopped filling in potholes, maintaining parks, closed all children’s centres, libraries, museums, leisure centres and turned off every street light they would not have saved enough money to plug the financial black hole they face by 2020. Department for Transport resource funding has been cut by 37%, from £2.6 billion in 2015-16 to £1.8 billion in 2019-20, representing a real terms decline of 71% since 2009-10.

Let us consider the fact that last year a record 8.6 million people were living in London. By 2030, that figure is predicted to reach 10 million. That is the pressure under which TfL finds itself. We are not ideologically opposed to TfL’s maximising the value of its assets to increase the revenue seized by the Treasury. They do what they have to do, and using resources efficiently is important to keep our capital city running.

On Second Reading, my hon. Friends and I expressed concern about certain measures in the Bill, including clause 5, which we have discussed. We are happy with the principle and understand the necessity of TfL’s having greater commercial freedoms, but the implications of those so-called freedoms were problematic. The controversial Earls Court development, a joint venture between TfL and the private developer Capital & Counties, set a worrying precedent for further public-private partnerships. Clause 5 would allow TfL to enter into limited partnerships with private property developers. Those partnerships are vague in legality and opaque in accountability.

I said on Second Reading that we must consider carefully the long-term impact of introducing powers to enter into those partnerships. We are reassured both by the fact that TfL has noted those concerns and by its decision to table amendments to remove clause 5 and references to limited partnerships from the Bill. It is encouraging that our opposition to that problematic part of the Bill was taken into account, and we are pleased with the outcome.

I also spoke on Second Reading about the importance of putting public needs above private profit. Property development to increase TfL’s revenue must not happen without the backing of local communities—those who are affected most directly. Those who bankroll projects should not subsequently be able to steamroll over local people. TfL is obliged to obtain the consent of the Mayor to dispose of an interest in land by sale or by granting a long-term lease. If that land is operational or has been in the previous five years, the Secretary of State for Transport must give his or her consent. It must be noted, however, that that did not prevent the unhappy saga around the developments at Earls Court from unfolding. The balance between the provision of affordable homes on the one hand, and maximising revenue to reinvest in transport, is an extremely significant and fine political judgment. We will be watching closely to ensure that proper balance is secured.

In conclusion, as clause 5 has been shelved, I think we are all hopeful that TfL can now move forward. We are keen to see how TfL uses its commercial freedoms to develop and improve the transport network that keeps our great capital city moving, but we will be watching closely to ensure that profit is used to benefit the public, and not the other way round.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I support amendment 1, and consequential amendments 2 to 6, which I tabled on behalf of the promoter.

This is a private Bill promoted by Transport for London, as has been said. It was submitted to the House of Lords in November 2010, and reached this House on 4 March 2014. It took rather a long time to get through the other place. The Commons gave the Bill a Second Reading on 9 September 2014, and it was considered by an Opposed Private Bill Committee on 13 January 2015, where clause 5 was substantially amended. I shall come on to discuss that briefly.

A debate on the consideration stage took place in the last Parliament on Monday 16 March, and those of us who were Members then remember that as an epic occurrence. Many amendments were tabled, and the time allocated for debate expired before proceedings
could be brought to a conclusion. Following the agreement of both Houses to the revival of the Bill in this Parliament, consideration was first proposed on 22 February 2016, but there was an objection, resulting in the need for today’s debate.

The promoter, TfL, has considered carefully the strength of feeling expressed in the previous debate in the House about clause 5. If the clause was introduced, it would allow TfL to engage in limited partnerships. TfL recognised, notwithstanding the amendments to the clause made by the Opposed Private Bill Committee, that serious concerns remained about the possible exercise of powers conferred by the clause and about the lack of transparency arrangements, which was raised by objectors. Accordingly, TfL took the decision not to press for clause 5 to stand part of the Bill. The amendment to which I am speaking would leave out that clause, and the further minor amendments grouped with it are consequential upon the removal of clause 5. I understand that that is accepted across the House.

**Andy Slaughter:** As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman is saying that TfL has listened to the democratic voice of this House and to the wishes of the elected representatives here. Is it as simple as that? If so, that is quite refreshing.

**Bob Blackman:** We have had substantial debates. The promoters listened to those debates, considered them carefully and decided that in order to ensure the passage of the Bill, rather than prolong the agony and the disputes, it would be better to withdraw the clause and demonstrate in good faith that they would not proceed with that element. That means, of course, that the Bill is substantially changed from its original form.

I shall touch on the amendments proposed by the objectors—in principle, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). If I miss one of the amendments that he is pushing, he will no doubt intervene to clarify that. New clause 1 is substantially that which was debated on 16 March 2015. The clear issue here is that exercising powers under clause 4 will be properly exercised under the 1999 Act, ensures that the exercise of the powers conferred by clause 4 will be properly exercised in discharge of statutory functions under the 1999 Act. That set of proposals is therefore unnecessary and unreasonable.

8.15 pm

**Andy Slaughter:** The hon. Gentleman asks what the point is. The point is bitter experience. I bet that he could give just as many examples from his constituency as I can from mine of projects that TfL has gone into without proper risk assessment or consideration, and which have invariably wasted millions of pounds. What we are looking for here, before steps are taken, is a proper process of review; of stepping back and thinking.

**Bob Blackman:** Requiring the Secretary of State to go through a process of producing risk assessments and so on is clearly extremely burdensome. It is quite clear that TfL will have to carry out those functions itself in order to justify what it is seeking to do.

Amendments 7 and 8, which the hon. Gentleman pressed in particular, are new and were not considered on 16 March 2015. The clear issue here is that exercising powers under clause 4 is subject to the consent of the Mayor, when he is granting security on borrowing or acquiring companies, and the consent of the Secretary of State, in respect of core assets and revenue. I could go into a long and detailed explanation of why that would be unnecessary. The point is that these amendments would create legal uncertainty over the whole question of what the requirements would be. They would also create uncertainty about TfL and its subsidiaries exercising the necessary flexibility around assets and revenue streams.

Since the Bill was deposited—this is a very important aspect—the operational funding from central Government has been reduced, as has been said during the debates. It will now be removed entirely, but much earlier than anticipated. The Bill, including clause 4, will assist TfL in its efforts to achieve further savings and efficiencies, while at the same time upgrading transport networks, which, I remind the House, support new jobs, new homes and economic growth in London and right across the UK. I therefore hope that the hon. Gentleman will not press those amendments to a vote, because they are completely unnecessary, would create tremendous uncertainty and, indeed, would impact on TfL’s ability to generate the sorts of savings and to create the types of work that we all want to see.

**Andy Slaughter** rose—
Bob Blackman: I will give way very briefly.

Andy Slaughter: I think I want the long and detailed explanation to which the hon. Gentleman referred. What I want to know—is this not about the first part of clause 4(2), which I understand, about “security for money which it borrows”—is how “the payment of which it guarantees, or in respect of which it gives an indemnity”, first, improves TfL’s financial position, and secondly, does not create risks to TfL.

Bob Blackman: It is quite clear that the operation under clause 4(2) mirrors what TfL can do anyway under section 160 of the 1999 Act, and the scope of what a subsidiary can lawfully do by way of offering a guarantee or indemnity is not changed by this Bill whatsoever. From that perspective, the proposals to delete these references are almost irrelevant, given that the same powers exist under the 1999 Act. TfL is merely seeking to ensure that it has got this flexibility under those arrangements.

Andy Slaughter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I have given way on a couple of occasions. If there is something else the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise, he will no doubt duly do so.

Most of the other proposals appear to have been put forward at consideration stage on 16 March 2015—they certainly formed a great part of the debate, but they clearly did not secure the agreement of the House. I therefore suggest that all the proposals put forward by the hon. Gentleman should be rejected and that we should end consideration stage and allow the Bill to proceed to Third Reading so that we can discuss its general merits.

Andy Slaughter: I appreciate the way the hon. Gentleman has approached the debate, but he will understand that I am a little disappointed by his response and by that of the Minister, who gave the proposals a cursory few moments. However, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who is on the Opposition Front Bench, for at least making some thoughtful comments.

It is not my fault, or that of any of the other opponents of parts of the Bill, that it has dragged on for five and a half years, and we will perhaps look at that issue on Third Reading. As I said, most of the proposals were probing or, I hope, improving proposals, and I am disappointed that they have been dealt with in a fairly cursory manner. However, I also said that I would not press them to a vote.

Let me go back to amendment 7. As I said, the powers in clause 4(2) already exist, but there is no ability to secure borrowing, or an indemnity or guarantee, against property. I asked what I thought were quite reasonable questions about that. I said that, whereas I understand the advantage of securing borrowing against property, I do not understand the benefit to TfL, the fare payer or the taxpayer of an indemnity or guarantee.

Bob Blackman: I simply think that it shows a lingering lack of candour and transparency and an attitude of “It’s none of your business how we run our railway” when those involved cannot give a simple explanation of a fairly simple, albeit technical point. However, there it is. I have made the points I want to make on the proposals, but I do not propose to put any of them to a vote tonight. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment made: 1, page 1, (Recitals) leave out lines 6 and 7.—(Bob Blackman.)

Clause 5

POWER FOR TfL TO FORM AND INVEST IN LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS

Amendment made: 2, page 3, line 24, leave out clause 5.—(Bob Blackman.)

Clause 6

SPECIFIED ACTIVITIES

Amendments made: 3, page 4, line 19, leave out “or a limited partnership”.

Amendment 4, page 4, leave out line 21 and insert “a member; or”.

Amendment 5, page 4, leave out lines 37 and 38.

Amendment 6, page 4, line 39, leave out “(c)” and insert “(b)”.—(Bob Blackman.)

Third Reading

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

8.24 pm

Mr Goodwill: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on taking this Bill to Third Reading. I have listened with interest to the contributions of Members on both sides of the Chamber.

The outcome of the 2015 spending review means that TfL will need to find further savings and look to maximise its commercial income in the interests of both the taxpayer and the travelling public. That is why I welcome the principle behind the Bill. It will enable TfL to use financial practices and mechanisms to release greater value from its assets and financing arrangements. In short, it will maximise its unique position to ensure that assets generate revenues to their greatest potential. I understand from TfL that the Bill could realise in excess of £50 million in immediate benefits by improving its hedging power, enabling it to borrow money in a more cost-effective way and allowing it to make the most of its assets.
For all those reasons, the Government support the Bill and I look forward to seeing it finally receive Royal Assent.

8.26 pm

Andy Slaughter: Well, here we are, after only five and a half years, with a Bill that is better than it was when the petition was first presented in the other place on 29 November 2010. It has had an interesting history. I suspect it will be reviewed in various civil service colleges and sixth forms in years to come—although I do not think it will give any pleasure to those who study it—as an example of how not to do a private Bill, because it really did not have to be like this.

There have been some highlights, or lowlights. There was a time when the Bill was considered by the other place to be uncontencious: it went through Committees unopposed and its Second Reading was a formality. Then, up popped an organisation called the West London Line Group, which I am pleased to say is stationed, if I can put it that way, in my constituency. It pointed out that TfL was seeking, under what was then clause 4 of the Bill, to dispose of any land it wanted without the consent of the Secretary of State. After important but cursory scrutiny, TfL backed off from that most contentious and controversial part of the Bill.

The Bill then went to sleep for a long time. There were periods of 18 months when nothing happened. I do not know why that was. I have never actually asked TfL and I am not sure it could tell me even if I did. When the Bill finally came to this House in 2014—four years into its life—things became a bit more lively, because a number of parties, which I mentioned earlier, identified that it still contained some controversial parts.

More importantly, we were beginning to see, or suspect, that there were other motives behind the Bill. I do not know what TfL knew in 2010 about how quickly its revenue stream was going to be withdrawn—I suspect that it must at least have thought that that would be the case—or whether it was contemplating some of its proposed large-scale property deals. To some extent, we owe a debt of gratitude to Capco for its aggressive exploitation of the West Kensington and Earls Court development, which has become a cause célèbre in many ways. Indeed, it will shortly be the subject of a complaint to the European Commission on state aid, because so bad was the deal that TfL got for the Earls Court exhibition centres that those who are making the complaint contend that it amounts to unlawful state aid. In other words, the subsidy and the help that TfL has given to Capco to allow it to boost its share price, boost its profits and boost its directors’ bonuses may be unlawful under European law. We will see how well that complaint fares, but the fact that it has been contemplated suggests just how little confidence and faith many of the people who have scrutinised the Bill have in TfL’s ability to get a good deal.

I said that I would mention what the RMT has said about the matter. In the press release that it put out today, it stated:

“The construction firms with which TfL plans to engage, are running rings around TfL, helping the hapless organisation offload its prime London assets at well below the market rate.

We have no confidence in TfL to be able to secure a fair price for its land—and our concerns are borne out by its dreadful governance failures in relation to the development of Earls Court”

and:

“There is a fresh financial crisis brewing—meaning that there is an increased risk of corporate defaults—especially in the over-leveraged property sector.”

I pause to say that Capco is now discounting its luxury properties by about 20%, according to press reports last week. The press release continued:

“TfL is entering the property development game at precisely the wrong moment and in precisely the wrong way”.

That is how RMT put it. I might have chosen different words, but I cannot disagree with those sentiments. Those were real fears about the way in which TfL was, in a completely new way but across the board in relation to its assets, turning 5,700 acres of land into development sites.

As we found out, the whole thing was about money, specifically the Chancellor’s decision to withdraw £2.8 billion of Revenue funding from TfL over the next five years. That has led TfL, as I described in the earlier debate, to indulge in what I believe are risky, dubious and foolish interventions in the property market, which have allowed developers to use whatever vehicles they like with the support of a public sector organisation. It really stuck in the craw that the House was going to pass legislation that would have enabled those sorts of deals and developments to be done. It is good that the clause that contained those provisions was withdrawn in the other place and clause 5 has been withdrawn today.

If anybody does not believe me, I am happy to take any hon. Members to the Earls Court site, where they will be able to see the huge disruption that has been caused to a whole neighbourhood of London by dust, noise, the removal of asbestos, the threat to the security of residents and property, and the way in which the interests of small business, whole estates of people and small streets are being overridden. TfL has no control over that any longer, because it is just a sleeping partner. It is now a minority stakeholder in the land that it used to own, which it sold off at an undervalue, with loans that it guaranteed at nil interest rate. That cannot give us any confidence that if TfL had been allowed the powers that clause 5 would have given it, it would have used them in any proper way.

I am pleased that we have reached this stage, and I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) say that TfL has, belatedly, properly responded to the concerns that have been expressed not only in this House but in the other place. I am glad, therefore, that the Bill, as the hon. Gentleman candidly admitted, bears no resemblance to the one that was introduced five and a half years ago. Not only have five and a half years and a lot of debating time elapsed, but we have ended up with something that is a mere shadow of what it was before.

There is a remaining concern that I do not feel has been addressed. I did not press it to a vote. I do not think I would have won the vote if I had—I say that rather churlishly—judging by what happened on a previous occasion, when the payroll vote all came in to vote. I am sorry if I have again kept them away from their dinner tonight. As I said a few moments ago, I worry that there is still that continuing arrogance. Those at TfL say, “We know best”, but they do not know best. They do not
have a track record of doing this. In some ways, I would not expect them to have that. They are mainly transport people and they are running a railway—and quite a lot of the time, they do a good job of running a railway—but they are now getting into bed with some of the biggest property sharks and some of the least appropriate people to develop London. I am afraid that the way in which they are doing so really is a case of the lamb trying to lie down with the wolves.

I am worried about that for the future. I suspect that it will not worry me so much once we know the outcome of the mayoral election. Nevertheless, the Bill still indicates things—including in clause 4, which we have just debated in relation to amendment 7, that will still allow TfL to guarantee and indemnify third parties, and to secure those guarantees and indemnities against their own assets—that TfL should not be in the business of doing.

When we started to debate the Bill a couple hours ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) raised some very important points, which I said I would address on Third Reading, in relation to the sort of developments we can expect on TfL land. What is the purpose of the Bill? We now know—we did not know it, although TfL may have done, back in 2010—that it is mainly about making up for lost revenue. It is mainly about TfL being deprived of billions of pounds of revenue by the Chancellor. However, it is also about the type of city we will live in in London, because TfL is one of the largest public sector landowners and it is seeking to develop many of its sites. I have mentioned some in my own constituency or borough, such as in Parsons Green and Earls Court, and others may well be brought forward in the future. We do not know the list of developments, even though several hundred major sites are on it. One of the first things that the new Mayor could do is to publish that list and make sure that all MPs take an interest in it. I suspect that there would be substantial interest among London MPs from all parties when the list becomes available.

TfL has a wider responsibility. It should not just keep fares as low as possible, although that is important, and run an efficient railway, but ensure, as custodian of the largest part of the public realm in London, that it deals with that properly. It has a fantastic history: some TfL stations are among the best architectural buildings in London. The pride that ran all through the Victorian era and into the inter-war period—in the 1930s, there were developments of lines and stations out to the suburbs—is a fantastic credit to London and this country. It would be a terrible shame if, in the 21st century, TfL decided to build, through the variety of investment vehicles that we are tonight giving it permission to use, not just hideous overdevelopments and monstrosities, but non-functional buildings that do us no credit whatsoever either architecturally or in terms of use.

Increasingly, that is we are seeing with the sort of development partnerships into which TfL is going. When I looked at the short list of development partners that TfL has brought out I shuddered because they are exactly the same companies that are ruining the borough I live in with their riverside developments, their tall, faceless towers and the things from their pattern books that show no architectural merit whatsoever. Such developments minimise the proportion of affordable housing and the amount of amenity space, and they do not provide any social benefit at all. Unfortunately, hard-pressed local authorities— as the planning authorities, this falls back on them—which are cutting their budgets by up to 50%, are in no position to deal with that.

This is a David and Goliath battle. It is not City Hall or the town hall that holds all the cards—the bureaucrat and Big Brother. The developers hold all the cards. They can afford the people who can make the viability assessments that they want, as well as the surveyors, architects, lawyers, consultants and accountants to run rings around TfL and the boroughs to get the developments that they want.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Bill and what he has achieved—in particular, the removal of one specific clause. He rightly raises concerns about the planning system and how TfL’s potential private sector partners could run rings around local authorities. Is it not true that the situation will be even worse if the Housing and Planning Bill is passed, as the Government are, in effect, removing and reducing the power of local authorities to intervene actively in planning applications and decisions?

Andy Slaughter: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. She makes two very good points about the Housing and Planning Bill. One is its anti-localist feel, as it takes planning authority away from the boroughs. The other is what that Bill is doing to housing. It is not just the case that the Government, and the coalition Government before them, have been negligent. They have been actively supporting unaffordable housing and diminishing the role of affordable housing in London.

That is very clear in the Housing and Planning Bill, in which we have not just the sale of housing association properties, but the subsidising of those sales by the sale of council properties. I have had direct experience of this problem. My borough is the only one in which, under Conservative control, the quantum of social housing actually decreased over a period of years. It did not go up at all; it went down, through demolitions, sales and other matters of that kind. That is exactly what we are seeing. The situation is getting worse. The point that I made earlier—I hope my hon. Friend agrees with it—is that we have to build more affordable housing, social housing and shared ownership housing, and more private rented housing that is affordable, especially for young people. We also need genuine low-cost home ownership.

That should be being delivered through a Bill such as this one, because TfL has that responsibility as a major public landholder in London. But it is not being delivered. The type of investment vehicles promoted through the Bill and the type of partners that will be selected will simply mean we see more of what we call safe deposit flats being built.

TfL may ask what it can do, given that its money is being taken away by the Government and it has to pull as much money as it possibly can from commercial developments. I have already explained why I think that is a short-sighted view, which may not achieve even its short-term objective of making TfL a lot of money. The luxury property market may also be in trouble.

We need sustainable development, in town centres and around stations in particular. We need car-free development, for people of all income levels and from all backgrounds. Those are the people who make our city work. Of course, if those people are able to live in
zones 1, 2 and 3, they will not be clogging up the tubes and buses, as they will be nearer to where they work. TfL already has major capacity problems, and is making a rod for its own back by helping with the process of social cleansing and pushing people out of London.

This Bill should be about Londoners’ housing and environment; it should promote air quality and alternative means of travel to the car. It should also be about having an efficient and effective transport system. It is not about any of those things, but about promoting dodgy investment vehicles with dodgy investment partners to maximise the gain for private sector development companies without their taking any risk, as that risk will instead be loaded on to the public sector, in the person of TfL. That is why we have opposed the Bill so strongly, over the past two years in particular, but also before then.

I am glad that TfL, the sponsor and possibly even the Government have listened. I suspect we have succeeded in modifying 90% of what we wanted to modify. It just did not have to be like this. When I met TfL two or three weeks ago, I said “Do you really want to go through another long debate like this in Parliament? Why don’t you hold this back until the new Mayor gets elected? I bet you could agree something that we could all agree on within half an hour.” I am afraid it did not take that in the spirit in which it was intended and it wished to press ahead. Well, it has got its Bill now. I suspect it wasted a very large sum of fare payers’ money on all its experts to get it through, which it did not need to do. I suspect it is not at all happy with the result. I hope it has had an object lesson in how Parliament works. We will not put up with the pig in a poke that the Bill was in its original form.

There are some good provisions in the Bill, but almost by definition we have not discussed them because they are unexceptional and have general support. There are still one or two bad things in the Bill. The Bill has had an unhappy history. I hope that at the very least TfL will learn two lessons: how to approach bringing Private Bills to this House and to the other place; and that we will continue to scrutinise how it does deals and how it tries to develop its property portfolio. TfL has to do this not only in its own interests as an organisation, but in the interests of the fare payer and the taxpayer, and in the interests of Londoners as a whole.

8:46 pm

Bob Blackman: It is a pleasure to rise at what I hope will be the end of a very long journey. The purpose of the Bill is to provide TfL with additional powers, so it can meet its business needs more flexibly and take advantage of more efficient arrangements for the stewardship of its financial affairs. TfL has identified various opportunities for maximising the value of its assets. They can only be realised if TfL acquires the new statutory powers or if the restrictions on the exercise of its current powers are removed.

This has been mentioned before, but let me put it on the record: TfL is one of the biggest landowners in London, with 5,700 acres of land. Clearly, there is a pipeline of some 300 sites, with 50,000 new homes to be provided in London. We know above all else that in London, the capital city of this country and one of the major cities of the world—if not the major city in the world—we need to provide more new homes and to keep people moving to create investment for the opportunities for jobs and for a better quality of life for everyone. The Bill enables TfL to play its part. It is clear that from October 2015 we already have 75 sites that will generate 10,000 new homes over the next two years. Two thirds of them, contrary to what the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, will be in zones 1 and 2. It is not true to say that sites are not being provided for new homes for Londoners and for people who want to make London their home.

Andy Slaughter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I will make a bit of progress and then maybe give way. The hon. Gentleman has had plenty of opportunities to put his own perspective and spin. I want to set the record straight.

Four sites in particular have been invested in recently by TfL: 360 homes at Nine Elms tube station, with 25% affordable; 55 homes in the Fenwick Estate near Clapham North tube station, of which 100% are affordable; the development at Northwood is only 20% affordable housing, but TfL has respected local demand to invest in a brand new tube station with step-free access; and at Parsons Green TfL has submitted a scheme with 40% affordable homes, which it has now withdrawn to allow further time for consultation with local businesses and residents. It is clear that TfL is responding to the request and demand for additional housing to be provided in the capital.

The Bill contains only three substantive clauses but is of great importance to TfL because it will enable it to deliver much better value for money for the fare payer and taxpaying public. The growth in London is relentless and driving up demand for services. The tube has record ridership year on year and our roads are also under great pressure. To keep London working and growing, TfL has to invest just to keep the assets in good repair, modernise the rail and road networks and improve reliability. The reality is that all its revenue is reinvested in TfL projects, be it on the roads or rail. Clearly, the issue that will be debated in the run-up to 5 May is how we keep that revenue stream increasing and ensure a fair balance between the taxpayer and the fare payer.

TfL’s £11 billion capital funding settlement from the Government runs from 2015-16 to 2020-21—the life of the Parliament—and includes a total of £5.8 billion in investment grant, £1.4 billion in general grant from the Department for Transport and, crucially, £3.8 billion in borrowing powers. That allows TfL to invest £1.7 billion a year to modernise the road and rail networks. The Circle, District, Hammersmith and City and Metropolitan lines will be the next four tube lines to be upgraded. I would have thought the hon. Member for Hammersmith would welcome that, seeing as his constituents use those lines, as do mine—I think, in particular, of the Metropolitan line.

Andy Slaughter rose—

Bob Blackman: No, the hon. Gentleman has had plenty of time to put his point of view.
From 2019, TfL’s objective will be to cover all the operational costs of running the tube and bus networks through non-DIT grant sources of income. It plans to do this over an extended period by running the business more effectively and efficiently. The continuous savings programme has generated a 15% reduction in costs. Following the November spending review, TfL has had to accelerate and build upon that because, as has been alluded to, its overall income is set to reduce by £2.8 billion over the period to 2020-21. The Bill will provide TfL with additional powers to run its business more flexibly and take advantage of more efficient and economic financial arrangements. This will allow TfL to maximise the value of assets, bear down on fares and deliver significantly better value for money to the public.

The first of the substantive clauses, clause 4, will allow TfL’s subsidiaries to borrow and grant security over assets and revenue streams. We have had a long debate about this issue in relation to the amendments. The powers will allow TfL to access cheaper finance for projects and to structure security so that a creditor has recourse only against subsidiary borrowing. TfL will be able to purchase subsidiary companies that already have secured debt without having to engage in costly loan restructures. Very importantly, the Secretary of State’s consent is required if core assets are to be offered as security, and the Mayor must consent to all other arrangements.

Where TfL owns more than 50% of a joint venture, clause 4 will enable TfL’s subsidiary to incur debt using the assets of the subsidiary as security. That does not advantage or disadvantage a private partner involved in the joint venture, as the increased value of the assets will be brought about with the greater flexibility in clause 4 and will be shared by TfL and the private sector partner, in accordance with the terms agreed between the parties.

Clause 5 has now been removed. Clause 6 seeks to expand the type of entities through which TfL’s commercial activities must be undertaken. TfL is currently required to undertake its profit-making activities through a company limited by shares that is either a subsidiary or a joint venture. The clause amends this restriction to give TfL the option of using any type of entities that TfL has the power to form, in addition to a company limited by shares. TfL would be able to use a company limited by guarantee or a limited liability partnership. Importantly, clause 6 preserves the policy that TfL must undertake commercial activities through a taxable entity by requiring that the subsidiary be a member of a limited liability partnership. Clause 6 will enable TfL to conduct its affairs more flexibly and net the maximum value from the assets.

Clause 7 amends TfL’s hedging power, responding to assertions made on Second Reading and elsewhere, that my hon. Friends and hon. Gentlemen have misconceptions about the scope of the Bill, but, contrary to assertions made on Second Reading and elsewhere, the Bill does not give TfL any new powers to sell or develop its land. TfL has had those powers since it was created in 2000, and it is not seeking to enlarge them in any way. Neither can TfL act autonomously when it wishes to dispose of its interests in its land, including when granting a long-term lease. TfL must obtain the consent of the Mayor to sell surplus land, and if that land is operational land or has been operational land in the last five years, the Secretary of State must give his or her consent.

Some colleagues suggested on Second Reading that TfL’s track record shows that it is not competent enough to be given greater powers and that it should focus on its core function of providing transport services rather than delving into joint venture projects with developers. It cannot be disputed that TfL serves more customers more efficiently and more reliably than any point in its history. Providing public passenger transport will always be TfL’s main focus. The powers it seeks in the Bill will not detract from its discharge of those functions, and the discrete scope of the Bill should be taken as indicative of a change in TfL’s priorities.

The Bill will, however, give TfL greater opportunity to secure sustainable income from its assets, rather than a one-off capital receipt from their disposal. Very importantly, that is to adopt a long-term strategy to the management of its property estate, which will allow TfL to maximise the value of its assets and deliver better value for money to the public.

I am somewhat confused because it would appear that the hon. Member for Hammersmith is so lacking in confidence in his candidate for the mayoralty that he would seek to block this Bill in order to get him there. I am looking forward to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) assuming his place as Mayor of London on 6 May, and we can look forward to this Bill helping him to deliver more homes, more jobs and better and safer transport for the people of London.

8.58 pm

Daniel Zeichner: You will be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not intend to repeat the substantial points I made in my earlier contribution—[Interruption.] That is no doubt the biggest cheer of the night. There is always a but, however, and I shall reiterate one or two minor points. Let me first put on record the thanks of Labour Members for the sterling efforts of our hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has staged a heroic fight over many months and years on this issue. As a consequence, we end up with a better Bill.
Let me return to my earlier point: the pressure on TfL is clearly a consequence of the substantial cut in support from the Government in the recent Budget. That has caused a significant shift in the way in which TfL operates. I hear what others have said about its capacity to use resources well and make the best possible use of its assets, and we hope that their confidence is justified, but we also share the misgivings expressed by my hon. Friends about some of the potential bedfellows whom TfL may seek out. This becomes a much wider and more complicated debate about the role of public authorities such as TfL at a time when so many people in our city are experiencing such acute housing problems. Labour Members, certainly, feel that TfL’s most important role is to keep our capital working and moving successfully.

Nevertheless, we have a better Bill, not least because of the withdrawal of clause 5, which, in our view, would have led us down a dangerous route. On the basis that we have secured some improvements, let us end the evening on a positive note. We hope that TfL will be able to take the opportunities that some Members have described, although we ourselves still have some reservations.

**Road and Rail Links: Sheffield and Manchester**

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Stephen Barclay.)*

9.1 pm  
**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The debate has been slightly delayed. At least three colleagues who share my concern about trans-Pennine links would have joined me in the Chamber tonight, but the late start has prevented them from doing so. I wanted to put that on the record.

The economic case for new transport infrastructure between Sheffield and Manchester is very strong. The National Infrastructure Commission has reported that the north in general “needs immediate and very significant investment for action now and a plan for longer-term transformation to reduce journey times, increase capacity and improve reliability.”

It admits that “Sheffield’s economy…is small compared to that of Leeds and Manchester, with lower productivity and skills levels”, and that—this is the important point—“the city is less well linked to the surrounding region, in particular with the Pennines limiting connectivity to the west.”

It also points out that “the lack of a good transport link between the two means that their economies are largely separate from each other.”

That is a big problem for the northern powerhouse project, and a real obstacle to the delivery of progress.

Only 10,000 vehicles a day travel between Greater Manchester and south Yorkshire, whereas 55,000 a day travel between west Yorkshire and Greater Manchester. There may be slight differences in population, but the only real explanation for the disparity in population, but the only real explanation for the disparity between the two regions. The implication is that the vast majority of potential travel between them simply does not take place, because the infrastructure needed to accommodate it does not exist.

**Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on initiating a debate on a matter that she will know is close to my heart, because my constituency is just on the other side of the Pennines. Does she agree that the problems on the two principal roads between her constituency and Greater Manchester, which go through my constituency—the A628 and the A57—are preventing people from travelling, and preventing them from creating a link between two big economies that need to dovetail as part of the northern powerhouse?

**Angela Smith**: I entirely agree with my constituency neighbour. As I shall go on to explain in detail, the key problem is that those two roads are effectively mountain passes—or what pass for mountain routes in England—and they run through a national park. The fact that two of our major northern cities are divided by the huge obstacle presented by those two very difficult roads lies at the heart of the problem.

I want to illustrate the economic impact with a concrete example before I move on to describe the two roads that the hon. Gentleman referred to. Tata Speciality Steels has a dedicated service centre in Bolton, which is obviously on the other side of the Pennines from the factory, and
the company experiences real logistical difficulties precisely because of the poor links between the two areas. There are three road routes across the Pennines. We have the A57, part of which is known as the Snake pass. Incidentally, it was not given that name because of its winding nature; it was named after a feature on the Duke of Devonshire’s coat of arms. It is nevertheless incredibly difficult to use. Heavy goods vehicles find it impossible; indeed, they are advised not to use it. Even cars can find it difficult in bad conditions. It is, after all, a mountain pass.

The A628 is therefore the major road across the Pennines between Sheffield and Manchester, but the height and exposure of the road often create problems during poor weather in winter, and it is sometimes closed due to snowfall or high winds. However, road closures on the Woodhead pass are more often the result of road traffic accidents than of bad weather. In 2011, four of the eight closures on the Woodhead pass were due to road traffic accidents, and four were due to bad weather. In 2012 there were 14 closures, eight of which were the result of road traffic accidents. The other six were due to bad weather. There were 12 closures in 2013; eight were due to road traffic accidents and four to bad weather. So, in the latest year for which we have statistics, the major road crossing between two of our biggest cities was closed on average once a month. That is a huge obstacle for people and, in particular, for businesses trying to make logistical transport plans in order to do their work.

We also have the M62, but using it to go from Sheffield to Manchester involves making a massive detour. I used the AA route planner this evening and worked out that if you use the M62 to go up from Sheffield, across the Pennines and down to Manchester, the distance is 72.5 miles and the journey takes one hour and 42 minutes. If you use the A628, the distance is only 37.8 miles, but the journey is only 20 minutes shorter. Using the motorway involves travelling twice the distance but takes only 20 minutes longer. That is if you are lucky—we all know that the M62 can be hugely congested. It is therefore not a realistic option, and we need to do something about the trans-Pennine link.

As for rail, the average speed of rail travel across the Pennines between the major cities is below 50 mph. This has led to the contained nature of travel in the northern regions. An analysis of travel patterns between northern cities by Transport for the North suggests that levels of commuting are below what might be expected given the size and relative proximity of the cities in question, bearing in mind that Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester are equidistant from each other. Commuting between Sheffield and Manchester, for example, is 38% lower than could be expected. As an example of the slow speeds that we experience, the trains from Manchester to Sheffield travel at less than half the average speed of those travelling between London and Milton Keynes.

Trains are also running at capacity on the Hope Valley line. The hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) will know that line, as will the Minister. The trains run at capacity during the rush hour, with an average of 7,224 passengers coming into Sheffield from Manchester each morning during peak hours, which is 2.3% in excess of capacity. This results in 7.8% of passengers having to stand during those morning journeys.

As the Minister knows, I would be the first to acknowledge that progress is being made. Proposals are on the table for a new road tunnel and a new rail tunnel involving a high-speed route across the Pennines. I welcome those proposals; I am not playing politics. I know that work is being undertaken to establish the feasibility of at least three of the original five potential corridors for a road link across the Pennines. The feasibility work needs to include the impacts on nearby land use and economic growth, and there are the environmental concerns relating to a long road tunnel. I am hopeful that if the proposed new road tunnel is feasible and if the economic case can be made, the Government will press ahead with this important project.

Andrew Bingham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Smith: I cannot, as I have only a few minutes left.

As for the new rail project, the National Infrastructure Commission has made it clear that it recommends kick-starting High Speed 3, and that its integration with HS2 would be the best way of planning the new rail development in the area. Important route decisions for HS2 need to be made over forthcoming months, and I put it on the parliamentary record—I have already done so locally—that Meadowhall is the best option for an HS2 station in South Yorkshire on the way to Leeds at end of the eastern branch of HS2.

We have heard that the Government plan an HS3 route from Manchester to Leeds, and I need to make it clear and put it on the record that any such project cannot be allowed to miss out South Yorkshire. It is absolutely critical to the economic resilience and redevelopment of the north of England that the new rail route serves South Yorkshire and potentially the south bank of the Humber as much as it serves Leeds and the north bank of the Humber. A new tunelled rail link could come out in the Penistone area, probably in my constituency, and spur not only up to Leeds and over to Hull, but down into South Yorkshire, Sheffield, Rotherham and potentially beyond. The developments on the table are exciting, but we are absolutely adamant in South Yorkshire that we want to be included in the Government’s options for both rail and road.

Some of us have been campaigning for years for a new rail route across the Pennines. We initially focused on reopening the old Woodhead route, but we lost that campaign and electric cables have now been established in the old 1953 tunnel by National Grid. It is clear that we did not lose the argument about the need for new rail infrastructure; however, the connections suggested so far are not to Sheffield, which is what the campaign for a new Woodhead route was always about, or to South Yorkshire, but to Leeds, so we need to deal with that. We need a commitment to a route that crosses the Pennines and then serves all the major urban communities of the north. Why do we need to do all that? All the Government’s arguments about the northern powerhouse and the rebalancing of the economy are brought into focus by the need to do something about the trans-Pennine transport links, which is what the NIC has driven home in the conclusion of its report. The NIC’s argument that poor connectivity is holding back economic development in South Yorkshire underpins the case.
I want to finish by mentioning the achievements of our Victorian forebears. I mentioned the Woodhead line earlier, so let us look at the facts. It was built by the Victorians, and when the first railway tunnel was completed in 1845, it was one of the longest in the world. The second tunnel was completed in 1853. Both those tunnels would potentially be usable even now, but for their being no longer in maintenance. That is a great testament to the foresight and engineering skills of our Victorian ancestors. As far as I am concerned, they managed it, and so can we. They saw the economic potential of linking two rapidly growing northern cities—a steel city and Manchester—and so should we. They also invested for the long term, and so should we.

A 30-year appraisal in the cost-benefit analysis of the need for these links—the road link and the rail link—is not adequate; we need an analysis and an economic case that understands that we are building for the long term. We need to look at a 100-year case for building this new infrastructure. We would never have built the Woodhead line or many of our railway lines across the country if we had taken a long-term view of the interests of the economy in areas such as Sheffield, Manchester and London. Would we have even built the tube in London had we not taken such an approach? That is what we need to understand.

On that basis, there is a great deal of support among Opposition Members for what the Government are trying to achieve. As I said, more of my colleagues would have been here to support this debate had it not been postponed for so long because of other very urgent business. I look forward to the Minister’s remarks. I hope that he will concede the case for the Sheffield link to HS3, and that he will give us some optimistic updates on the progress on both the road link and the rail link that we are all looking forward to seeing.

9.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on securing this debate on road and rail links connecting Sheffield and Manchester. She has been making some valuable points about the need for improved transport links, and I agree with her comments about the debt we owe to our Victorian forefathers and the long-term approach they took to their planning. There are indeed lessons we can take from that. One thing I did learn during her speech was how Snake pass got its name—I did not know that until a few moments ago.

On 7 March, the Department for Transport and Transport for the North jointly published the first annual update report on the northern transport strategy. The report is the culmination of 12 months of collaborative work with Transport for the North and other transport agencies, and it sets out the significant progress that has been made in laying the foundation for transformative infrastructure projects across the north of England, connecting key cities and areas across the region, enabling the north to become more than the sum of its parts. The report sets out the next steps, including major improvements to the north’s road networks, connecting the north’s regions better by rail, and enhancing the passenger experience of travelling across the north by using smart and integrated ticketing technologies.
This study, alongside studies considering the case for the significant improvements to the M60 and the north Pennines connectivity, the A669 and the A69, will publish its final report by the end of the year. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already allocated £75 million from the £300 million transport development fund to ensure that, if these studies indicate that there is a strong case for developing these schemes, we can get shovels in the ground on these transformational projects as soon as possible.

**Andrew Bingham**: The improvements to the A628 and the A57, the Mottram relief road and the Glossop Spur, are very welcome. The Minister will know from his visit to High Peak not long ago that we need to extend that work. I really must stress that, although this is welcome, speed is the key. I do not mean the speed of the traffic as it trundles through Glossop at 5 mph, but the speed of delivering these projects, because we are experiencing huge problems in my constituency.

**Andrew Jones**: I very much enjoyed the visit to my hon. Friend’s constituency, and the point he makes was brought home by that visit and by talking to residents and to neighbouring colleagues from this House who also joined us on that visit. I will come on to talk a bit more about that very shortly, but his point is fair, and I agree with the urgency of the case.

The tunnel and these long-term studies are examples of the kind of forward-thinking, long-term planning that has been a characteristic in transport planning in our country and is something that we are trying very hard to recover. We have made a good start on that, and it is a key part of our approach to transport. We are also committed to putting in place improvements to transport corridors between Sheffield and Manchester in the more imminent future. That builds on the points mentioned by my hon. Friend.

We have already announced a number of measures that will seek to alleviate pressure on the transport network in the short to medium term. This includes improvements to the A628 in the Peak District national park, with the introduction of two overtaking lanes. There are also additional upgrades on both sides of the national park, with schemes due to improve both the Mottram Moor link road and the A61, improving journeys between Manchester and all of south Yorkshire. There are also other smaller measures in place to address accident blackspots.

On timing, it is expected that construction of the schemes set out in the first roads investment strategy will commence by March 2020. I know that my hon. Friend and other colleagues across the House are impatient for progress, so I will do all that I can to look at ways in which we can advance that date through the design and delivery process. Nevertheless, I must also stress that we will work closely with the National Park Authority to ensure that these improvements are in keeping with the Peak District national park’s protected landscape.

**Angela Smith**: The Minister will be aware of the controversial history of any attempt to deal with congestion, particularly around Mottram and Tintwistle. May I ask him to work effectively with groups such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Friends of the Peak District to ensure that we keep not just the national park onside but the environmentalists, who have a passionate concern about our wonderful national park?

**Andrew Jones**: I happily give that commitment to make sure that we work as widely as possible. Our objective is not just to solve a transport issue and improve quality of life for residents as a result of the economic benefits that come from transport investment, but to improve the protection of a wonderful national park and people’s experience of that park. We will happily consult widely with communities and stakeholders on all these measures.

Turning to rail services, upgrading our rail network will make journeys faster, easier and less crowded. Businesses will be able to recruit from a wider labour pool, and people will be able to travel to a wider range of jobs without having their horizons limited by the distance from their home and the challenges of travelling time. As the hon. Lady will be aware, the new Northern and TransPennine franchises began on the first of this month, and she has welcomed the benefits, which are significant for rail passengers across the north. The new franchises will deliver more than 500 brand new carriages, space for 40,000 extra passengers at the busiest times and thousands of extra services, plus investment to improve stations. The line between the key northern cities will have more trains, with new trains and services, which is a significant change. Alongside that, the north of England rail infrastructure upgrade programme includes a substantial electrification programme and other track, station, depot and signalling improvements to enhance the capability of the northern rail network.

As part of the proposed northern hub programme of capacity enhancements, the northern hub is something for which the hon. Lady campaigned for a considerable time, and I was happy to join that campaign—Network Rail proposes to carry out works at the eastern end of the Hope Valley line, which has been a key connection between Sheffield and Manchester since it was completed at the end of the 19th century. A passing loop is to be provided east of Bamford station, and the line is to be redoubled at Dore and Totley station. The purpose of the scheme is to enable an increase in passenger services between Manchester and Sheffield and to improve access, with a sustainable means of transport, to the Peak District national park.

A public inquiry on Network Rail’s application for legal powers and planning permission for the scheme will open in Dore on 10 May. The independent inquiry inspector will submit a report and recommendation to the Department for Transport. In view of the Department’s role in deciding the application, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the merits of the scheme at the moment.

We are working to establish better rail connections across the whole of the north of England. In March 2015, the Government and Transport for the North set out the vision for the northern powerhouse rail network—HS3, as it is sometimes called. South Yorkshire is certainly part of those plans; there is no question about that. It is an ambition for radically faster, more frequent links between the six city regions of the north: Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, and Hull, along with Manchester airport. That ambition includes, for example, six trains an hour with 30-minute journey times between Sheffield city centre and Manchester, and better connectivity for passengers from south Yorkshire to Manchester airport. Initial findings, published in the spring 2016 report on the northern transport strategy,
[Andrew Jones]

indicate that that is likely to include a mixture of upgrades to existing lines, the construction of new lines, and the use of northern sections of HS2.

At the same time, the National Infrastructure Commission agreed that the north needs a high speed, high frequency network between its six city regions. Working with TfN, we are continuing to develop options, and by the end of this year we will have a more detailed view of the physical work required to deliver each option within a corridor. This includes analysis of the indicative costs and benefits, in order to move towards proposing a preferred option on each corridor.

It is clear that we are working hard to establish much better links between the cities of the north, particularly Sheffield and Manchester. They are great cities and an important part of the northern powerhouse. Connectivity is at the heart of progress. We are taking action now and planning for the long term to ensure better futures for both cities. I look forward to reporting to colleagues in the House the progress that we are making as the reports and development work take place.

Question put and agreed to.

9.30 pm

House adjourned.
Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the importance of north Wales, will the Secretary of State press very hard for the establishment of links to Manchester airport and rail links to enable people to benefit from HS2, and would I, as a north Wales MP, be able to vote on such measures?

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to his position. As he said, the Budget contained excellent news for north Wales in the form of the growth deal announcement, which recognises the region's close association with the north-west of England, but does he agree that maximising the benefit will require at least an element of political devolution to north Wales?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend speaks with authority and knowledge of this issue. Devolution to north Wales from what is seen in many quarters as the remoteness of Cardiff Bay is essential. The community groups whom I met in north Wales, whether they were from the north-west, from the border or from the English side of the boundary, wanted the growth deal to work on a cross-border basis, and I am determined to explore that possibility in the interests of the region.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which sectors of the Welsh economy offer the most exciting prospects for growth to help to rebalance the economy, and what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to encourage them?

Alun Cairns: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the new cross-border taskforce is making a bid for control period 6 funding from the Department for Transport with the aim of improving links with north Wales. Franchise negotiations are taking place between the Welsh and United Kingdom Governments, and we are determined to ensure that Members are represented properly in those negotiations.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the plans in the draft Wales Bill for the granting of income tax-varying powers for the Welsh Government. We want Wales to be a low-tax economy. Of course, mechanisms will need to be introduced to protect Welsh interests. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury earlier this week to discuss early proposals for such mechanisms, and we are happy to engage in further such discussions.

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Welcome both him and the Under-Secretary of State to their new positions—ensure that north Wales Labour Members are provided with some details of the so-called partnership, given that we are the partners from north Wales?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and support.

We are determined to work on that issue. There has been a bottom-up approach on the growth deal. We have met local authority leaders and businesses from north Wales, and we are determined to pursue that further. I am not sure that I can make the growth deal stretch as far as Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but I would be interested to try to take it across the English border.

Severn Crossings: Tolls

2. Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on people in Wales of the Government’s decision to reduce tolls on the Severn crossings.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): This Government’s commitment to halve the Severn crossings toll is a major boost for the economy and people of south Wales. It will make a positive difference to commuters and small business owners and demonstrates our continued determination to rebalance the economy.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that reply. I also welcome him to his place. It seems only a moment or so ago that we were competing to be the parliamentary candidate for the then safe Labour seat of Gower, which was some years ago.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the reduction in the tolls will also hugely benefit the Welsh tourism sector by encouraging people to come to Wales, and that it is time for the Welsh Government to pull their finger out and deliver the investment and improvements to the M4 corridor?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. It is fair to say that there are no infrastructure projects more important to the south Wales economy than the upgrade of the M4 around Newport. It is hard to believe that our noble Friend Lord Hague was Secretary of State for Wales when a commitment to that was first made, only for it to be cancelled twice by the Labour party when it was in government. Business has called for it; commuters have called for it; visitors have called for it. The Chancellor made money available specifically for this project almost three years ago. We just wish the Welsh Government would get on with it.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs found that the operational and maintenance costs of the bridge represented a quarter of the toll, yet, as the bridge goes into public hands, the Government have reduced the toll by half and are therefore creating a 100% margin. When will they reduce the toll to the level of the operational and maintenance costs to give south Wales and the Welsh economy every chance of performing as well as anywhere else, rather than having this stranglehold on it?

Alun Cairns: I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman, like business groups, be it the Federation of Small Businesses, the chambers of commerce or the Institute of Directors, would welcome the halving of the tolls. We saw no action in that regard from the Labour party when it was in government. However, we have gone further than just halving the Severn tolls. A small goods vehicle, for example, will move from the current rate of £13.20 to less than £4 when the tolls are halved, because we are also removing the second-class toll.

13. [904372] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The announcement by this Conservative Government of the cut in tolls is hugely welcome. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that in the longer term the revenue generated from the tolls should not exceed the cost of maintaining the two Severn bridges?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his diligent and persistent campaigning on the issue. I know that he was absolutely delighted when the Chancellor was able to respond to his and many other Conservative colleagues’ requests. Of course, a debt will remain on the tolls even when the bridges come back into public ownership in 2018 or thereabouts. That debt will still need to be serviced, as will the innovations on free-flowing traffic that we want to introduce.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on their recent appointments. Labour Members look forward to working constructively with them, particularly on the new Wales Bill, whenever that may appear.

To clarify, in last month’s Budget the Chancellor made much of halving the tolls on the Severn crossings, but as we have since discovered that is not quite the bargain it appears to be. The 50% discount includes the 20% of VAT, which disappears anyway when the bridge reverts to public ownership, and of course businesses reclaim VAT. So instead of leaving businesses still paying thousands of pounds a year, why will not the Government do the right thing and scrap these tolls altogether?

Alun Cairns: We have an election coming and the call from the Labour party is now very different—it is very convenient. It has long called for the devolution of the tolls, but we were fearful that, as soon as the tolls were devolved, they would be used as a cash cow to support the income of the Welsh Government.

Employment Trends

3. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of employment trends in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The labour market in Wales has never been stronger. Although we recognise the challenges facing the Welsh economy, there is a lot to celebrate. Unemployment has fallen to its lowest since 2008 and the number of people in work in Wales is at an all-time high.

Mark Pawsey: I welcome the Minister to his position. He is quite rightly focusing on the issues affecting steel production at Port Talbot, but what assessment has he made of the decision by Aston Martin to build its new DBX car at St Athan?
Mr Speaker: I think that the hon. Gentleman was referring to the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon). Some name was mentioned, but it does not mean anything in the Chamber.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Since 2012, Jobs Growth Wales has helped 15,000 people into meaningful employment. Given that youth unemployment is falling faster in Wales than in the UK as a whole, does the Minister agree that the UK Government could learn from the Welsh Labour Government in this regard?

**Guto Bebb**: It is interesting to note that an independent audit of Jobs Growth Wales has highlighted that some 80% of its spending has been inefficient. However, it is important to point out that successful jobs creation in Wales is dependent on co-operation between the two Governments, which is exactly what we saw in relation to Aston Martin.

11. [904370] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that tourism is a major employer. Will he take this opportunity of paying tribute to Andrew R. T. Davies, the leader of the Conservatives in the Welsh Assembly, and to Anthony Pickles for coming up with the idea of bringing the Prince of Wales's regalia to Wales? Will he also praise the Prince of Wales for following up on that idea? What discussions is the Minister having with the Welsh Government to promote this?

**Guto Bebb**: I will of course join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the leader of the Welsh Conservatives. It is important to highlight the importance of tourism to the Welsh economy, and bringing the regalia back to Wales is the right thing to do. I am certain that the castle of Conwy in my constituency would be delighted to host them.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Does the Minister think that his colleagues’ plan to sack hundreds of civil servants in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in Cardiff will help or hinder employment trends in Wales?

**Guto Bebb**: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but she will be aware that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a leaked report. The key thing that we need to be aware of is that wherever in Wales we look—north, south, west or east—we are seeing employment growth.

14. [904373] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position and congratulate him on his new job. Does he agree that the reductions to business taxes announced in the Budget and the ability of people to keep more of their own earnings will create an environment in which the private sector can invest and in which employment opportunities can come to Wales in the same way as they do to the rest of the country?

**Guto Bebb**: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The tax cuts that have been put in place by this Government since 2010 are to be welcomed. Of particular importance in the Budget was the announcement on small business rates, and I call on the Welsh Government to follow the example of the Westminster Government to ensure that Welsh small businesses have the same advantages through their business rates as do those in England.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Only 38% of working-age disabled people are in jobs in Wales, compared with 46% in the UK as a whole. Why?

**Guto Bebb**: The right hon. Lady asks an important question. There is more work to be done and, again, there is a need to work together on this issue. However, I would highlight the fact that more and more people with disabilities are now in work—152,000 more in the past 12 months and over 300,000 more in the past 24 months. We need to ensure that the successes we are seeing across the country are replicated in Wales.

### Steel Industry

4. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of risks to the future of the steel industry in Wales.

**Alun Cairns**: The steel industry is currently dealing with unparalleled global economic conditions and the UK is deeply concerned by the social and economic impact that they are having in south Wales. While we cannot change the status of the global steel market, our objective remains to overcome the challenges and play a positive role in achieving a sustainable future for the steel industry in Wales and across the UK.

**Tom Pursglove**: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he agree that in order to secure the future not only of the Port Talbot site but of Tata sites around the UK, no option should be ruled out?

**Alun Cairns**: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Steel for the way in which he has represented the interests of his constituents and of those who depend on steelmaking in his area. He recognises the way in which the plants are interlinked and he has been working closely with the Business Secretary and me to help to support a secure future. I can reassure him that no stone will be left unturned to secure a long-term future for the Corby plant as well as for every other plant across the UK.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): I welcome the Secretary of State and his deputy to their new positions and assure you, Sir, that I will endeavour to give them ample opportunity to explain themselves after my questions. Why did the Secretary of State not travel to Mumbai for the Tata board meeting of 29 March?

**Alun Cairns**: The Government have been in close dialogue with Tata steel for many months. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary was at Tata the
month before the Mumbai meeting and had engaged with its directors well before that. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be grateful that as a result of the Government’s actions we managed to avert the immediate closure of the plant and propose a sale.

Hywel Williams: I will give the Secretary of State another go. Did he fail to attend the meeting because a more senior Cabinet colleague told him not to do so? Did he decide not to go off his own bat? Or was it more down to the fact that, as the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise said of her boss the Business Secretary to the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs yesterday, “He would not have gone to Australia had he known that they were going to close the ruddy works”?

What stopped our Secretary of State? Was it the Cabinet’s pecking order, was it indolence, or was it just plain ignorance?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman’s approach. Steelworkers want to see Government and Opposition, and the unions and the company, work together to secure a long-term future. The Government have been in a long-term dialogue, which is demonstrated by the ongoing sales process, as opposed to the plant facing the risk of immediate closure.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he and the Wales Office will work with all relevant Government Departments to ensure the long-term future of Port Talbot, particularly for the workers who live in my constituency?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. He met the Business Secretary last week, and he and I have had several conversations about support for his constituents who depend on the plant, demonstrating its regional impact. The Government are determined to do everything possible to secure a long-term, viable future for the plant.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): As the Secretary of State well knows, at sites across Wales, such as Shotton, Llanwern, Orb, Trostre and Port Talbot, Tata steelworkers produce a whole range of specialist products. What assurances has he obtained from Tata that it will not siphon off the production of the most profitable lines to their plants abroad? What guarantees has he received that the intellectual property will remain with the Welsh operations in order to attract a suitable buyer and safeguard thousands of Welsh jobs?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the sale of the operations in the United Kingdom, which demonstrates the positive engagement between the UK Government and Tata Steel that has resulted in its decision to sell off all its operations, rather than simply to dispose of what some might see as the more profitable assets.

Steel Industry: Government Support

5. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support the steel industry in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): We have been in extensive discussions with Tata for months, and it is due to Government intervention that Tata has agreed to a sales process rather than an immediate closure of its operations in Wales. I spoke to the hon. Gentleman before he went to the Tata meeting in Mumbai and have spoken to him since. I am keen to stay in regular contact in order to update him as the position changes. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. These are important matters affecting the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people in Wales and across the country. Let us have some respect for that fact without Ministers wittering away—Mr Evennett—in the background. Important matters are being discussed. Be quiet, sir!

Stephen Kinnock: The Secretary of State will know that retaining the order book and customer base is critical for the Welsh steel industry. I want a short answer to a short question. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he has had conversations with customers such as Honda, Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover to secure the integrity of the customer base? Yes or no.

Alun Cairns: My father was a welder at the Port Talbot plant for more than 30 years before he was made redundant several years ago. I am from that community and understand how important the steelworks is to the income of the area. My family has been through the good times when records have been broken and the difficult times when my father, like many others, was made redundant. The Government regularly engage with many of the companies, both suppliers and customers, that work with Tata. We are determined to do everything to support them.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Yesterday, the Business Secretary said we need to work together, cross-party, on this, and the Secretary of State for Wales has just said the same. I understand that he is to visit Shotton on Monday—when was he intending to tell me?

Alun Cairns: I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would be grateful for, or approving of, a visit from a UK Minister to Shotton. I have been responding to the calls from the local workers, but I was in Wrexham on the day that the news broke about Shotton, and I spoke to community leaders and business leaders about the impact. I said to the community, “As soon as more information becomes available, I will return.” That is why I am returning to Shotton next Monday, and I am pleased about it.

EU Membership: Economy

6. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the economic effect on Wales of UK membership of the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The European Union makes a massive contribution to the Welsh economy: it is our largest trading partner; it supports thousands of jobs; and it
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The Government believe every disabled person who wants to work should be able to work. As announced in the spending review, there will be a real-terms spending increase on supporting disabled people into work. That will ensure that valuable talent and skill will be further recognised in the Welsh workforce.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing the situation of disabled people in Wales.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Disability rights organisations, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and many others have decried the lack of evidence in support of the Government’s cutting £1,500 a year from disabled people who have been found not fit for work. How many employers in Wales have the Government signed up as active Disability Confident employers for those disabled people who are fit for work?

Guto Bebb: It is important to point out, first, that supporting disabled people into the workplace is incredibly important, and this Government have a track record of success. Over the past 12 months, we have seen 150,000 disabled people enter the workplace; the figure is more than 300,000 over the past 24 months. I am proud of the fact that Swansea is the first disabled-friendly city in the UK, supporting disabled people into employment. On the specific numbers, I will write to the hon. Lady with the details that she requests.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the Minister concede that with more than a third of work capability assessment appeals being successful, Government policy is damaging the lives of a great many disabled people and starving them of money that they need in order to live a reasonable quality of life?

Guto Bebb: Although the work capability assessments need to be refined and are being refined, it is crucial to highlight the fact that this Government strongly believe that people who are disabled and who want to work and are able to work have a contribution to make. The aim of this Government’s policies is to help people into employment where that is possible, and the figures show that our policies are successful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally—patience rewarded—I call Mr Ian Lucas.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Minister to his post. Is he aware that the callous policy of the Conservative Government of implementing personal independence payments is leading to many people being prevented from working because Motability cars are being taken away from them, which prevents them from being able to travel to work? Will he speak to the Prime Minister, who is sitting next to him, to try to talk some sense into him?

Guto Bebb: I find the hon. Gentleman’s comments slightly disappointing. When he looks at all the changes in the employment situation in his constituency, he should welcome this Government’s work on welfare reform. The welfare reform changes that we are putting in place are contributing to behavioural change, leading to more people supporting their own families and
contributing to the economy. When he looks at the statistics for the Wrexham constituency, he should welcome the changes, instead of condemning them.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904325] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 April.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others and, in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Wendy Morton: Last week in Aldridge-Brownhills I visited Laserform manufacturing and Potclays, who supplied clay for the Tower of London poppies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting small businesses and the further increase in personal income tax allowance, which came in this month, show that, unlike Labour, the Conservative party is the party of enterprise and aspiration and believes in enabling hard-working people to keep more of the money they earn?

The Prime Minister: Let me join my hon. Friend in congratulating the firms that she mentions. She is right that it is predominantly small and medium-sized businesses that will be providing the jobs of the future. We want people to keep more of their own money to spend as they choose. That is why the historic move last week to an £11,000 personal allowance means that by 2018 people will be paying about £1,000 less per taxpayer and we will have taken 4 million of the lowest-paid people out of tax altogether. That is the action of a progressive Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in mourning the death today of the dramatist Arnold Wesker, one of the great playwrights of this country, one of those wonderful angry young men of the 1950s who, like so many angry young people, changed the face of our country.

Yesterday the European Commission announced new proposals on country-by-country tax reporting, so that companies must declare where they make their profits in the European Union and in blacklisted tax havens. Conservative MEPs voted against the proposal for country-by-country reporting and against the blacklisting. Can the Prime Minister now assure us that Conservative MEPs will support the new proposal?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the right hon. Gentleman in mourning the loss of the famous playwright, with all the work that he did. He is right to mention that.

Let me welcome the country-by-country tax reporting proposal put forward by Commissioner Jonathan Hill, who was appointed by this Government as the United Kingdom Commissioner. That is very much based on the work that we have been doing, leading the collaboration between countries and making sure that we share tax information. As we discussed on Monday, this has gone far faster and far further under this Government than under any previous Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: If the proposals were put forward by the British Government, why did Conservative MEPs vote against them? There seems to be a sort of disconnect there. The Panama papers exposed the scandalous situation where wealthy individuals seemed to believe that corporation tax and other taxes are optional. Indeed, as the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) informed us, they are apparently only for “low achievers”. When Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says that the tax gap is £34 billion, why is the Prime Minister cutting HMRC staff by 20% and shutting down tax offices, losing the expertise of the people who could close that tax gap?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman wants to get on to our responsibilities to pay our taxes, which I think is very important. I thought that his tax return was a metaphor for Labour policy: it was late, it was chaotic, it was inaccurate and it was uncosted. Turning to his specific questions, he is absolutely right to identify the tax gap. That is why we closed off loopholes in the last Parliament equivalent to £12 billion, and we aim to close off loopholes in this Parliament equivalent to £16 billion. HMRC is taking very strong action, backed by this Government, backed by the Chancellor and legislated for by this House. I think that I am right in saying that since 2010 we have put over £1 billion into HMRC to increase its capabilities to collect the tax that people should be paying. The difference between those on the Government Benches and the right hon. Gentleman is that we believe in setting low tax rates and encouraging people to pay them, and it is working.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for drawing attention to my own tax return, which is there to see, warts and all—the warts being my handwriting, and the all being my generous donation to HMRC. I actually paid more tax than some companies owned by people he might know quite well. He is not cutting tax abuse; he is cutting down on tax collectors. The tax collected helps to fund our NHS and all the other services. Last month, the Office for Budget Responsibility reported that HMRC does not have the necessary resources to tackle offshore tax disclosures. The Government are committed to taking £400 million out of HMRC’s budget by 2020. Will he now commit to reversing that cut so that we can collect the tax that will help to pay for the services?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman’s figures, rather like his tax return, are not entirely accurate. At the summer Budget in 2015 we gave an extra £800 million to HMRC to fund additional work to tackle tax evasion and non-compliance between now and 2021. That will enable HMRC to recover a cumulative £7.2 billion in tax over the next five years. We have already brought in more than £2 billion from offshore tax evaders since 2010. The point that I will make to him is that I think we should try to bring some consensus to this issue. For years in this country, Labour and Conservative Governments had an attitude to the Crown dependencies and overseas territories that their
tax affairs were a matter for them, their compliance affairs were a matter for them and their transparency was a matter for them. This Government has changed that. We got the overseas territories and Crown dependencies round the table and we said, “You’ve got to have registers of ownership, you’ve got to collaborate with the UK Government and you’ve got to ensure that people do not hide their taxes.” And that is what is happening. So when he gets to his feet, he should welcome the fact that huge progress has been made, raising taxes, sorting out the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, closing the tax gap, getting businesses to pay more and providing international leadership on this whole issue—all things that never happened under Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. The only problem with it is that the Red Book states that HMRC spending will fall from £3.3 billion to £2.9 billion by 2020. With regard to the UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories, only two days ago the Prime Minister said that he had agreed that they will provide UK law enforcement and tax agencies with full access to information on the beneficial ownership of companies. There seems to be some confusion here, because the Chief Minister of Jersey said:

“This is in response to a need for information without delay where terrorist activities are involved”.

Obviously we welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to fighting terrorism, but are Jersey and all the other dependencies actually going to provide beneficial ownership information or not?

The Prime Minister: The short answer to that is, yes they are, and that is what is such a big breakthrough. Look, I totally accept that they are not going as far as us, because we are publishing a register of beneficial ownership. That will happen in June. We will be one of the only countries in the world to do so—I think Norway and Spain are the others. What the overseas territories and Crown dependencies are doing is making sure that we have full access to registers of beneficial ownership to make sure that people are not evading or avoiding their taxes.

In the interests of giving full answers to the right hon. Gentleman’s questions, let me give him the figures for full-time equivalents in HMRC in terms of compliance. The numbers went from 25,000 in 2010 to 26,798 in 2015. It is not how much money you spend on an organisation; it is how many people you can actually have out there collecting the taxes and making sure the forms are properly filled in.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister is quite right: the number of people out there collecting taxes is important, so why has he laid off so many staff at HMRC, who therefore cannot collect those taxes?

In 2013, the Prime Minister demanded that the overseas territories rip aside the “cloak of secrecy” by creating a public register of beneficial ownership information. Will he now make it clear that the beneficial ownership register will be an absolutely public document and transparent, for all to see who really owns these companies and whether they are paying their taxes?

The Prime Minister: Let me be absolutely clear: for the United Kingdom, we have taken the unprecedented step—never done by Labour, never done previously by Conservatives—of an open beneficial ownership register. The Crown dependencies and overseas territories have to give full access to the registers of beneficial ownership. We did not choose the option of forcing them to have a public register, because we believed that if that was the case, we would get into the situation the right hon. Gentleman spoke about, and some of them might have walked away from this co-operation altogether. That is the point. The question is, are we going to be able to access the information? Yes. Are we going to be able to pursue tax evaders? Yes. Did any of these things happen under a Labour Government? No.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does talk very tough, and I grant him that. The only problem is that it is not a public register that he is offering us: he is offering us only a private register that some people can see.

It is quite interesting that the Premier of the Cayman Islands, Alden McLaughlin, is today apparently celebrating his victory over the Prime Minister, because he is saying that the information “certainly will not be available publicly or available directly by any UK or non-Cayman Islands agency.”

The Prime Minister is supposed to be chasing down tax evasion and tax avoidance; he is supposed to be bringing it all into the open. If he cannot even persuade the Premiers of the Cayman Islands or Jersey to open up their books, where is the tough talk bringing the information we need to collect the taxes that should pay for the services that people need?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. Gentleman is misunderstanding what I have said. In terms of the UK, it is an absolute first to have a register of beneficial ownership that is public. He keeps saying it is not public; the British one will be public. Further to that—and I think this is important, because it goes to a question asked by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—we are also saying to foreign companies that have dealings with Britain that they have to declare their properties, and the properties they own, which will remove a huge veil of secrecy from the ownership of, for instance, London property. Now, I am not saying we have completed all this work, but we have more tax information exchange, more registers of beneficial ownership, more chasing down tax evasion and avoidance, and more money recovered from businesses and individuals, and all of these things are things that have happened under this Government. The truth is he is running to catch up because Labour did nothing in 13 years.

Q6. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): My constituents John and Penny Clough, whose daughter Jane was tragically murdered by her ex-partner while he was out on bail, are campaigning to save Lancashire’s nine women’s refuges, which are currently under threat because Labour-run Lancashire County Council proposes to cut all their funding. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Clough family and me that Labour-run Lancashire County Council should prioritise the victims of domestic violence?
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very moving case, and I know that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our sincere condolences to Mr and Mrs Clough. In terms of making sure that we stop violence against women and girls, no one should be living in fear of these crimes, which is why we committed £80 million of extra funding up to 2020 to tackle violence against women and girls. That includes funding for securing the future of refuges and other accommodation-based services, but it obviously helps if local councils make the right decisions as well.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The United Kingdom and its offshore territories and dependencies collectively sit at the top of the financial secrecy index of the Tax Justice Network. Since the leaking of the Panama papers, France has put Panama on a blacklist of unco-operative tax havens and the Mossack Fonseca offices have been raided by the police in Panama City. What have British authorities done specifically in relation to Mossack Fonseca and Panama since the leak of the Panama papers?

The Prime Minister: In terms of who is at the top of the pyramid of tax secrecy, I think it is now unfair to say that about our Crown dependencies and overseas territories, because they are going to co-operate with the three things that we have asked them to do in terms of the reporting standard, the exchange of tax information and access to registers of beneficial ownership. Frankly, that is more than we get out of some states in America, like Delaware. We in this House should be tough on all those that facilitate lack of transparency, but we should be accurate in the way we do it.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what we are doing about the Panama papers. We have a £10 million-funded, cross-agency review to get to the bottom of all the relevant information. That would hugely be helped if the newspapers and other investigative journalists now shared that information with tax inspectors so that we can get to the bottom of it.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s final question, we are happy to support blacklists, but we do not think a blacklist should be drawn up solely on the basis of a territory raising a low tax rate. We do not think that is the right approach. It is the approach the French have sometimes taken in the past. In terms of taking action against tax havens, this Government have done more than any previous one.

Angus Robertson: Some 3,250 Department for Work and Pensions staff have been specifically investigating benefit fraud, while only 300 HMRC staff have been systematically investigating tax evasion. Surely we should care equally about people abusing the tax system and those abusing the benefits system. Why have this Government had 10 times more staff dealing often with the poorest in society abusing benefits than with the super-rich evading their taxes?

The Prime Minister: I will look carefully at the right hon. Gentleman’s statistics, but they sound to me entirely bogus, for this reason: the predominant job of the DWP is to make sure that people receive their benefits, and the predominant job of HMRC is to make sure that people pay their taxes. All of the 26,000 people I spoke about earlier are making sure that people pay their taxes. The clue is in the title.

Q8. [904332] Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will and Carol Davies and many other farmers in south Herefordshire are still waiting their 2015 payments from the Rural Payments Agency, nearly four months after they were due. That follows the failure of the RPA website last year. It is causing great personal and financial distress, and threatens the future of farm businesses. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet farmers to discuss the issue and press the RPA to make these payments by the end of this month, and does he share my view that, at the very least, farmers should receive interest on the amounts overdue?

The Prime Minister: I recently met both the National Farmers Union and the Welsh NFU, and I continue to have meetings with farming organisations, including in my own constituency. I know there have been problems with the payment system. The latest figures show that some 87% of all claims have been paid. I believe that the figures for Herefordshire are in line with the national average, but obviously that is no consolation to the 13% that have not received those payments. That is why we have a financial hardship process. We are working with charities. We have made hardship payments amounting to more than £7 million, but we need to make sure that the lessons of how to make the system work better in future years are properly learned.

Q2. [904326] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): If the British people vote to leave the European Union, will the Prime Minister remain in office to implement their decision?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q10. [904334] Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Again on Europe, does the Prime Minister agree that the European Union is not just the world’s biggest single market but an ample source of foreign direct investment, providing 50% of the investment that we receive: and an excellent platform for supply chains to thrive and prosper, which gives them the ability to get the skills and the innovation that they need? That, for my constituency, means that Sartorius, Renishaw, Delphi and a whole load of other hi-tech companies thrive and prosper, as they do elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: I well remember my visit to Renishaw’s with my hon. Friend, where I was shown what I think was a world first: a bicycle that was printed on a 3D printer. I did not get on and give it a try, but it looked as though it would carry even someone of my weight. He is right, because the single market is 500 million people, and it is a great market for our businesses and our services. Increasingly, the market and the supply chain are getting more and more integrated. That is why we should think very carefully before separating ourselves from it.

Q3. [904327] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and people under 40, but, despite that, research into them receives just over 1% of the UK’s national spend on cancer research. That will be the subject of a debate next Monday in Westminster Hall.
Will the Prime Minister have a word with the Secretary of State for Health, so that the Minister who answers that debate might be able to bring with him or her some long-overdue good news of change in this area?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do exactly as the right hon. Gentleman says. It is an important issue. We invest something like £1.7 billion a year in health research, but there is always this question when it comes to cancer research. The spending has gone up by a third over the last Parliament to nearly £135 million, but there is always the question about whether that is fairly distributed between all the different types of cancer. I will make sure that the Minister can give him a very full reply.

Q11. [904335] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I have a steel producer at the heart of my constituency, and so I share concerns raised about the future of our steel industry and, more widely, of energy-intensive manufacturing. The north of England still has significant steel industry and, more widely, of energy-intensive manufacturing. The north of England still has significant steel industry, which will safeguard steel jobs in other parts of the country, to see how we can help on a commercial basis. I am absolutely satisfied that we are doing everything we possibly can. We cannot totally buck the global trend of massive overcapacity in steel and massive decline in prices, but those are the key areas—in terms of power, in terms of plant and in terms of procurement—where we can help.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The changes that we are making are going to save the steel industry more than £400 million by the end of this Parliament, and that is a good example of the steps that we can take. There was an excellent debate yesterday in the House about this issue. We need to work on everything we can do in terms of procurement. We need to make sure that we are taking action in the EU against dumping, and we are. We need to make sure that we reduce energy costs where we can. We stand by to work with any potential purchaser of the Port Talbot works, which will safeguard steel jobs in other parts of the country, to see how we can help on a commercial basis. I, too, have met Mr and Mrs Clough, and it was a truly dreadful case. Women’s refuges are facing an absolute crisis. The changes that the Government propose to make to housing benefit will force the closure of women’s refuges. The Prime Minister needs urgently to look again at these changes, because unless he makes refuges exempt, they will be closing up and down the country. Will he do it?

The Prime Minister: I would say to the hon. Lady that we are doing the same kind of thing with these refuges as we did in the last Parliament with rape crisis centres. That is why the £80 million of funding is so important, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is working with local authorities to explain that this money is available to make sure that refuges are there.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As part of world autism awareness week last week, the National Autistic Society launched its biggest ever awareness campaign, called “Too Much Information”, and young Alex, the star of the film, was here in the House and met many MPs on Monday this week. The society’s research shows that some 50% of autistic people and their families sometimes do not even go out in public because they are afraid of what people think and of the public reaction to them. Will the Prime Minister meet me and the charity to discuss how the Government can support this campaign, and how we can help tackle the social isolation of so many families through this campaign and through Government assistance?

The Prime Minister: First, let me pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who has been campaigning and legislating on this issue for many years now, including the landmark legislation that went through in the last Parliament. We have been working closely with the Autism Alliance and have invested some £325,000 since 2014, but she is right that more needs to be done in terms of helping families with autistic children and raising the profile and increasing the understanding of what having an autistic child or being autistic is all about. I think she is absolutely right to do that. Let me put in a plug for “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”, which is still on at the theatre on Whitehall. I took my children the other day. It is absolutely excellent, and will provide a better explanation of autism than perhaps anything we can discuss in this House.
Q7. [904331] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The authorities in Peru, El Salvador and Panama have raided offices of Mossack Fonseca, seizing documents and computer equipment, but no one has knocked on the door of the law firm’s branch in the UK. While recognising the operational independence of our enforcement agencies, does the Prime Minister share my deep concern that, as we speak, documents are no doubt being shredded and databases being wiped, undermining the opportunity to bring further potential wrongdoing to light?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that we need to make sure that all the evidence coming out of Panama is properly investigated. That is why we have set up a special cross-agency team—including the National Crime Agency, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and other relevant bodies—to make sure we get to the bottom of what happened. But she is right to reference the fact that these organisations are operationally independent. It would be quite wrong for a Minister or a Prime Minister to order an investigator into a particular building in a particular way. That is not a Rubicon we want to cross in this House. Let us empower the National Crime Agency, empower HMRC, give them the resources and let them get on with the job.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): May I draw the Prime Minister’s attention to the tragic death of Ayeeshia Jane Smith in my constituency? Ayeeshia was 21 months old when she was stamped on by her mother so violently that it punctured her heart. The pathologist said her body resembled a “car crash victim”. Yet Ayeeshia had been known to social services since the day she was born. They knew about the violent boyfriends; they knew about the domestic violence; they saw the doors kicked in; they smelled the cannabis; they saw the bruises; they saw the cuts; they saw the fingerprints on her little thighs—and they did nothing.

The Prime Minister will understand that people in Burton want to know how this could have happened. They are concerned to know that the serious case review that is being carried out is being carried out properly, that those people who are directly involved in the organisations being investigated will have their say, and that we can make sure that no other child suffers the life and the death of Ayeeshia Jane Smith?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. In the work that we all do, we get to hear about some hideous and horrific incidents, but for anyone watching television that night, and seeing the description of what happened to Ayeeshia, it simply took your breath away that people could behave in such a despicable and disgusting way towards their own children. In my view, no punishment in the world fits that sort of crime carried out by the child’s own parent. As my hon. Friend said, there will be a serious case review. I will look carefully at his suggestions, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of Education will do so as well. There are criticisms of the way in which these cases are conducted, but in this case, to start with, we must get on with the serious case review because we have got to get to the bottom of what went wrong.

Q9. [904333] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): There are currently more than 7,900 people in the UK who need an organ transplant, including 139 children, and many will die because of the shortage of available organs. The Welsh Labour Government have already introduced groundbreaking legislation for opt-out organ donation in Wales. Will the Prime Minister join me in supporting the “change the law for life” campaign for opt-out organ donation throughout the UK?

The Prime Minister: I am always happy to look at this again. I have looked at it before and have not come out in favour of opting out. We debated the matter in the last Parliament and made quite a lot of moves towards making opt in much easier. We found that different hospitals and different areas of the country had very different records for how well they do. My personal position is that we should support and continue to drive opt in, but the House of Commons can vote on this issue from time to time, and on whether it wants to go down the Welsh track rather than the track we are on. Personally, I think let us make opt in work better.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that our colleague Lord Bates has just started a 2,000 mile walk from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro, arriving in time for the Olympics to raise awareness for the Olympic Truce and money for refugee children. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Lord Bates well on this epic journey, and also commit the Government to upholding the values and principles of the Olympic Truce?

The Prime Minister: I have already written to Michael Bates to wish him well on this long walk and to support the work that he has done over many years for the Olympic Truce. He leaves me a bit of a hole in the House of Lords, where he has been doing fantastic work for the Home Office on security issues, so we wish him a good walk and a speedy return.

Q12. [904336] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): At Ealing hospital, the technically junior, though highly experienced doctors I met last week are dismayed that the Government’s equality assessment of their new contract finds that it discriminates against women—more than half of them. As the Prime Minister is a self-confessed feminist, leading a progressive Government—[Interruption.] So he says. Will he reverse this blatant injustice, which has no place in 2016?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the question and backhanded compliment. The contract is actually very pro-women because it involves a 13% basic pay rise, restricts the currently horrendous and unsafe hours that some junior doctors work, and gives greater guarantees about levels of pay and the amount of money that doctors will get. I think that as people start to work on it and with it, they will see that it is very pro-women.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Over 200,000 economic migrants came from the European Union in the period for which we have figures. Yet the propaganda sheet sent out to the British people claims that we maintain control of our borders. Have we withdrawn from the free movement of people, or is that sheet simply untrue?
The Prime Minister: The truth is this: economic migrants who come to the European Union do not have the right to come to the UK. They are not European nationals. They are nationals of Pakistan, or Morocco, or Turkey. None of those people has that right. That is very important—and frankly that is why it is important that we send information to households: so that they can see the truth about what is proposed. What my hon. Friend has just put forward is a classic scare story. Britain has borders. Britain will keep its borders. We have got the best of both worlds.

Q13. [904337] Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Stirling University in my constituency is Scotland’s university for sporting excellence. Elite sports have been rocked over recent months by an international doping scandal, which threatens to see entire countries thrown out of and banned from major sporting competitions. Does the Prime Minister agree that, in this Olympic year, the World Anti-Doping Agency needs further support, and will he tell me what further action can be taken?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. The World Anti-Doping Agency has made a lot of advances in recent years. The issue is relevant to our anti-corruption summit on 12 May, when we will look at corruption in sport and bring forward new codes of practice that we will adopt in this country and hope others will also adopt. There is also the question of whether doping should be made a specific criminal offence; that is something that we should look at and debate in this House.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What progress has been made in implementing Sir Bruce Keogh’s 10 clinical standards, published in December 2013, which are absolutely essential for rolling out the seven-day NHS?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I can write specifically to my hon. Friend on the clinical standards. What is good is that Bruce Keogh and others within the NHS support the vision of a seven-day NHS. We should of course pay tribute to all the doctors and nurses who work at weekends already—that is a very important point—but we are trying to move towards an NHS in which the individual has access to their family doctor seven days a week and hospitals work more on a seven-day basis, which will save lives and improve care. I will write to my hon. Friend about the specific detail.

Q14. [904338] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Parent governors play a key role in local schools, supporting their children’s education and performing an important civic duty. Is the Prime Minister aware of the sadness and anger that have resulted from the forced academies announcement because the duty for each school to have parent governors will be removed, and will he urgently review this attack on parents?

The Prime Minister: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Lady asked that question, as I know we will be debating the issue later today. Let me be clear: we support parent governors and think that they have a great role to play, but no school should think that simply by having parent governors it has solved the problem of how to engage with parents. Let me say to her that there is something in the Labour motion for today’s debate that is actually inaccurate and should be withdrawn. It says that the White Paper “proposes the removal of parent governors from school governing bodies”.

It does no such thing. As well as not getting his tax return in on time, the Leader of the Opposition is bringing forward motions to this House that are simply wrong.
Points of Order

12.38 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 2 December, during the debate on Syria, the Prime Minister promised that there would be regular quarterly progress reports to this House on the military action against Daesh. The longest a quarter could last is 92 days, but it is now 133 days since that pledge was made. Have you had any indication from the Government as to whether they intend to make that quarterly progress report so that we can see what action is being taken and whether it is effective?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. The question of how a Government fulfil a commitment to the House is principally a matter for Ministers. Having taken a keen interest in this matter, the right hon. Gentleman will know that a report was presented to the House by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in December, and that a second report, which I think was billed or tagged as a quarterly report, was provided by the Secretary of State for International Development on 8 February. If memory serves me correctly, it was an oral statement, and it may be that the right hon. Gentleman and some other Members were hoping for—or even expecting—a written report. That is, however, not a matter for the Chair.

To be fair, the Government have made a large number of statements to the House over the past few years—that is a matter not of speculation but of fact. The only point I would make gently is that since the Foreign Secretary had unavoidably to be absent from Foreign Office questions yesterday—that prompted a modicum of comment from his own side although he had done me the courtesy of notifying me beforehand—it might be thought a good idea for a subsequent report to be provided by him to the House. If there is an appetite for that report to be oral, I know that it will be delivered by the Foreign Secretary with great dexterity. It would also have the additional “advantage”—I say that in inverted commas because it is a matter for the House to decide—of pleasing a right hon. Gentleman from the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware of the decision by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to close its Sheffield policy office. Despite repeated requests at the BIS Select Committee for the Department to share the figures on which that decision was based, the permanent secretary told the Committee:

“I don’t think I can point you to one specific document which covers specifically the Sheffield issue.”

In answer to a question about costs from my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) at the Public Accounts Committee, he said that the decision was “not based on individual cost-benefit analysis of a static closure.”

I have had access to a document entitled “BIS 2020—Finance and Headcount outline”, which specifically covers the Sheffield issue and is, in the permanent secretary’s words, “an individual cost-benefit analysis of a static closure.”

Will you clarify, Mr Speaker, whether the permanent secretary’s words constitute misleading the House, and advise me on how I can get the information in front of the two Committees of the House that have requested it?

Mr Speaker: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but my instinctive reaction is that exegesis of what is said by the Government, including permanent secretaries, and adjudication upon it, is not a proper matter for the Chair. I think it is safer to keep out of that. It may well be that it is a subject of some dispute on which the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied, but I underline that it is for the Committees concerned to press for the information that they require. If they are dissatisfied with what they have or have not received, they should persist, and there are well-established procedures for doing so. I have a feeling, however, that by putting his concerns on the record, the hon. Gentleman may find that the Government are able and inclined to offer the information he requires.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): On a point of order. Mr Speaker. I apologise for not giving you advance notice of this point of order, but I had hoped that it would be raised during Prime Minister’s questions. On 28 October 2015 in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, Sir John Chilcot said that the text of the Iraq report would be available in the week commencing 18 April 2016, at which point it would be passed to the security services for checking. Given that that is next Monday, I wonder whether you have received notice from any Minister who intends to make a statement to the House, to update it as to when that process will be finished and the long-awaited report will be available?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have received no such indication of an imminent statement on the matter. When this issue has been aired in the House, the sense of dissatisfaction across the Chamber has been audible not just to the Chair, but to millions of people throughout the country. It has become exceptionally and excessively protracted. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s frustration. He has put his point on the record again, and I hope that it will have been heard in the appropriate quarters. Have I received an indication of a statement? I am afraid I have not.
Improvement of Rail Passenger Services
(Use of Disruption Payments)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.45 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require Schedule 8 disruption payments between Network Rail and train operating companies to be allocated to specified projects aimed at increasing the quality, value for money or reliability of passengers' experience of railway travel and associated services; and for connected purposes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present the Bill to the House today, the purposes of which are threefold. First, the Bill seeks to improve the services on offer to rail commuters across the country. Secondly, it aims to ensure that millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is directed towards benefiting passengers, rather than lining the pockets of train operating companies. Thirdly, the Bill seeks to shine a light on a part of the rail industry that is bewildering in its complexity, and to open it up to greater public scrutiny and accountability. The Bill would create a responsibility for the regulator to guarantee that any net income made by train operators from schedule 8 payments in totality is used to fund overall passenger benefits on the network. It is important to note that the Bill is not intended to stop or replace passenger benefits on the network. It is important to ensure that millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is available to the public. With rigorous monitoring by the regulator, this money should be put towards improving the customer experience of the railways. Such measures could include retaining ticket money in services for the benefit of passengers. The payments received from Network Rail bear no relation whatever to the passenger compensation schemes between the train operators and their customers. Indeed, only a fraction of what train operators receive in payments from Network Rail is ever passed on to commuters whose journeys have been disrupted. Passengers are certainly not helped to claim what they are owed for delays, given that train operators make it so difficult for them to access compensation. It is really important that passengers are made more aware of their rights. I applaud the recent work of Which? and its “Make rail refunds easier” campaign, putting pressure on the rail regulator and train operators to make this whole process simpler, fairer and more accessible to commuters.

I call on the Government to bring rail travel within the EU-compliant Consumer Rights Act 2015. The unfairness of the current structure of railway compensation payments is really brought to light when we consider how much money is involved and how poorly passengers are compensated compared with train operators. I commend the recent work of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and the shadow Transport team to expose this issue. Their analysis has shown that between 2010 and 2015 Network Rail paid out £575 million to train operators in schedule 8 payments. Over the same period, train operators provided compensation to passengers to the tune of only £73 million. That is a compensation gap of more than half a billion pounds, a substantial boost to operating companies’ profit margins.

I accept that train operators should be able to cover the costs of any loss of revenue they incur that arise from the unplanned delays caused by Network Rail. What they should not be able to do, however, is make a profit over and above those costs from train delays and cancellations. That is just plain wrong.

In 2014-15, the Government provided a grant payment to Network Rail of £3.8 billion. Therefore, to add insult to injury, a significant amount of taxpayers’ money flows from Network Rail back to private train operating companies, many of them ultimately owned by foreign Governments, under schedule 8 payments. It is scandalous that a system can be designed in such a way that the very people using the rail network and who are most affected by the poor standard of service on offer—tax-paying commuters—can end up contributing to train operators’ profits out of their own misery! How can this be right? Where is the accountability to the fare-paying, taxpaying public for how this system operates and where this money goes?

The rail expert Christian Wolmar has said: “In an ideal world, the train operators would only get back the actual money that unexpected delays costs them. However, instead the level is determined by an economic model that only very vaguely reflects the impact of delays felt by passengers. So vaguely, in fact, to be meaningless.”

He went on to say that the current system “does the railways no credit and creates the perverse incentives that plague the industry.”

I could not agree more; the situation must change. We need a way of linking schedule 8 payments to benefits that improve the customer experience of the railways. This Bill would make that happen.

I want the rail regulator to be given the power to ensure that train operating companies have to provide full disclosure of any net profit they might make from schedule 8 payments. This information should be made available to the public. With rigorous monitoring by the regulator, this money should be put towards improving the customer experience and providing a high-value service. Such measures could include retaining ticket office staff; facilitating easier access to station platforms and trains; free wi-fi on trains; or using the money towards paying for a guarantee that trains will not miss out stops—a particular frustration for a number of my constituents. These are just a few suggestions, and I think that, should this Bill become law, it would be a very good idea to consult passengers on the improvements they want to see to their services.

It is clear from recent evidence that the rail regulator understands many of the issues I am looking to address with this Bill. At the end of last year, the regulator and Network Rail agreed a £4 million rail reparation fund to benefit directly commuters affected by poor performance on routes provided by Thameslink, Southern and the...
Gatwick Express services. By increasing the number of staff at stations, employing more track workers to deal with disruptions and introducing incident management software to resolve issues on routes more quickly, the regulator sought to “enhance” the services for passengers affected by poor performance.

I want a permanent rather than a temporary scheme in place that can benefit all passengers across the country. However, the rail reparation fund example is an important first step by the regulator. What it has set out to achieve reinforces the fundamental principle that lies at the heart of the Bill before us—that improving rail passengers’ services should be the top priority for Network Rail and train operators. Commuters should not be left waiting on station platforms while train operators pick up big profits from the rail industry’s complex, opaque and unfair compensation arrangements.

I would like to thank colleagues from across the House who have agreed to sponsor my motion today. That support shows the extent to which we all want to see the rail industry reformed for the benefit of passengers—our constituents. It is for all these reasons that I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Joan Ryan, Tom Brake, Julie Elliott, Mrs Louise Ellman, Frank Field, Kelvin Hopkins, Peter Kyle, Caroline Lucas, Siobhain McDonagh, Will Quince, Henry Smith and Mr Charles Walker present the Bill.

Joan Ryan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 April 2016, and to be printed (Bill 160).
for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), raised any of those points about the Russian Administration when on “Russia Today”?

John McDonnell: That certainly will happen in future.

Even if they were not criminals, many of Mossack Fonseca’s clients, if not all, had the strong intention of evading or avoiding the taxes that would otherwise have been due from them.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent speech and for bringing this debate to the House. Does he agree that this is a real issue for people in London, particularly in respect of the impact that these shady characters have on our London property market? It is a tragedy that Londoners, who want to remain in London, have to move out because these criminal elements are messing up the international finance system.

John McDonnell: That confirms the need for open and public disclosure of beneficiary ownership and beneficiary interests. As my hon. Friend and every London MP knows, speculation on property in this capital city denies many of our constituents a decent roof over their heads.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John McDonnell: Let me press on a little, and I shall give way shortly.

Mossack Fonseca exploited the presence of loopholes and entire jurisdictions that favour secrecy and minimal taxation. We can expect further news over the next few weeks and months, as the investigative work continues. Yesterday the Panama headquarters of Mossack Fonseca was raided, but 10 days on since the initial leak, I believe that its UK offices in Hitchin—not far away—have not been, despite the raising of concerns by the firm’s founder about the lack of due diligence performed by the UK office in relation to a company in its charge, and entire jurisdictions that favour secrecy and minimal taxation. There may be more revelations to come, set to tarnish the reputation of the Prime Minister’s own constituency office in Hitchin.

John McDonnell: That did indeed demonstrate very starkly that we were not “all in it together”. Perhaps these revelations will show that we are not “all in it together”?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will give a straight answer to a straight question. Does he regret the support that he gave to the IRA? They are still laundering money and still avoiding taxes in Northern Ireland, and he supported their activities in the past.

John McDonnell: I have never given the IRA support in relation to money laundering or any other activity. Let me make it absolutely clear that wherever laundering takes place, it is illegal and should be tackled, and I shall welcome the hon. Gentleman’s future contribution to the establishment of procedures to ensure that that happens.

Jo Cox: Having spent 10 years as an aid worker, I am acutely aware of the millions of pounds that are lost to development in poor countries as a result of these tax havens. Does my hon. Friend agree that, before the anti-corruption summit that will take place in London in May, the Prime Minister needs to do far more to reassure the House that he will accelerate his efforts to persuade British overseas territories to mirror the United Kingdom’s welcome move, and establish a transparent public register of beneficial ownership?

John McDonnell: The issue of a public register is critical to any measures that are taken in the future, because such a register will enable these kleptocrats to be held to account—particularly in the developing world, where they have denied development resources to the economies of their countries.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Transparency throughout the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories is, of course, crucial. Does not the lack of such transparency further reinforce the message to our constituents that there is one tax rule for the rich and powerful, and another for everyone else?

John McDonnell: One of the key things that I think the whole House must do in the coming period is re-establish the credibility and fairness of our taxation system, which has been so badly damaged.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): The shadow Chancellor has called for greater transparency on the part of the Crown dependencies. Can he explain why this is the first time he has made such a call? Why did he not make such calls during the 13 years of the last Labour Government?


If the hon. Gentleman looks at my parliamentary record over the last 18 years, he will see that I was one of the first MPs to set up the tax justice meetings in the House that brought the Tax Justice Network here, and to do the necessary research. He will also see that, as shadow Chancellor, I have commissioned a review of HMRC’s activities in terms of the tax base, including those relating to avoidance and evasion. However, I understand his concern. I have worked on this issue on a cross-party basis for a number of years, and have criticised successive Governments for not doing enough.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend has spoken of tax fairness. Does he agree that the Panama papers have revealed a channelling of moneys to the very rich while the poor have to pay their taxes, and that that comes on top of a Budget in which capital gains tax was cut for the top 3% through changes in personal independence payments for the disabled? Does that not show that we are not “all in it together”?

John McDonnell: I think that what people found extremely disappointing in the Budget debate was that, as my hon. Friend says, the cut in capital gains tax was being paid for by cuts in benefits for people with disabilities. That did indeed demonstrate very starkly that we were not all in it together. Perhaps these revelations will
[John McDonnell]

enable us to take steps towards the establishment of a fair taxation system that will fund our public services effectively.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I thank the shadow Chancellor for being so generous with his time.

Last night, an all-party parliamentary group to which I belong held an excellent meeting with a journalist from The Guardian and the campaigners who exposed the scandal. They informed us that openness and transparency in the overseas territories could be achieved quite simply through an Order in Council from the United Kingdom Government. The achievement of those aims is a matter of will on the UK Government’s part.

John McDonnell: My hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House made that point last week, giving example after example of cases in which Orders in Council had been issued. They have been used very effectively by successive Governments, and it bewilders me that this Government are not taking that opportunity now.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: May I press on for a little while? I am only on the third page of my speech. This is getting ridiculous. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later, but I have already given way a fair amount. As you know, Mr Speaker, I am generous, but I do not want to speak for too long.

Even today, we have not seen the Prime Minister’s full tax return or that of the Chancellor, and it is important that that should happen. The Prime Minister established the principle, which I advocated three months ago, that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor should publish their tax returns—not summaries; their full tax returns—but that has not happened.

However, what confronts us today is an issue far bigger than any individual. At the centre of the allegations is a single issue. The fundamental problem is not tax avoidance by this individual or that company; those are symptoms of the disease. The fundamental issue is the corruption of democracy itself. At the core of our parliamentary system is the idea that those who levy taxes on the people are accountable to the people. If those who make decisions about our taxation system are believed to be avoiding paying their own taxes, that undermines the whole credibility of our system.

James Cartlidge rose—

John McDonnell: It depends on the issue that is being addressed. Sometimes harking back to the medieval period may be the most effective way of dealing with these problems.

James Cartlidge rose—

John McDonnell: I must press on. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later, if that is okay.

The common understanding is also that those who live here and benefit from public services will make a proportionate contribution towards them. The level of taxation may vary—sometimes it is higher, sometimes lower—but because we have a shared sense of fairness, we expect those with the broadest shoulders to carry the greatest burden in taxes. Over the last 30 years, however, we have witnessed the growth of wealth inequality on such a scale that it has undermined that basic principle of democracy. Figures from Oxfam suggest that the richest 1% own more than the rest of the world combined.

James Cartlidge rose—

John McDonnell: Let me press on for a little while. I will return to the hon. Gentleman, I promise.

Great hoards of assets, in property and in financial wealth, have been built up. According to the best available measures, the levels of income inequality in Britain today are climbing as high as they were at the time of the first world war. The share of income going to the super-rich has risen almost inexorably for three decades. We are returning to the levels of inequality that were experienced before universal suffrage—before women had the vote, and before the development of universal free education and healthcare—in a world that existed before the gains of democracy brought obscene levels of wealth inequality under control, and created a more humane society for the majority.

James Cartlidge rose—

John McDonnell: Let me press on. I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

The world of the Rockefellers and the robber barons is the one to which we are returning: a world in which there is immense, almost unimaginable wealth for a gilded elite, but insecurity for growing numbers. Much of that wealth is now held offshore in secretive, unaccountable tax havens. According to the most recent estimate, $21 trillion dollars, equivalent to a third of global GDP, is hidden from taxation systems in global tax havens. It is estimated that, if taxed fairly, that wealth would raise $188 billion a year in extra taxation.

This is not about a few families seeking to “minimise their tax bill”, as was claimed by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). It is systematic. An offshore world is operating parallel to the world in which the rest of us live. This is not an accident. The offshore world is being constructed, piece by piece, by multinational corporations and the super-rich, aided by shady offshore operations such as Mossack Fonseca, and—we must be honest about this—supposedly reputable
accountancy firms here in London are also playing their part. According to the Public Accounts Committee, PwC has aided tax avoidance “on an industrial scale”. Deloitte has advised big businesses on avoiding tax in African countries. Ernst and Young act as tax advisers to Facebook, Apple and Google, and just last month KPMG had one of its tax-avoidance schemes declared illegal by the High Court. Together, the big four accountancy firms in this country earn at least £2 billion annually from their tax operations.

But it is not just them. Banks headquartered and operating in London have been particularly proficient in directing their funds through Mossack Fonseca shell companies. HSBC and its affiliates created more offshore companies through Mossack Fonseca—over 2,300 in total—than any other bank. Coutts, a subsidiary of RBS, created over 500 offshore companies through its subsidiary in Jersey. Supposedly reputable companies are aiding and abetting the systematic abuse of our tax system.

We should be clear: the City of London is being viewed by many as a tax haven in the middle of a dense network of havens created for the super-rich to avoid the taxes the rest of us must pay.

**James Cartlidge**: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in 2010 the richest 1% contributed 25% of all tax, and does he welcome the fact that the Chancellor revealed in the Budget that that has now increased to 28%?

**John McDonnell**: It is not just a matter of tax, is it? It is not just a matter of income tax, either. Of course I recognise those figures, but distributional analysis has been undertaken independently of the Government. Conservative party policy since 2010 has seen some of the biggest losses for the poorest, not the wealthiest. The Women’s Budget Group put together the tax gains, the tax paid, the services cut and the benefit cuts. The poorest 10% will lose 21% of their income annually as a result of this Government’s policy—five times more than the top 10%. The analysis of the Institute for Fiscal Studies clearly shows that this year’s Budget hits the poorest 80% harder than the richest. Eighty per cent. of those cuts fall on whom? It is on women.

**Huw Merriman**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he is always generous with his time. As well as appreciating the fact that 1% of the highest-income earners pay 28%, would he consider that since 2010 this Government have taken millions out of tax altogether by increasing the tax allowance— it is now £11,500?

**John McDonnell**: Let me deal with the tax threshold issue. The IFS has said that the biggest gains from the shift in the lower tax thresholds come for the higher earners. They are the ones who get the most and they benefit from the tax threshold moves. It describes the shifting of the tax thresholds as “very much a giveaway to the better off”.

**Robert Jenrick**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**John McDonnell**: I gave way earlier to the hon. Gentleman. I will press on because I know that others want to speak and I am sure he will want to speak himself. This is a world that the super-rich inhabit. They live by different rules and it is an alien world for the majority of the rest of us.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The hon. Gentleman agree that his party’s opposition to the removal of the family home from the income tax threshold affects those on the lowest incomes in London and the south-east because it will mean that only the wealthy can afford to stay in London when the family home is sold and they have to pay inheritance tax?

**John McDonnell**: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We have supported the increase in tax thresholds to try to take people out of tax altogether, but the benefits overall have actually accrued to the highest earners rather than the lowest and we need a more sophisticated system than that. With regard to inheritance tax, the cut that was made this time around by the Government benefited the top 5% of the population. There must be a better way of ensuring that people can pass on their wealth to their children, rather than just benefiting the super-rich. We have to look at that again. I am happy to do that and meet her to discuss it.

**Maria Caulfield**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being extremely generous in giving way, but there are low-income families in London and the south-east whose home’s value has increased beyond recognition. They are now asset rich but income poor. How will the Labour party help them if it does not take them out of inheritance tax?

**John McDonnell**: The important thing now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) has said, is that we build more homes to house those people. That will be an effective way of reducing prices, too. That will give access to home ownership to thousands more in the capital.

**Mr David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): Can we put this discussion on thresholds to bed once and for all? The people who are paying 28% income tax will get a small rise. Every one of us standing here will get a 10% pay rise next year and we will get a much bigger tax threshold rise than the ordinary men and women of this country. That is what they cannot understand. We and the super-rich are getting richer. They keep getting poorer. That is what this debate is about—it is about fairness.

**John McDonnell**: We have to find a better way in our taxation system to benefit those at the lower end of the scale. At the moment, although we are happy with the rise in tax thresholds, there needs to be a way to compensate for that more equitably. Again, it is not us saying this; it is the IFS and many other independent assessors. They are saying that this is not the most effective way of redistributing wealth in this country. May I go back to my speech? I do not want to try your patience, Mr Speaker.

It is an alien world for the majority of us. It is a world of offshore trusts and legal trickery that would put Byzantium to shame; a world in which it is perfectly normal to buy property in London through a company registered in the British Virgin Islands, managed by lawyers in Panama with offices in Bermuda; a world in
which citizenship and attachment to a country are something to pick and to choose depending on price. The scandal of the “non-doms” continues, in which a few super-rich can pay a notional fee instead of the taxes that would otherwise be due from them as residents.

Tucked away in this year’s Budget was an extraordinary clause that wrote off “selected non-doms’” entire capital gains tax bill on any gains made before April 2017—a giveaway to the wealthy. This is not the world that most of us live in. Most of us pay our taxes. Contrary to the shocking opinion of the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), that is not because we live in a country of “low achievers”, as he described them. We do so because we understand that a decent society depends on the contributions all of us make. Without the payment of taxes, we cannot run the public services that are essential to a decent society.

Christopher Pincher: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Let me press on. I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once.

We do not have access to the specialist services that Mossack Fonseca and other companies provide. We cannot negotiate with HMRC when and how much to pay in tax. However, for the global elite, tax avoidance is as much a part of their world as the yachts and the mansions. This world is a corrosive influence on our democracy. The more the super-rich can escape the burden of taxation, the more it falls on the rest of us in society.

It is morally wrong that a billionaire oligarch should be paying proportionately less in taxes than the migrant cleaner of his mansion. It is a disgrace that an immense global corporation such as Google should pay no corporation tax for nearly a decade, while small businesses are chased for tiny amounts. It is an affront to the basic principles of our democracy that large corporations should be able to negotiate sweetheart deals with HMRC.

[Interruption.] It is also a corrosion of democracy when a revolving door apparently exists between HMRC, charged with collecting taxes, and major accountancy firms whose business depends on minimising taxes. HMRC’s last director went to work for Deloitte, and now we find that the executive director appointed by HMRC to oversee its inquiry into the Panama leaks is a former adviser to tax havens who believes that tax is a form of “legalised extortion”. The structures of Government are being bent out of shape by tax avoidance. Decisions are warped around the need to protect the interests and wealth of the super-rich and of giant corporations. Democracy becomes corrupted.

On party donations, the Conservatives receive more than half their election campaign funding from hedge funds. In public view, here in London, its party leadership has made loud and repeated noises about tax avoidance, yet its MEPs in Brussels have voted six times, on instructions from the Treasury, to block the EU-wide measures against tax avoidance. As we have heard in evidence this week, the Prime Minister lobbied the EU Commission in 2013 to remove offshore trusts from new tighter EU regulations on avoidance. The Conservatives’ own record reveals that people no longer trust them on this issue. Not only have they impeded efforts to clamp down on tax avoidance, but these schemes directly implicate senior figures in the Conservative party. Several Conservative party donors, three former Conservative MPs, and Members of the House of Lords are among those with connections to companies on the books of the offshore law firm Mossack Fonseca.

As the super-rich flee their obligations to society, the burden of taxation is pushed elsewhere. As I have said, independent assessments of the tax and benefit changes introduced since May 2015 show that the poorest 10% are forecast to see their incomes fall by more than 20% by 2020, with 80% of the burden falling on women. It is the poorest and those least able to carry the burden who will suffer the most under this Government. An economic system that allows tax avoidance on this scale is one in which the inventor and the entrepreneur come second to the owner of wealth, the worker comes second to the plutocrat and the taxpayer come second to the tax dodger. It is a system in which inherited wealth and privilege, rather than talent and effort, are rewarded.

There has been criticism of the last Labour Government, and I was not enamoured of all their economic policies, but they did take measures against avoidance. Their measures on corporation tax avoidance are forecast—not by me, but by the Financial Times—to raise 10 times as much revenue as the present Chancellor’s schemes.

The Panama leaks must act as a spur to decisive action. In response to the leaks, the Government have stepped up their rhetoric on tax evasion but much of what has been announced falls short of what is needed or repeats existing announcements. I remind Ministers that page 223 of the Office for Budget Responsibility report that accompanied this year’s Budget outlined a disclosure scheme for companies operating in Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. The report said that owing to HMRC’s consistent underfunding, it did not have the resources to follow up on the links of the scheme. I again offer some words of advice to those on the Government Front Bench: fewer press releases and more action. It is time to move on and to close down tax havens and clean up this muck of avoidance.

Let us take this step by step. We need an immediate and full public inquiry into the Panama leaks. The Government’s proposed taskforce will report to members
of the Government, the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, who are members of a party funded by donors featured in the Panama papers. To have any credibility, the inquiry must be fully independent. We must shine a light on, and start to prise apart, the corrupt networks that operate through tax havens. Part of that will involve creating a proper register of MPs’ interests. Members of this House should not be able to hide behind spurious claims of privacy. We want HMRC to be properly resourced to chase down the tax avoiders, with a new specialist unit dedicated to the task. Foreign firms bidding for Government contracts here should be required to name their owners. Full, public, country-by-country reporting of earnings and ownership by companies and trusts is a necessity if fair amounts of taxation are to be charged.

The measures announced by the EU this week do not go nearly far enough, requiring only partial reporting by companies. The turnover threshold is far too high, and Labour MEPs in Europe will be pushing to get that figure reduced much more to make it more difficult for large corporations to dodge paying their fair share of tax. Banks need to reveal the beneficial ownership of companies and trusts they work with. That means creating a public register of ownership of companies and trusts, and not only of companies, as the Government are currently enforcing. The Prime Minister has a role to play in this, as it was he who lobbied for the exclusion of trusts from the proposed EU measures. Labour will work alongside leading tax experts to lead a review into trusts from the proposed EU measures. Labour will charge for Government contracts here should be required to a public register of the trusts too often used to avoid paying tax and reduce transparency in our tax system.

We must ensure that Crown dependencies and overseas territories enforce far stricter minimum standards of transparency for company and trust ownership. The Government’s current programme for reform is being laughed at by the tax havens. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said today, it was only this week, after signing a new deal on beneficial ownership, that the Cayman Islands Premier Alden McLaughlin celebrated a victory over the UK, saying:

“This is what we wanted, this is what we have been pushing for three years”.

The truth is that the Government are playing into the hands of those who want to abuse the tax system.

Christopher Pincher: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Let me press on if I can.

We need serious action on enforcement. We need not central registers but, as Christian Aid and others are calling for, full public registers accessible to all, including journalists and other businesses, if we are going to curb the activities exposed in the Panama papers. This package of measures is Labour’s tax transparency and enforcement programme. We believe that it offers a sound basis to take the first necessary steps against avoidance and towards openness and transparency. We are presenting it today as we want to see immediate effective action.

This is a test of leadership. The leadership of the Conservative party could take this opportunity to correct the series of errors that it has made. It could join us today in taking effective steps towards dealing seriously with avoidance. People want to see the Conservatives take these steps. Otherwise, they will rightly stand accused of siding with the wrong people and of being the party of the tax avoiders. Incidentally, it was not long ago that the Chancellor of the Exchequer appeared on television to give advice on the “pretty clever financial products”, as he described them, that would allow the wealthy to dodge inheritance tax.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Dodge? Can you use that word?

John McDonnell: Don’t tempt me, Mr Speaker.

Some of the Conservative party’s Back Benchers believe that tax avoidance is a sign of success. The party’s donors are named in the Panama papers, and the Prime Minister himself is a direct beneficiary of a scheme set up in an offshore tax haven through his prior ownership of Blairmore Holdings shares.

The Panama leaks have presented a stark political choice. Do we continue to allow a system of corruption and avoidance, or do we now take the action necessary to restore fairness to our taxation system and to correct the abuse of democracy? That is the challenge, and the choice, ahead of us. I urge the Government and all Members of this House to join us in a serious programme of work to tackle the abuse of our tax system. The Government can make a start by supporting our motion today and adopting Labour’s tax transparency enforcement programme. I commend this motion to the House.

1.27 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): It is a great pleasure, for the second time this week, for the Government to be able to inform the House of how much more we have done than the previous Government to tackle evasion, avoidance and aggressive tax planning and to become a world leader in tax transparency. In 2010, we inherited a situation in which no one could find out who really owned a company in the UK or find out the details of a London property which no one could find out who really owned a company based in an overseas territory.

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The Panama leaks have presented a stark political choice. Do we continue to allow a system of corruption and avoidance, or do we now take the action necessary to restore fairness to our taxation system and to correct the abuse of democracy? That is the challenge, and the choice, ahead of us. I urge the Government and all Members of this House to join us in a serious programme of work to tackle the abuse of our tax system. The Government can make a start by supporting our motion today and adopting Labour’s tax transparency enforcement programme. I commend this motion to the House.

Mr Gauke: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman precisely what I just said. In 2010, no one could find out who really owned a company in the United Kingdom. From June, we will be publishing a public register of beneficial ownership. What is more, HMRC could not find out who owned a company based in an overseas territory.

As a consequence of the agreements we have reached this week, HMRC will be able to do exactly that. That is
evidence of the progress that has been made under this Government, and that was not the case under the previous Government.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) pointed out, we have had lots of honeyed words from the Government about how they are going to deal with this matter. However, is that not belied by the fact that they appointed someone as the executive chair of HMRC who thinks that taxation is “legalised extortion”? Does that not demonstrate the attitude that exists in this Administration?

Mr Gauke: It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman seeks to smear a public servant who has served Governments of—[ Interruption. ] Let me make this point. This is someone who has served Governments of both colours and with whom I have worked extensively over six years. He has been and is determined to do everything he can to ensure that our tax laws are properly enforced and deal with avoidance and evasion. I suggest to anyone who throws around one line from an article written in 1999 that they look at the entire thing, because his argument is about properly addressing tax avoidance by ensuring that we get the law right. It is unfortunate when accusations are thrown around about dedicated, impartial public servants.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work over several years in dealing with some of these issues. Will he comment on the fact that this country now has the smallest gap on record between tax owed and tax paid? That is the real story about this Government’s efficiency in dealing with tax collection and the difficulties in the system.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right. The reality is that the tax gap, as a percentage of tax revenues, has fallen considerably over the past six years, which is testimony to the effort put in by not only this Government but HMRC. Bringing the tax gap down involves considerable challenges, such as tax evasion, tax avoidance, and inadvertent error on the part of taxpayers, which does happen from time to time as I am sure all hon. Members will recognise. We are determined to do what we can do improve and strengthen our systems. I am grateful for the opportunity today to make progress on that.

Robert Jenrick: Will the Minister emphasise the point about the tax gap? One of the most relevant measures is the tax gap specifically for those paying corporation tax. It was rising when the coalition Government came to power in 2010 and has fallen by almost 50% over the past six years, which is a major achievement.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right that the tax gap in the context of large companies and tax avoidance as a whole have fallen strongly. There is of course always more that we can do, so let me take this opportunity to set out some of those steps.

Clive Efford: Will the Minister give way?
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), but I must then make some progress.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. I of course welcome all that the Government have done on tackling tax avoidance and evasion. He says that more could be done on tax avoidance, but does he accept that, following the comments of the former Labour Foreign Secretary and Lord Chancellor, who said that the Labour Government could have taken but did not take action on tax avoidance and the previous Labour Government’s deficit, the Government are playing catch up?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to draw those remarks to the attention of the House. We have done a great deal on tax avoidance, but more can always be done and I will set out how we are doing that, working through the OECD.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister give way? I want to help.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman says that he wants to help me, so I will give way and then really make some progress.

Mr Anderson: In the interests of the people listening to this debate, will the Minister provide, either today or by putting something in the Library, details of companies or schemes identified since 2012 that could be classed as either morally repugnant or morally wrong, terms that were used by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor in 2012 to describe such schemes? Has any work been done on that? Can we get a register so that we know who to look out for in future?

Mr Gauke: I think the hon. Gentleman is actually being helpful—not that I ever doubted that he would be. When there is artificial, contrived behaviour and when schemes are clearly contrary to the intentions of Parliament, we need to take strong action. We are also entitled to be critical of those involved in promoting such schemes. Indeed, we brought in a regime whereby we can name and shame the promoters of tax avoidance schemes that are clearly contrary to our intentions.

Maria Caulfield: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gauke: As it is on that point, I will give way, but I am conscious that we are 10 minutes in and I am only on page 3 of my speech.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for giving way. If Opposition Members want to be helpful, they could speak to the unions. Unison paid no corporation tax in 2011 or 2012, despite owning £51.6 million of stocks and shares and generating an income of over £5 million.

Mr Gauke: It would be fair to say that I try to make it a rule not to comment on the individual tax affairs of taxpayers, but perhaps those who are happy to wade in on such debates should answer such questions.

HMRC is committed to exposing and acting on financial wrongdoing. Its specialist offshore unit is currently investigating more than 1,100 cases of offshore evasion around the world, with more than 90 individuals subject to current criminal investigation. The motion calls for greater HMRC resourcing. This shows precisely why at the summer Budget of 2015 we confirmed an extra £800 million to fund additional work to tackle evasion and non-compliance by 2020-21.

We have already heard quite a lot today about HMRC resources and headcount. I have to concede that there was a period when the numbers working in compliance and enforcement fell—that period was up to 2010. If we look at where the numbers were in 2010 compared with where they are today, we see that the enforcement and compliance numbers are higher than they were when the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and I took our respective positions—there has been an increase. I accept that much more of HMRC’s work on processing self-assessment forms, for example, has been automated and the number of staff working in that area has fallen. However, the number of people working in compliance and enforcement has increased over the past six years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gauke: I want to make a few more points. Even before last week, HMRC had already received a great deal of information on offshore companies, including those in Panama and including Mossack Fonseca. This information comes from a wide range of sources and is currently the subject of intensive investigation. HMRC has asked the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the BBC and The Guardian to share the data they have received from last week’s leaks. Clearly, it is important to examine the data very closely, which is why we are providing new funding of up to £10 million for an operationally independent cross-agency taskforce to analyse the Panama papers and take action on any wrongdoing and regulatory breaches. The taskforce will include analysts, compliance specialists and investigators from across HMRC, the National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority. Between them, those agencies will have some of the most sophisticated technology, experts and resources to tackle money laundering and tax evasion anywhere in the world. The taskforce will report to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary on the strategy for taking action, and we will update Parliament later this year. I stress that the taskforce will have total operational independence. If it finds people to prosecute, it will prosecute them. If it finds information about illegality, it can act on it. In addition, the independent FCA has written to financial firms asking them to declare their links to Mossack Fonseca. If the FCA were to find any evidence that firms have been breaking the rules, it, too, has strong powers to take punitive action.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Minister mentioned last year’s Budget and the £800 million for non-compliance issues. However, I understand from his answer to a written question that only £266 million of that has been allocated specifically to address tax fraud. How much of that will be spent on dealing with tax evasion?
Mr Gauke: The vast majority of the additional money we have put into compliance, both the £800 million announced last year and the £1 billion announced in the last Parliament, is going to dealing with tax evasion. All of it is going into compliance, which is in the areas of dealing with tax evasion and tax avoidance, at its broadest points. I am happy to let the hon. Lady have details of the precise numbers and to write to her on that subject, but this money is going into compliance exactly to deal with these areas. We have taken this very seriously, substantial sums will be raised for us over the course of this Parliament and we are proud of our record on this.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): First, on headcount, will the Financial Secretary confirm that there are 14,000 fewer staff in HMRC now than there were in 2010? Secondly, will he inform the House whether any HMRC staff currently have a compulsory redundancy notice?

Mr Gauke: I make no secret of the fact that HMRC is a smaller organisation than it was in 2010 in its headcount. That is because efficiency savings are capable of being found in an organisation that devotes a number of staff to processing pieces of paper when we are moving to a more digital world and we can make greater use of technology. On the area that is relevant to today’s discussion and is the concern of the House, the concern is to ensure that HMRC has the resources to deal with tax evasion and tax avoidance. In that area, headcount is not the be-all and end-all; it is about what we get out, not what we put in. As it happens, however, the numbers of people dealing with enforcement and compliance have gone up under this Government. That point sometimes seems to be missed from this debate.

In a globalised world, international action is clearly vital to stop cross-border tax avoidance, evasion and aggressive planning. The UK Government can be proud of having done more than any other country to stamp out these practices. On avoidance, we have already implemented the OECD recommendations for country-by-country reporting to improve transparency between business and tax authorities, and have advocated public country-by-country reporting on a multilateral basis. The Commission’s proposals for public country-by-country reporting are a step in the right direction towards new international rules for greater public transparency. However, we need to consider carefully the details of the Commission’s proposal, including how the reporting is done and how the information is broken down.

On transparency in the context of tax evasion, which is a key point, the UK will be the first major country to publish a register of company beneficial ownership, free for anyone to access, allowing everyone to see who owns what company. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it a personal priority to use our G8 presidency to set a new global standard of tax transparency. As a result of our G8 presidency, 129 jurisdictions have committed to implementing the international standard for exchange of tax information on request, and more than 95 jurisdictions have committed to implementing the new global common reporting standard on tax transparency. This is a huge breakthrough. I recall that six years ago no one believed that we would get to that position, and I am delighted that we have done so. This is a step change in transparency.

Robert Jenrick: To emphasise that point, none of our major international economic competitors has agreed so far to have a public register of beneficial ownership. In fact, the state of Delaware, in which 90% of United States public companies are listed, has said that it has no intention of implementing this. We really are leading the world and leading our major competitors.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point, and I will address the subject of the public register in a moment. It is considerable progress to have got central registers at all. We have pressed for that, and I am pleased that overseas territories and Crown dependencies have agreed to sign up to it.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Prime Minister has stated that the registers that the overseas territories will provide will be available to tax authorities here. However, as this debate has clearly highlighted, this is a global problem, so will those registers be shared with other tax enforcement agencies globally so that they can ensure that tax is not being avoided from other countries?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I think there is scope for going further on it. What we have agreed is to ensure that we have access to those central registers. That is clearly very helpful but I think more progress can be made in that area and it is something to return to in the future.

Panama is one of the very few financial centres that has not yet fully committed to these international standards. We are clear that it should do so, and we continue to press for Panama to join the club of responsible nations. Of course, there is more international work to be done, particularly on tackling money laundering. That is why we are hosting an anti-corruption summit in May, with the aim of encouraging consensus not just on exchanging information, but on publishing such information and putting it into the public domain, as we are doing in the UK. Once again, Britain is leading the world on transparency, accountability and responsibility.

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

Mr Gauke: There are a few more points that I want to make, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Let me address the subject of the UK’s Crown dependencies and overseas territories. Reform of the regimes of the overseas territories and Crown dependencies has been a key objective for the UK, and the reforms that we have secured have been considerable. All the UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories with financial centres are signed up as early adopters of the common reporting standard, reporting annually from 2017 in respect of data that have already been collected. The Crown dependencies and overseas territories will share information with the UK from this year, one year earlier than the rest of the world. All the UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories with a financial centre have committed to transparency on company ownership.

Last Monday the Prime Minister announced that our overseas territories and Crown dependencies have agreed that they will provide UK law enforcement and tax
agencies with full access to information on the beneficial ownership of companies. For the first time, UK police and law enforcement agencies will be able to see exactly who owns and controls every company incorporated in those territories. This is a major step forward in transparency, the result of the Government’s sustained work in this area.

It is right that we expect the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to meet international standards, and indeed they do. Yes, we want them to move towards a public central register. That is not yet the international standard. If, as the Leader of the Opposition suggests, every former colony that does not have a public register should be recolonised, where would we begin? Is he proposing that we invade Delaware? [ Interruption. ] Now we come to mention it, says the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris).

The reality is—and this is the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was right to raise—that the UK is in favour of a public register. We are implementing a public register in June for the first time. We have never had one before. We want other countries to do it, but very few of our European Union colleagues do so. It is not the case that the US does it. We want to ensure that it becomes the new international standard, but Orders in Council condemning overseas territories for failing to do what most of our EU colleagues do not do would not be fair or effective. The approach that we have taken has brought the overseas territories and Crown dependencies a long way. I fear that the approach advocated by the Labour party would fail to work.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Financial Secretary give way?

Mr Gauke: I will make some more progress. The hon. Gentleman has just arrived.

As well as leading international action, we have ensured that domestically our regime is both tough and transparent. We have invested more than £1.8 billion in HMRC since 2010 to tackle evasion, avoidance and non-compliance. The £800 million in extra funding that we announced in the summer Budget 2015 will enable HMRC to recover a cumulative £7.2 billion in tax over the next five years, and to triple the number of criminal investigations it can undertake into serious and complex tax crime. In the last Parliament, we made more than 40 changes to tax law, closing down existing loopholes and introducing major reforms to the UK taxation system, raising £12 billion.

Penalties increased, new offences created, loopholes closed, new measures introduced, more money raised—it does not stop there. In this Parliament, we have already announced a further 25 measures for legislation to tackle avoidance, evasion and aggressive tax planning. These measures are forecast to raise £16 billion by 2020-21. This week, we announced that we will bring before the House this year legislation to make it a crime for corporations to fail to prevent their representatives from criminally facilitating tax evasion. This new corporate offence goes further than any other country has gone in tax law, closing corporations to account for criminal wrongdoing. It will apply to both UK and overseas corporations, and will set a new standard for corporate responsibility and accountability. I am sure that Members on all sides of the House will support any measures as they go through.

What a contrast to the 13 years of the Labour Government. This week, the Opposition ramp up the rhetoric, but it was not on our watch that private equity managers had a lower rate of tax than their cleaners. It was not on our watch that the wealthy could sidestep stamp duty. It was not on our watch that high earners could disguise their remuneration as loans that were never repaid. Those are just some of the loopholes left open by Labour—loopholes that we have been busy closing ever since.

Let me make one further point about the approach of the Labour party over the past week. Yes, taxes should be paid in accordance with the law and the intentions of Parliament, and we should take action against those who fail to do so. Those of us on the Government Benches certainly hold that view. But too often in the past week, Labour has appeared to be motivated by something else. That something else is hostility to the wealthy—not for dodging taxes, but just for being wealthy, for being successful, for earning money and for wanting to pass it on to their children. Those are things which millions of people aspire to do.

Thanks to the actions that this Conservative Government have taken domestically and overseas, we are revolutionising tax transparency and putting an end to loafers and offshore tax evasion. This is strong and firm action from a Government committed to ensuring that every penny of tax that is owed is paid. I urge the House to reject the motion.

1.55 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I make a number of small observations on what we have heard so far and gently say to the Minister, whom I like, that success is not measured merely in monetary terms? There are many, many successful people who will forgo stashing cash in the attic, the bank or the offshore tax haven.

On HMRC, we have no problem with efficiency or with organisations being fit for purpose. We have no qualms about genuine waste being eroded, but we look askance at 17 out of 18 tax offices being closed and only one being reopened, and the argument that somehow that will deliver more for substantially less.

The shadow Chancellor spoke about wealth inequality now rising to a level that we have not seen since the days of the Rockefellers or, as his M. I. T. Her barons, I would not put the Prime Minister in the category of the super-rich, such as the Rockefellers. We know, however—the Prime Minister has been very open about this—that he bought shares, as he described it, in a trust or a fund as part of Blairmore Holdings. He sold them some years later. He did nothing illegal at all. That episode shone a very bright light in a very murky corner of offshore tax havens. One thing that struck me was that he bought the stock in 1997 and sold it in 2010. Those dates were familiar to me. It was the entire duration of Blair, Brown and new Labour. On the underlying issue, which I know the shadow Chancellor is genuinely concerned about, and on many of the points that the Minister made at the end of his speech, the Labour party did nothing for 13 years. I am glad that this is now on the agenda in a proper and cogent way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) made a number of telling points on this subject in his speech on the Second Reading of the Finance Bill. He said: “you cannot build economic success on the back of social injustice.”—[Official Report, 11 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 115.]
[Stewart Hosie]

He also said, quoting Adam Smith:

“No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.”

He argued that creating such division does not bring progress, and he went on to describe how much of this division is characterised today by people in certain quarters being able to park large sums of money offshore, and the rest—the vast majority—being unable to do that.

My hon. Friend suggested that, according to Jason Hickel of the London School of Economics, tax havens hide one sixth of the world’s total private wealth—in excess of $20 trillion. Some estimates put that as high as $32 trillion, and CNN described it on Monday evening as about 6% of total global GDP. There are higher estimates. We can probably all agree that it is around $20 trillion, or 15 times UK GDP, parked offshore in tax havens—money and assets which very wealthy people and criminals can hide from the relevant tax authorities.

The revelations in the millions of documents in the Panama papers from Mossack Fonseca are but the tip of the iceberg. I am told that it is the fourth biggest law firm in Panama providing these services, which means there are three larger firms, and I presume that there are dozens, scores or hundreds of smaller firms doing the same. And it is not simply in Panama. Indeed, Panama does not even make it into the top 10 tax havens. Taken together—I do not think this situation has changed yet, notwithstanding the measures that the Government have announced—the UK and the overseas territories collectively are No. 1, outstripping even Switzerland by some margin, it is argued.

It is worth reminding ourselves that at a single address in the Cayman Islands, Ugland House, there are 19,000 registered businesses. I am certain that some of them will be legal, but many will not be. Many will be companies whose beneficial owners remain hidden from the tax authorities there, here or elsewhere. That means that income that should be the subject of taxation will go untaxed, to the detriment of public services here and elsewhere.

We have, in essence, an international system of finance that enables tax avoidance on an industrial scale, a system that hides from scrutiny the owners of vast wealth while the ordinary man, woman or business in the street does not have, and does not want, that luxury. They pay their fair share, and they simply want others to do the same. What makes it most unfair—I think this is why people are so angry—is that when assets or income are hidden and go untaxed, we all suffer as the resources we need for vital public services are reduced and squeezed.

It is also the case that much of the tax stashed in tax havens is looted from developing countries, so this is not simply an issue for the west. It is a matter of fundamental importance to those developing economies, which frankly are in even more need of the tax receipts than the wealthy people who hide them. The Prime Minister used was that he “was looking for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), is the question of where the money actually is and how it is set to work for its beneficiaries. As we know, cash funds do not actually sit in the Cayman Islands or the Bahamas. One of the biggest centres for the cash is London, and we can see where some of that money is spent. For example, hundreds, if not thousands, of rather expensive properties in London have been bought by persons unknown. We have therefore called for radical reform to address tax avoidance, outright evasion and criminality and to deliver fairness across the board so that the very wealthy pay the tax that is due in precisely the same way as those on more modest earnings.

The starting point for paying tax in this country is the starting point for paying tax in this country is the Revenue knowing precisely who owns what assets and what income is derived from them. In short, that means a public register of beneficial ownership of companies, and not just in the UK, but for the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories as well, precisely so that nobody can hide assets or incomes through an opaque structure of a company registered in an overseas territory, registered by a Panamanian lawyer while the money comes swiftly to a bank account in London and is parked in a multi-million pound mansion in Mayfair through an anonymous shell company.

That also means taking serious action on trusts. The argument that the Prime Minister used was that he would not have got the agreement had trusts been included. He argued—possibly correctly historically—that those trusts were set up in order to allow sophisticated investors to invest in dollar-denominated stock. But times have changed. I took a cursory look at the stock exchange website this morning. On its “frequently asked questions” page, I saw the following question: “Can a company have its securities traded in currencies other than sterling, for example euros and dollars?” The answer was, “Yes, your shares can be denominated and traded in any freely available currency you choose.” Indeed, the stock exchange launched a Masala rupee-denominated bond last week. The old arguments that these structures are required for non-sterling trades or

Paul Flynn: Does the hon. Gentleman think it is significant that China has £44 billion invested in the Cayman Islands and £49 billion in the British Virgin Islands? Is it not one of the reasons why the Government might not want to act against these tax havens that they are ingratiating themselves with the Chinese, who are busy destroying our steel industry?

Stewart Hosie: I suspect that the Chinese authorities are interested in that £93 billion just as much as we are, because I suspect that much of it is not there—how can I put this gently?—officially. They have as big a problem with money being fleeced from their system as we and other countries have with ours.

Another issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), is the question of where the money actually is and how it is set to work for its beneficiaries. As we know, cash funds do not actually sit in the Cayman Islands or the Bahamas. One of the biggest centres for the cash is London, and we can see where some of that money is spent. For example, hundreds, if not thousands, of rather expensive properties in London have been bought by persons unknown. We have therefore called for radical reform to address tax avoidance, outright evasion and criminality and to deliver fairness across the board so that the very wealthy pay the tax that is due in precisely the same way as those on more modest earnings.

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Crown dependencies and overseas territories and the law enforcement and tax authorities here. We think that should be public—there is absolutely no doubt about that—but it should also be shared elsewhere. If miscreants are identified by the Revenue or the police here, I hope that there will be a very swift phone call to the appropriate authorities elsewhere so that they, too, can follow the money.
investment are now simply wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath put it, even if the Prime Minister was right some years ago, he is wrong now and public opinion has changed dramatically. That brings me to what else the Prime Minister said on Monday. He said that he has published all the information on his tax returns for the past six years. He has provided details about money inherited from and given to him by his family. He has published other sources of income and his salary. He dealt specifically with the shares that he and his wife held in a unit trust called Blainmore Holdings, set up by his late father. That, from our point of view, was precisely the right thing to do. However, in a sense, all of that is irrelevant because it did not actually address the fundamental issue of individuals holding assets through overseas shell companies and being able to hide them and their income from the tax man.

Also, in describing the actions that the Government are taking to deal with tax evasion, aggressive tax avoidance and international corruption more broadly, the Prime Minister said that they have put an end to rich homeowners getting away without paying stamp duty because their houses are enveloped within companies. He said that they had made 40 changes to close loopholes, and they have sought agreement on global standards for the automatic exchange of information, and in June this year, as the Minister has pointed out, the UK will become the first country in the G20 to have a public register of beneficial ownership so that everyone can see who really owns and controls each company. We recognise that there has also been work on base erosion and profit shifting.

All of that is to be welcomed. What we are saying is that we need to go further. It will simply not be enough for the police and the tax authorities to see beneficial ownership of companies registered in Crown dependencies; it must be public, so that the citizens of those countries and ours can see who precisely owns and benefits from what. Also, while we welcome the publication of beneficial ownership of companies in the UK, I ask the Government to ensure that sufficient resources are now dedicated to HMRC so that it can forensically scrutinise the sources of income to ensure that they are legal and that the tax due is paid. Of course, as I said earlier, the Government must also pass on to other authorities the details of any miscreants suspected of looting cash from other countries.

I am delighted that this subject is now under real scrutiny. I am also delighted that we have gone wider than the parochial. Oxfam has pointed out how significant this is in its report “Ending the Era of Tax Havens”. It gives encouragement to the Government, stating:

“The UK is especially well placed to show leadership here because it controls or directly influences by far the largest network of tax havens in the world. This network, encompassing the UK’s Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories and centred on the City of London, is estimated to account for nearly a quarter of global financial services provided to nonresidents within a jurisdiction. Taken together, this UK entity would sit at the top of the ranking global financial services provided to nonresidents within a jurisdiction. This network, encompassing the UK’s Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories and centred on the City of London, is estimated to account for nearly a quarter of global financial services provided to nonresidents within a jurisdiction. Taken together, this UK entity would sit at the top of the ranking global financial services provided to nonresidents within a jurisdiction.”

That is not something we should be proud of. However, Oxfam goes on to talk about the opportunity the Government have, saying that success in tackling corruption and tax evasion could be transformative not just in terms of our revenue, but in terms of the fight against global poverty and inequality, which, for the SNP, is just as important.

I will end by saying one thing to the Government: the cat is out of the bag. This is not just about Mossack Fonseca; this is the tip of the iceberg. The public will not allow this matter to be quietly swept under the carpet again.

2.10 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie). Although there are probably some things we would disagree on, there are a couple of issues on which we do agree. One is that it is welcome that we are having this debate on the Floor of the House today. The other is the fear that the next tax haven to be listed—this time it would affect ordinary working people—might be England if the Scottish Labour party gets its way after the elections this May and makes tax rates for working people higher there than they are south of the border.

It is always good, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, to be discussing on the Floor of the House how we get in the tax that is owed. During Prime Minister’s Question Time, I think I heard the Leader of the Opposition refer to tax as partly a donation. I can understand why he said that, but let us be clear: a donation is something people voluntarily give to a charity, as I do out of my salary; a tax is a legal requirement to pay something—it is not a donation or an act of charity.

As a member of the Committee, I sat on our recent inquiry into Google, which is perhaps one of the cases that has helped to prompt the debate on this issue over the last few months. We focused a lot on some of the offshore locations, but we also had references to things such as the “double Irish” and the “Dutch sandwich”, which helped to reduce the company’s tax liability. Neither of those relates to offshore territories; they both involve jurisdictions that are members of the EU. It is therefore important that, as we work across the world to try to deal with tax evasion and avoidance, we make sure that other nation states give these issues the attention they deserve. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sorry to disturb the hon. Gentleman, but there is quite a lot of chattering going on, and I am finding it quite difficult to hear him.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In its report, the Committee was clear that HMRC should try to lead a debate about openness and tax rules. In that instance, the issue was revenues and the discussion of information with HMRC. It is easy to grandstand in such debates, but it is important to have not a knee-jerk reaction, but a considered debate about what information is available publicly, because there cannot just be specific rules for individual companies. If we change our general principle of not discussing individual taxpayer data, there are obviously some pitfalls to that, as well as some potential benefits, as we see when we look at deals such as the one with Google. However, the Committee felt that HMRC could lead a debate on that.

The report summarises some of the issues involved in judging whether the Google deal was the best deal that could have been done. It is worth noting, however, that the debate was based on previous tax rules, not today’s tax rules; effectively, we were having a debate about things as they existed some years ago—in some cases,
11 years back, when many Members sitting here today were not actually in the House—and about laws that have, in many cases, changed.

What came out of the Committee’s discussion is that HMRC’s performance is being looked at more widely, and the Committee regularly looks at it. It is encouraging to see some of the figures that have been published on the reduction of the tax gap—not least the corporation tax gap, which has gone from 14% to 7%. That is welcome. Yes, there is more we can do to drive down that 7%, but it is far better to be talking about 7% than 14%.

As has been referred to in the debate, the tax haven where a hedge fund manager could pay as low a tax rate as the person who cleaned their office was the UK six years ago. I have always felt that tackling that was one of the best things done under the coalition Government, because it seemed innately unfair that someone sitting within a few miles of this building could use capital gains tax rules to pay a low rate on a substantial income—indeed, a lower rate than a person earning the minimum wage for cleaning their office.

Having had discussions with Anguilla’s Public Accounts Committee recently, I welcome a number of things about HMRC’s having the ability to get information from, and share information with, the Crown dependencies. I agree with the hon. Member for Dundee East that we should be as diligent in handing information to tax authorities in developing countries via such information-sharing arrangements as we are in using information to enforce our own tax system. I suspect there will always be a debate about exactly what information we share with countries with more repressive regimes, but where the line is purely about avoiding taxation, we should be prepared to co-operate, provided that there are assurances about the standards that will be applied afterwards as part of investigations under the relevant nation’s criminal justice system.

In terms of how the Government and the UK engage with these authorities, it is worth bearing in mind that some of the regulations involved are very complex. There is perhaps a debate to be had about the fact that costs them even more than it costs us. This is ultimately about ensuring that those tax rates that are used to hide who actually owns something, so that 7%, but it is far better to be talking about 7% than 14%.

The issues under discussion are, rightly, very high on the public agenda, and a great number of my constituents have contacted me to share their concerns. They, like many others, have a strong sense of both the real and the perceived injustice in our system, whereby the vast
majority of people in this country play by the same rules and have very little choice about the contribution they make to the public purse. This is not about envy or anger at wealth, whether it be earned or inherited; it is about the fact that those at the top end of the income scale seem to play by an entirely different set of rules. That, understandably, makes people angry, and the Government must take genuine steps to level the playing field and regain the public’s trust.

One of the assertions that has been made in representations to me is that the solutions to the problem are easy. Although I do not necessarily subscribe to that view, I do think that there are a few relatively simple steps that the Government could take to make a significant difference. Those steps would bring about much greater transparency about the ownership of individual and company assets and wealth, and enable a very clear view of who the beneficiaries are of investments and funds, whether they are held here in the UK or in offshore trusts and accounts. It is essential to deal properly not only with aggressive tax avoidance that Parliament never intended to be pursued, but with tax evasion and other criminal activity, such as fraud and corruption. Too often, both issues go hand in hand.

In his statement on the Panama papers on Monday, the Prime Minister acknowledged:

“Under current legislation it is difficult to prosecute a company that assists with tax evasion.”—[Official Report, 11 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 26.] He is absolutely correct. In fact, the challenge is understated, and I will briefly explain why. At present, under UK law, in order to hold a company criminally liable, prosecutors must identify an individual sufficiently senior within the organisation—usually at board level—as its “controlling mind” with knowledge of the offence. In an increasingly globalised world where multinational organisations, which have very complicated structures and management arrangements, are the norm, that sets an extremely high bar for prosecutors to cross. By contrast, in the US a company can be held vicariously liable in criminal law for the actions of its employees undertaken in the course of their employment.

The Government seemed to acknowledge that inadequacy in UK law and included proposals in their 2015 manifesto to introduce corporate criminal liability for economic offences. Yet by September 2015 those proposals were quietly dropped, a fact that came to light only in response to a written parliamentary answer. The proposals were intended to be pursued, but with tax evasion and other criminal activity, such as fraud and corruption. Yet by September 2015 those proposals were quietly dropped, a fact that came to light only in response to a written parliamentary answer.

The Government propose to do that by creating an offence modelled on section 7 of the Bribery Act 2010, introduced by the last Labour Government, that holds a company liable if it fails to take “adequate steps” to prevent bribery by its employees. In other words, it puts the onus on companies to ensure that proper compliance procedures are in place and holds them criminally liable if they do not do so. That model, which already applies to the offence of bribery, will apply to tax evasion under the Government’s proposals.

Why stop at tax evasion? Why not extend the provision to cover failure to prevent other crimes, such as fraud or money laundering, as promised in the Conservative party’s 2015 manifesto? The director of the Serious Fraud Office has suggested that that is a workable solution. Back in 2013, he highlighted the benefits:

“Such an approach would merely add a criminal sanction to existing obligations; it would assist in the reform of poor corporate culture which contributed to the crash; it would underpin the recovery by encouraging clean and stable markets; it would increase investor confidence; assist in more rapid prosecutions and dovetail well with deferred prosecution agreements.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned earlier the situation in America. None of the bankers in this country was held to account for the crash, but a number of those in America were. Does she agree that something should be done about that?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The banks in America have paid significant fines as a result of their behaviour ahead of the crash, but it has been significantly more difficult to ensure that justice is done here. That is the very reason why the issue needs to be addressed. The solution is very simple and workable. The Government already intend to legislate on tax evasion, so it would simply be a case of expanding the number of offences to which the legislation applies.

I strongly urge the Government to look closely at part 2 of schedule 17 to the Crime and Courts Act 2013. It sets out a useful list of offences, covering all manner of fraudulent and corrupt offences—from false accounting and forgery, to fraudulent trading, bribery and money laundering—that the Government’s proposed new offence could equally apply to. The work is all done. The ducks are lined up; the Government just need to implement the change.

The revelations in the Panama papers represent a pivotal moment that the Government must not squander. The Panama papers have not just highlighted issues
relating to tax evasion and, indeed, avoidance, but raised even greater questions about illicit financial flows, laundered money and the proceeds of crime, and about how companies exploit tax havens and secretive jurisdictions to facilitate that. Ahead of next month’s anti-corruption summit the Government should send out to the rest of the world the clearest of messages that the UK is serious about tackling economic crime in all of its forms, and its facilitation. I urge the Government to take the opportunity to take this important step to arm our law enforcement agencies and courts with the ability properly to hold companies to account.

2.29 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). She made an excellent speech, at the start of which she summarised very well the feeling of public anger about an elite who seem to live by rules different from those that apply to the average member of society. I agree with her.

I want to speak along the same lines as the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), who has just left the room, and talk about the underlying issues. Why is there such public anger about this issue? Tax avoidance and tax evasion have been going on for hundreds of years. Smuggling was tax evasion. When people filled in their windows to avoid the window tax, that was tax avoidance. Why has there recently been a crescendo of public anger? It cannot be simply because the Panama papers have been in the press. I argue that it is caused by underlining economics and the fissures that emerged in our society after the great credit crunch in 2008.

Mr Anderson: The hon. Gentleman might want to consider the fact that the poor people of the country are lectured constantly by the Government, who keep telling them that we are all in this together. Quite clearly, we are not.

James Cartlidge: We have a record low in the number of workless households. Worklessness is the single biggest cause of poverty. The Government have a very strong record on dealing with poverty, and I will come on to that.

Debbie Abrahams: It is generous of the hon. Gentleman to give way, but I have to challenge him on his last point. There are more people in work who are in poverty than ever before.

James Cartlidge: I simply do not agree with that. I want to start by focusing on the action that has been taken, because I do not think that the anger out there is caused by a lack of action.

Kevin Foster: Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Cartlidge: May I just make one point first, although it is lovely to have so popular a speech and so many interventions? On the action we have taken, as my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Newark (Robert Jenrick) have said, there has been a 50% fall in the corporation tax gap. I am sure that that is the sort of point on which my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay wants to support me.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, my hon. Friend for giving way. He has already been very generous with interventions. Does he agree that one of the things that really used to anger people was that an office cleaner could be paying a higher rate of tax than a hedge fund manager who worked in the same office? That was happening not in a tax haven, but here in the UK, and it is right that it was tackled.

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent point. It was a fundamental injustice, and we dealt with it. In the latest Budget, we announced a series of measures to tackle tax avoidance on matters such as hybrid mismatch, VAT evasion through online sales and the general anti-abuse rule. We will introduce a new penalty of 60% of tax due in all GAAR cases that are successfully tackled. We have brought in a long list of measures on matters such as serial tax avoidance and offshore avoidance.

On the broader point about the wider economics, I founded a small business in 2004—a mortgage broker specialising in the shared ownership sector—and it was obvious to me in the build-up to 2008 what was coming down the track. I believe that the then Government were trying to tackle inequality through debt. In those days, two potential homebuyers, one of whom was relatively wealthy and well educated, and the other who had less good skills and was less able to command such a salary, could both obtain similar levels of mortgage through the extraordinary measures that existed at the time, such as self-certified and sub-prime mortgages. We all know where that led.

In terms of public debt, the then Government’s main measure to deal with inequality was tax credits, which led to a £30 billion increase in in-work benefits. We paid for that increase in benefit spending on the national overdraft at a time when the country was doing pretty well and the world economy was relatively strong.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify something? He seemed to be saying that less intelligent people should not be allowed to have mortgages. Is that what he was saying?

James Cartlidge: I think that the hon. Gentleman should withdraw that remark. I find that genuinely offensive. What I said was that the rules were very lax, and self-certification meant that someone on a low salary could get a very large mortgage, just like someone who earned a large amount. That is exactly the point that I was making. We all know that that led to a huge crash in 2008.

We have one fundamental question to answer. How, in the current economic context, do we go about trying to deliver a fairer economy, which we all want, where more people share in the growth that we have been able to deliver? We need strong measures to counter tax avoidance. We need the public to feel as though we are all in this together, and that we are all paying our fair share.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On the point about everyone paying their way, does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that under this Government, the top 1% of...
earners are paying 28% of tax, which is a far higher percentage than under the Labour Government? [Interruption.]

James Cartlidge: There are shouts from Labour Members, because I made that point earlier, but it is worth repeating. I am delighted that my hon. Friend made it, because it is so strong.

Callum McCaig: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I am very popular today.

Callum McCaig: The hon. Gentleman is exceptionally popular today. The point about the richest 1% paying the largest amount of tax has been batted about a number of times today as though it is some sign of virtue. It is, in fact, a sign of the gross inequality that exists in the country, which needs to be addressed.

James Cartlidge: It is a sign that the rich are paying more tax. How does that make society more unequal?

Let me talk about the measures that we should be pursuing. Yes, we should be cracking down on aggressive tax avoidance, but if we are to help people across society to have a share, we need measures such as the national living wage, which was introduced on 1 April by a Conservative one nation Government. There are those who say that the national living wage is not generous enough. They have obviously not been reading *The Guardian*, which recently used its Mac index to prove that the national living wage is more generous than the minimum wage in any other European country except Luxembourg. Only in Luxembourg can someone buy more burgers with the minimum wage than they can with the national living wage in this country. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked what this had to do with tax avoidance. The underlying issue is fairness. It is about how we achieve an economy in which there is a widespread sense that everyone has opportunity and the chance to earn a decent wage.

We are delivering that in circumstances far more adverse than those that faced the Government before 2010. We have had a small majority and the first coalition since the second world war. We have had the biggest deficit since the second world war—11.5% of GDP—which we have cut by two thirds. In that context, it is difficult to grow our way out of such a problem and deliver fairness. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Glasgow South keeps chuntering, but he is not adding a great deal to the debate.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about fairness and about some of the challenges that we faced with the deficit that we inherited. Is he not proud that in those circumstances, not only have we shifted income tax from the lowest paid to the highest paid, but we have helped small businesses? Through the reforms to business rates, we will take many smaller businesses out of business rates altogether while making multinationals pay more.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention small businesses. I used to say to people that I ran a small business, but measured by the amount of corporation tax we paid, we were bigger than Google. The fact is that those who run small businesses feel as though they have to comply. They cannot afford expensive lawyers. I agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North about the sense that there is an elite who live by different rules. We have to deal with that, but we must not run away from the key point—my concluding point—which my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary also concluded, namely that when we talk about transparency, the transparency that really matters to the public is about our ideals and our beliefs.

What do we really believe? I fundamentally believe in the free market. I believe in capitalism. I believe in individuals getting out there and using their creativity to earn their way in the world. We cannot go back to paying our way through debt and unsustainable public finances. In the circumstances, we need to maximise the tax that we get, but we also need to maximise the investment into the country from companies that we have heard the Labour Front Benchers criticise. Those big professional firms in London are massive employers in this country. We need to expand our exports from the services sector. Basically, we need a positive, free enterprise agenda with a fair sense that companies and individuals are paying their fair share, which does not denigrate the free market but creates sustainable growth to deliver prosperity for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I have now to announce the result of a deferred Division on the question relating to employment agencies etc. The Ayes were 307 and the Noes were 241, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Everybody has been speaking for just over 10 minutes, rather than eight minutes, which is the informal guide. We now need to keep to about seven minutes or less, if we want to get everybody in. 2.39 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What has been highlighted by the publication of the so-called Panama papers is that we do not have a fair tax system. We are not all in it together, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said so eloquently. Those exposed by this scandal have knowingly exploited tax avoidance measures for their own financial gain. While it is not technically illegal, aggressive tax avoidance has been argued to be against the spirit and intention of the law and of the will of this House. What is really shocking is that Heads of Government are involved, including our own Prime Minister, and that poses fundamental questions about politics and politicians. Once again, it threatens public confidence and trust in politicians. These people are meant to be providing leadership to our citizens, and such involvement calls into question their attitudes and values, as well as their motives for seeking public office.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think the comments that have been made—for instance, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) said, “If you are not wealthy, you are a low achiever”—have added to the public’s distrust of politicians in this place?
Debbie Abrahams: Such a comment adds to the dissatisfaction with politics and politicians as a whole, as I have said. I thought it was a very insulting statement.

As Members on both sides of the House have already said, the Panama papers provide more evidence of the existence of a powerful and indifferent elite, for whom the accumulation of personal wealth at the expense of their fellow citizens is paramount. The evasion and avoidance of tax money that has been stolen is that which is collected by the Exchequer for our pensioners, disabled people and the vulnerable, as well as for doctors, nurses, teachers and all the other public servants funded by public money. Fundamentally, dodging paying a fair share of tax is contributing to growing inequality in this country and across the world, and tax havens are at the heart of this.

Many Members will have seen Oxfam’s report last month. It says the UK heads the world’s biggest financial secrecy network, which spans its Crown dependencies and overseas territories, and is centred on the City of London. Collectively, it is estimated to account for nearly a quarter of global financial services provided to non-residents within any given jurisdiction. The UK takes prime position out of all jurisdictions across the world in the Tax Justice Network’s financial secrecy index, which is hardly something we should be proud of.

The National Audit Office has estimated that the tax gap is £34 billion a year, which is £1 billion more than in 2009. That is equivalent to a third of the NHS’s national budget. About half of the tax gap is accounted for by tax fraud, which includes tax evasion, criminal activity and the hidden or grey economy. When we consider the cuts proposed in last month’s Budget in relation to the personal independent payment for disabled people, we can see that figure for half of the tax gap would pay the whole annual budget for people on the disability living allowance and PIP.

HMRC’s compliance units, now merged into the fraud investigation service, tackle all aspects of non-compliance. According to the NAO, they do not record how much of the revenue they successfully recover relates to tax evasion, but the NAO estimates that the figure is about 30%. One of the issues that HMRC has to face is the need to balance what it can get in quickly, as low-hanging fruit, but the NAO estimates that the figure is about 30%. One of the issues that HMRC has to face is the need to balance what it can get in quickly, as low-hanging fruit, and the hidden or grey economy. When we consider the cuts proposed in last month’s Budget in relation to the personal independent payment for disabled people, we can see that figure for half of the tax gap would pay the whole annual budget for people on the disability living allowance and PIP.

HMRC now has additional staff, with 670 new staff acting on tax evasion, but why were nearly 6,000 HMRC staff let go between 2013 and 2015? Has the 10% reduction in the number of HMRC staff since 2008 actually affected the collection of the moneys owed because of tax evasion?

As I say, I welcome the additional measures that have been taken, but the absolute outrage at this is clear from my mailbox, which I am sure is the same for other Members. There is palpable public anger. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) summed it up perfectly: when people are really struggling, it is shocking to see such absolute abuse by a tiny minority.

We need to look at this in the context of the Government’s other benefits and tax measures. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the regressive Budgets during the past six years have left people on low and middle incomes proportionately worse off. That is a result of the tax and social security measures. Projections for the next five years show that there will be increasing poverty and inequalities. All of that compounds the anger that people are feeling. In such a context, the vast accumulation of wealth by the wealthiest is very shocking.

In the past 15 years, those in the top 1% have increased their wealth by 79%, which is £3.7 million per person, while someone in the bottom 10% has seen a rise of just 45%, which is £1,600 per person.

In addition to the Prime Minister’s admission in his statement last week that he had benefited from an investment in an offshore trust based in a tax haven, he intervened in 2013 to oppose the beneficiaries of offshore trusts being named in proposed EU money laundering rules. This is what I mean by the need for political leadership. There has been an absence of political leadership, contrary to what can be deemed fair. I am conscious of the time, so I will not pursue that point. Our proposals will make a real difference, and I hope that Members will look at them.

2.47 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Forgive me for not being in the Chamber at the start of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not here because I had absolutely no intention of speaking. However, when I listened to the shadow Chancellor’s speech, I found myself understanding his frustrations and understanding the points he made. I guess the problem is that his solution seems to be some sort of socialist utopia, which I do not think will work. I see no example in history of its doing so. I have, however, been forced to consider what a viable solution to this state of affairs might be.

Understandably, as many colleagues have already illustrated ably in their speeches, the general public are angry and frustrated. There is a palpable sense that there has been a breakdown in trust not only in us in this Chamber, but in systems of government, whether it is the tax system or, given the latest dreadful case in Burton, the social work system. Across the board, the public are deeply mistrustful, and increasingly so, as well as deeply cynical. That is understandable, because this is not the only tax scandal. We have had Google and many others, including in relation to corporation tax.

I can understand why the average man and woman in the street is thinking, “If it is good for me, why is it not good for them?” The response should not be hypocrisy and it certainly should not be envy; it should be to ask what we can practically do in the globalised economy we all inhabit. I readily admit that there are failings in our current capitalist model, and I rarely see contributions from people who recognise that or, indeed, who have
thought about what might replace it. A notable exception is my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman).

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman mentioned public anger. Measures against the recession have been going on for about six years. The public are weary of that, just as the public in America are weary of what is happening there. The public feel aggrieved at us because the recession and the measures to deal with it have been too harsh and have gone on for too long. That is one reason why people feel that they bear the biggest part of the burden.

Dr Lee: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, but the political and philosophical point in it is that he does not believe that reducing the size of the state is necessarily in the interests of the majority. I do, and that is where we diverge, but the hon. Gentleman is right that there is a sense that the middle are carrying the burden and the very rich are not. However, all these things that we have been discussing, about which I have no knowledge—I wish I had money in trusts, offshore or elsewhere—are legal. If something is legal, I believe that it is legitimate. To those who believe that there is a moral component to paying tax, I say, “Get real.”

We probably need to look at the system first. Earlier, I referred to the corporation tax scandal, Google and the like. I know that the Government have made significant progress on reducing corporation tax, but corporation tax is out of date in a globalised economy. Let us just scrap it. We either make a decision not to spend £42 billion, or we move to a form of taxation that is not so easily avoidable, be it employee taxation, a sales tax or a property tax. However, the perpetuation of corporation tax in the world I see is plainly nonsense.

On the point about London property ownership, it is all about avoiding stamp duty. Scrap stamp duty. We should either not spend the £7 billion or find another way of levying the tax. Perhaps people should be taxed for ownership on an ongoing basis. Perhaps council taxes should be increased. I do not know—one can choose. However, corporation tax and stamp duty are clearly not fit for purpose and are easily avoidable.

The other challenge is intergenerational inequality. Significant sums of money are tied up in particular generations. Much has been said about the Prime Minister’s inheritance tax arrangements, which are totally to be expected—anybody with any wealth will mitigate inheritance tax. Who in that position would not? Let us not be hypocrites. The problem is that significant wealth is tied up in a particular generation, who were born post war. How will we facilitate the transfer of that wealth fairly and equitably? Answers on a postcard, please. At the moment, we do not have a system that works, and we need one.

I move on to transparency and the need for simplification. I am attracted to the Scandinavian—Norwegian and Swedish—model of publishing tax and wealth online. I support that; I have absolutely nothing—as far as I am aware—to hide. When I mention that to Conservative colleagues in particular, they worry about privacy. If that is founded—and those arguments are strong—the Prime Minister should not have published his tax returns, and nobody else should do so. It should be all or nothing. Each and every one of us in the Chamber, and indeed those watching in the Public Gallery, has a share in our democracy and in our Government functioning. For that share to be valued, we must all trust that it is legitimate and fair and that everyone is playing by the rules. I am therefore drawn to the Norwegian model, with all the necessary clarifications of legitimate application.

Dr Lee: I agree with my hon. Friend that initially no, it would not. However, in time, once the system beds down, it will. The richest man in Norway, who published all his wealth and income, is now extremely popular because it turns out that he is a great philanthropist. People do not have a problem with others being successful. I certainly do not detect that in the British public. However, I think that there is a suspicion that something underhand is going on in some quarters and, as the Prime Minister says, transparency is the best disinfectant.

We need to act because trust matters. Without trust, we cannot implement what is necessary, whatever the policies are. Anything that the Government can do to encourage the public to trust in the system and in this institution will get my support.

2.56 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I am happy to start on a note of consensus with the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) that this is all about trust. The public have reacted so fiercely against recent events because there is a collapse of trust in us. The expenses scandal was a screaming nightmare, and public trust reached rock bottom. It is now subterranean—it has got worse. An examination of our
standards in this House is currently taking place, and I urge every hon. Member to contribute to it. Democracy itself—the political system—is under threat.

The country is rightly angry about the unfairness in the system. The other day in the House, we heard the most insulting speech, which will deepen the sense of alienation between the Government and the Opposition. I have been here a long time and I recall an incident in which the person who made that speech revealed to the newspapers how he made some of his money. He bought the council house of an elderly gentleman in London, who I think was a neighbour, on the basis that it would appreciate greatly in value and that the neighbour would not live very long. The agreement that the hon. Member made was that he would give the tenant, who would get a discount for being there for years, the money to buy the house and then the hon. Member would inherit the house. That is Tory morality, and it is morally repugnant. It is not the right to buy, but the right to greed. That man lectured us the other day and tried to castigate those whom he described contemptuously as low achievers.

The difficulty is the gulf between what the Government say and what they do. In March 2010, the Prime Minister made an impassioned speech about how he would clean up lobbying. He knew all about it: he was a lobbyist, and he was going to sort it all out. Where are we today? The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 has been passed, life for trade unions and charities is a bit more troublesome, but the big corporate lobbyists do not have to declare who their clients are. No worthwhile reform has happened. The Prime Minister has worried the minnows in the shallows, but the great fat salmon still swim by unhindered.

There is similarly no sincerity in the Government’s determination to tackle the tax havens. I will give the House an interesting example. Lord Blencathra, who sees himself as the spokesman for the Cayman Islands, mocked the Prime Minister, saying that he had no intention of carrying out his threats to deal with tax havens and that they were a “purely political gesture”—those were Lord Blencathra’s words. We have just heard that the First Minister of the Cayman Islands is putting two fingers up to the Prime Minister. They are not going to take any notice.

Let us look at the remarkable history of Lord Blencathra. It is a fascinating story that shows the laxness of our controls in this House. In 2012 I made a complaint about his behaviour. My complaint was taken to a Committee in the other House to examine. It suggested that he was in breach of the parliamentary code of conduct. His activities included lobbying the Chancellor about taxes affecting the Cayman Islands; he also facilitated an all-expenses paid trip to the islands for three prominent Members of this House. The Committee that deals with standards in the Lords held an investigation, and produced a remarkable document. Lord Blencathra explained that he was taking £12,000 a month in payment from the Cayman Islands, but that he was not lobbying Parliament or Government, but Members—or the other way around; he gave some spurious excuse. Quite remarkably, the decision was taken in 2012 that he had not been in breach of any rules of the House.

Two years later, the contract that Lord Blencathra had signed was leaked. It appeared that he had agreed in the contract to

“Promoting the Cayman Islands’ interests in the UK and Europe by liaising with and making representations to UK ministers, the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Members of Parliament in the House of Commons and Members of the House of Lords.”

He put up a spirited defence, saying that he may have signed the contract but he had forgotten what he had agreed to, and anyway if he had signed it he had no intention of doing what it said. That is a most egregious breach of the code of conduct of the House—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I have been listening very carefully. The hon. Gentleman knows that he is not to criticise Members of the other House directly or personally. He has been quoting from reports up until now. If he would desist from directly criticising Members of the other House, I would be very grateful.

Paul Flynn: These are not new matters, if I may say so. I have dealt with that matter now.

If the Government fail to act against their own Members, who are not trying to stop the abuses of tax havens but are actually lubricating them, how can we take them seriously? There is some agreement on this, and some pleasure in the House that this situation has happened, because it might expose the corruption that is so endemic and the huge sums disappearing into tax havens. Light has been shone on all that.

I believe that there is a political agenda behind those who have hacked into Mossack Fonseca’s site. We do not know what that agenda is, and it might well be very sinister, but I will repeat my earlier point: one of the curious things here is what is happening with other nations. China has $44 billion in the Cayman Islands and $49 billion in the British Virgin Islands. Those are huge sums of money, but they are only part of the revelations—part is still to come. The reverberations of this pivotal scandal will spread for decades.

I am curious about the Government’s reluctance to act against China in many other ways. We have already done a dreadful and financially disastrous deal over Hinkley Point, which might give us the most expensive electricity in the world, although the deal is now collapsing. The Government seem to want to ingratiate themselves with the Chinese Government. As a result, they are going soft on them in many ways. What is most damaging is that they are not taking sharp action against the undercutting of the steel industry that is affecting so many jobs here.

We have a strange relationship with the Cayman Islands. We provide them with great advantages, by providing their defence for them. The Government’s permissiveness must stop. We will look to the Government to take the tough line that they have promised at the anti-corruption conference. They have not taken it before, so let us see them do it there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sorry to have to say that everyone has gone way over my informal speech limit, so I am going to have to impose a formal one, of six minutes per speaker. I hope that people will not take too many interventions.
3.5 pm

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I welcome the measures being taken to tackle tax avoidance, but I feel that the events of the past few days, and this debate in particular, are more about the politics of envy.

As a result of this Government’s measures, the top 1% of earners are paying 28% of income tax, a figure that is likely to grow. In the figures released in the past couple of days by the Leader of the Opposition, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister we can see evidence of the fact that those who earn more, pay more, with the Prime Minister paying nearly £76,000 in income tax—double the amount that I earned as a nurse just months ago. That shows that there is equality in this country—if someone earns more, they pay more.

I accept the point of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) that there is a difference between what is said in this House and what is done here. Opposition Members talk about reducing inequality in taxation but then oppose the measures that have seen 3 million of the lowest paid people in this country taken out of tax altogether. Opposition Members voted against measures, not just in the Budget just gone but in last year’s Budget, that froze fuel duty, VAT and national insurance—which, again, help the lowest paid people in this country. The Labour party introduced the 10p tax rate, which actually hit the lowest paid. We will take no lectures on tax equality.

In the short time that I have, I shall touch on inheritance tax, which seems to be at the front when Opposition Members lead the march of their politics of envy. They assume that inheritance tax is there only to tackle people with high incomes and a lot of assets. My constituency, Lewes, is in the south-east, and I am seeing more and more low-income families whose houses—their family homes—have increased in price, through no fault of their own, so that they now fall into the bracket for inheritance tax, and are having to move out of their family home when that tax is due. They are asset rich but income poor. That means that people who are nurses, like me, or teachers or cleaners, and cannot afford to pay inheritance tax, are having to leave their local areas. That is a particular issue in London and the south-east. For Opposition Members to dismiss that issue and claim that only wealthy people with huge incomes pay inheritance tax is very misleading.

I have a couple of other points to make. The feeling that success is measured only in wealth is absolutely wrong. We do not simply measure success in wealth, but—I think my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) made this point earlier—nor should we penalise those who have done well. It would be a sorry day if this country became a place in which, when someone has done well, has set up a successful business, is contributing to their local economy and is employing people, they were penalised, and not only that but frowned upon as well.

This party is trying to help people, whether they are on a low income or have been successful. We are the party of low taxation, whether people are poor or rich. *Interjections* I see Opposition Members laughing, but I welcome the measures this Government have taken—both the crackdown on illegal tax avoidance and the measures introduced to take the poorest out of taxation altogether. I hope that Opposition Members will desist from the politics of envy and deal with the problem of tax avoidance.

3.9 pm

**Mr David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): First, let me reply to a few points that have been raised today. I agree that it was utterly wrong that a cleaner was paying more tax than a hedge fund manager—it stank. But thank God that cleaner was getting the national minimum wage, which was resisted by the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats: £3.60 instead of £1.90—that is the truth. I welcome the fact that low-paid people have been taken out of paying tax, but we must recognise that 1 million people in this country are on zero-hours contracts. That is 2.5% of the workforce who would not have been taxed no matter what the tax threshold was because their pay is so abysmal. Five million public sector workers in this country have seen their tax threshold rise, but they have also had their pay frozen or cut for the last eight years. So we must look at the whole picture, and not just say that the tax threshold has risen and therefore everything is okay. It isn’t true.

The Prime Minister was right to say on Monday that nobody should traduce his dad. That was wrong, and the attack on his mother because she gave him a gift was not right either. It is normal and right that parents want to help their kids—all parents want to do that. In principle, if someone’s dad or mother has expertise in any field, we would expect them to use that knowledge on behalf of their kids. That applies to stockbrokers as much as it does to stockmen, and to bakers as much as to bankers.

The real problem that the leak has exposed is the huge range of opportunities that are open only to the rich, wealthy and powerful in this nation, which proves that we simply are not all in this together. Whichever way this is dressed up, it is clear that those in the know have not only the opportunity or good fortune to make money in the first place, but when they get that money, many more avenues are open to them to allow them to keep their hands on it. That is one reason why eyebrows were raised across the country and in the House when Conservative Members pushed through cuts to income tax from 50% to 45%, and huge rises in the level at which inheritance tax cuts in, because they personally would gain from that. If anyone else did that we would say it was criminal, but those Members stood to gain personally from that measure.

The Prime Minister earns £150,000 a year doing a job that we all understand is really hard. He tops it up with £50,000 a year from renting out his house, and he gets another £40,000 a year from his savings and investments. He then turns round and says to poor people in this country, “I’m sorry, mate, but you’ve got to cough up another £14 a week for your bedroom tax”; or a disabled person who struggles to exist on benefits is told, “You don’t need any more money than a fit person in your position, so you’re going to have to give us back £30 a week.” And what about the anger of 5 million public servants in this country who have been told time and again—this year for the eighth year running—“You must accept a real-terms cut in your living standards?”

**Dawn Butler:** I had a conversation with a Conservative Member who suggested to me that Members should declare their unearned earnings. Does my hon. Friend know what that means?
Mr Anderson: I haven’t got a clue what unearned earnings means—I have never been in a position to have unearned any earnings. The Minister might be able to answer that when summing up the debate, and I would be interested to find that out.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is paid £120,000 a year. He also receives £34,000 a year in rental income from his house, because he lives at No. 11 Downing Street, as well as dividend payments of £44,000 a year. But what does he say to nurses, care workers, prison officers, police officers, and, yes, tax collectors? He says they must work harder and longer—

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Anderson: Sit down.

The Chancellor says to those people, “You must work harder, and you must accept that you will have to work for longer before you get your pension.” How can he expect steel workers in this country, who are facing the possibility of a life on the dole, to believe that he really understands what they are going through?

The Mayor of London receives £143,000 for doing his day job, a quarter of a million pounds a year for writing for The Daily Telegraph, another quarter of a million in royalties from his books, and more money from his savings. Ordinary people in this country are fed up with carrying the can for the mistakes of the rich in this country—mistakes that led us into the economic crisis that is blighting the daily life of men and women who will never get the chance to save anything in the first place, let alone squirrel it away in the Caribbean, the Virgin Islands or the Channel Islands, where no one will ever get the chance to save anything in the first place. Let alone squirrel it away in the Caribbean, the Virgin Islands or the Channel Islands, where no one will ever get the chance to save anything in the first place.

In two weeks the Trade Union Bill will come back to this House, and the most tightly regulated body in the world will face even more restrictions under the sad reality of what we have been told is the sunshine of this Government; just because he sat on the British Overseas Territories Bill Committee and did not raise any issues of tax evasion; and just because he referred to the Labour Government taking control of the Turks and Caicos Islands as “medieval” and “extremely undemocratic”; and just because others have taken their eye off the ball, it does not mean that the Prime Minister or Government have done the same.

Let me say a few words about the key things that the Government have done, of which have already been mentioned. Raising the issue of tax evasion at the G8 summit and creating the world’s first public beneficial register of ownership was a major historic development. Many campaigned against it, actually for perfectly legitimate reasons, such as that it is a massive invasion of the privacy of law-abiding people. However, it is a huge step forward in the campaign against tax avoidance and evasion. It is happening in this country first, and we should be proud of that and not make it seem as if it is something that we take for granted. This Government were the first to do that, and other major economies around the world, like the United States, have not done that.

In one month the all-party group on corporate governance, which I help to run, will bring Chief Justice Leo Strine, who runs the Delaware Supreme Court, to Parliament. If Members care about this issue, and if this is not just phoney outrage, they should come to that event and question him about why Delaware—the state in which 90% of the major corporations of the United States are registered—has not yet followed the lead of this Prime Minister. We should encourage him to do the same.

The general anti-avoidance law was another major and controversial measure taken by the previous coalition Government. It was opposed by the Labour party. At the time, the Labour party spokesman said it was inadvisable to take this action until after the conclusion of the base erosion and profit shifting process, so it would not have happened under a Labour Government. It happened under a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government.

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend is making a very interesting point. May I add another initiative which, to be fair, was an initiative of the previous Labour
Andrew Mellon, said:

"It was utterly useless from a Treasury perspective, just the gratification of idle curiosity and filling of newspaper space."

Setting aside Prime Ministers and politicians, let us defend the right of individuals in this country to have privacy in their business and financial affairs. The legitimate, law-abiding citizens of this country should not be the losers from some individuals taking part in criminal acts.

3.24 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):

Well, it is some scandal, is it not, that has been leaked to us? Criminals, politicians and dictators have been hiding billions and billions of pounds in offshore accounts under the names of companies that do not actually exist. In fact, it is the scale and nature of the scandal that causes me to be so depressed about the nature of the debate we have had both in the Chamber this afternoon and in the run-up to this afternoon. It has taken us almost two weeks to actually start debating the issue. I did not quite buy everything that the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) had to say, but I thought he at least gave one of the most incisive speeches among this afternoon’s contributions.

It is obvious that this issue is such a major hot potato for the two main parties in this Chamber: so hot that they seem to prefer to kick it back and forward—“You’re worse than us.” “We’re better than you.” Meanwhile, the public want us to debate the issues raised by the leaks. Forget the Twitter hashtags. Forget what has been written in the newspapers. Forget the sneering snobbery on one side and the braying mobs on the other. Let us actually deal with the issue. The issue is not about class; we can have an academic discussion about class later on. This is about criminality. That is what the motion seeks to address and what I think all of us in the Chamber really want to address.

It strikes me that there are two key ways in which we can tackle the problem: through the resources made available to the public agencies and through changes to legislation. As a lot of Members have mentioned, we can also look at beefing up international co-operation. I genuinely welcome the measures the Prime Minister announced in his statement to the House on Monday. The cross-agency taskforce and the funding that will come with it, and the other measures relating to legislation, are extremely important and to be welcomed. I would like the Minister, in summing up, to say whether Interpol will have a role to play. I have not heard anything about that at all. In fact, no public statement has been made on this issue on Interpol’s website. I would therefore like to know whether Interpol will be invited to the corruption summit the Prime Minister will be hosting.

I am concerned about the pattern that forms when big scandals break, whether it is this one, the Volkswagen scandal or the Google scandal. This is a very British pattern—a pattern of only ever responding to events. I had hoped to hear more about how the Government intend to beef up the resources of HMRC to deal with this, because it is clearly not working. We have had some back and forth about more money, fewer staff and more staff, and fewer centres. It is clearly not working, so somebody really needs to step back and look at the problem within the context that actually exists. I had also hoped to hear more about how we would be trying to recoup some of the tax we are owed. I go back to the
point made earlier: this is about criminality. I can only hope that some of this will be getting talked about in the Paris talks today, at which, I understand, the UK Government are represented.

The Government made a lot of their ambition to secure economic security for Britain. They are absolutely right to mention that. The threats we face in terms of financial security are not to be taken lightly. In my view, they should be up there with the threats we face from terrorist organisations. There are different consequences, but both are absolutely serious. Just as the Prime Minister announced the recruitment of additional staff for agencies such as MIS in the aftermath of attacks on our doorstep in Europe, he should seek to do the exact same thing for the public agencies dealing with criminal finance.

I do not have much time to go into the detail, but I would like the Government to reflect more about what happens in Australia with unexplained wealth orders. I shall not throw my full weight and support behind them, because I am hesitant about what they mean for the presumption of innocence and the right to silence. We should, however, look at the issue. Such orders are also being used successfully in Italy against gangs such as the Mafia.

The public require us to act and to stop the politicking that we have seen in some contributions today. This is a big challenge, and what we need to deal with it are the fine minds of this House—there are some, such as the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), the former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee—coming together on a cross-party or perhaps even a cross-parliamentary basis. We could tap in to some of the devolved Parliaments as well, and start to take the issue seriously. We should ignore all those who operate under a cloud of anonymity, who tell us, “You wouldn’t understand it; it is too difficult”. That just allows them to carry on doing what has got us to this point. Failure to act will keep on feeding the cancerous way in which our politics is conducted. That will be to the detriment of us all.

3.30 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This debate is important for all the reasons that have been mentioned: public frustration at those who can earn money and not pay tax while the rest of the people have to pay it; the stretching of public finances at a time of austerity and the need to ensure that legitimate taxes are paid; and, of course, the concern that the ability to evade taxes and to hide sources of income leads to all kinds of corruption, including, as we have found in Northern Ireland, the ability to finance terrorism.

Let me put it on the record that however much the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor beat their chests about the evasion of taxes, they showed friendship to and favoured the very people who used all kinds of fiscal fraud to finance murder in Northern Ireland for 30 years—and we have never heard an apology from them about it.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said, we must approach this matter with a sense of maturity rather than a “politics of envy” approach. I know that some Opposition Members have denied it, but some contributions have demonstrated such an approach. Equally, on the Government side, there must be a willingness to listen to the genuine concerns and deal with the issues raised.

I do not believe that we can deal with this matter simply by demanding that everybody produce and publish their tax returns. Someone who is going to evade tax is hardly going to put that down on their tax return in any case. Where does this stop? If the issue is all about how the creation of policy has been influenced, what about top civil servants, who are involved in policy making? What about the heads of many public sector organisations, who are also involved in it? What of the press? We cannot have the critics of what happens in this House avoiding the publication of their own tax returns. As I say, where does it stop?

In any case, the answer does not lie in publishing tax returns. I believe that three important points have been identified. I shall not go through all of them, but the first one is that we must know who is responsible for the income of a certain business or company and be able to trace it, because the issues of accessibility and transparency are important. How do we achieve that? I think that the Government have already gone some way along the road.

Strangely enough, Labour Members believe that we should use Orders in Council against independent territories—a form of colonialism that I would have thought they would not support. [Interruption.] Opposition Members may say that is nonsense, but either we regard these places as independent territories that make their own laws, and seek to co-operate with and persuade them to do the right thing, or we impose the laws on them, which as far as I am concerned is a form of colonialism. I do not think it would work. I think the Government are right to seek to persuade those territories to come along and see the implications of allowing people to hide their identities in some of the businesses based in them.

The second important point is about tax avoidance. Many Members have talked about it today, but millions of people in the United Kingdom engage in tax avoidance and think nothing of it, because it is within the law. When a tax code can run to 22,000-plus pages, with all the allowances and other provisions in it, of course people are going to find loopholes. Unfortunately, as the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) said, the people best able to do that are people who have huge resources at their disposal. Many taxpayers do not have such resources, so a simpler tax system would help. Adam Smith, whose words have been cited in the Chamber today, laid down the canons of taxation, which he said were fairness, simplicity and the ability to collect taxes economically. Those are some of the principles that we should keep in mind.

Thirdly, there is the issue of enforceability. I have reservations about the direction in which the Government are going. Of course we should find efficiencies in public services, but when I see how many tax offices are closing, especially in border towns in Northern Ireland, where hundreds of years’ worth of experience in dealing with some of the worst money launderers in the United Kingdom is being lost, I ask myself whether we are really serious about taking on the tax evaders. Even when we spot them, they are not always prosecuted. HSBC has been identified as one bank that enabled many people to evade taxes—I believe that there were
7,000, and that more than 1,100 were in the United Kingdom—but there has been only one prosecution so far. It is not just a case of having the resources to enforce. It is a case of making sure that when people are caught, examples are made of them and they are punished accordingly, so that the message that goes out is, “This will not be tolerated.”

I believe that if we do not work to achieve greater transparency, an efficient tax system that does not leave loopholes and a proper method of enforcement, what is happening now will go on and on.

3.36 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I want to take up the point made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) about enforcement. He mentioned the closure of tax offices in Northern Ireland. I know that a tax office in my constituency is due to be closed in the next few years, which means the loss of work that it was doing on matters including the recovery of overseas taxes.

However, I do not want to join those who have used the debate to make points about the Government’s general tax policy or taxation record, because I think that the public would expect us to be debating the enormous implications of the Panama papers. I do not wish to conflate questions about the syndicated global grand larceny that is revealed in those papers with questions about personal taxation involving the Prime Minister or, indeed, anyone else. I would prefer us to concentrate—in this and other debates that will take place between now and the global anti-corruption summit that the Prime Minister will host—on the sort of issues that we would have been discussing anyway.

We have heard much from Conservative Members about enforcement. He mentioned the closure of tax offices in Northern Ireland. I know that a tax office in my constituency is due to be closed in the next few years, which means the loss of work that it was doing on matters including the recovery of overseas taxes.

When we consider the larceny that is represented in those papers and the people who have avoided or evaded taxes, we should bear it in mind that this is not a victimless duplicity or deceit, because other people have been left to pay those taxes. Other firms are having to pay taxes in order to meet the needs of exchequers worldwide, not least those in developing countries. Other people are missing out on services or salaries, because the tax is not there to maintain services at the levels necessary to improve the development of infrastructure or to pay salaries. People are losing out. These are not the politics of envy, but the politics of reality and social justice. These are the politics that say that, in the 21st century, we should live in a world where we are all in it together. That is why fairness in taxation worldwide is so important.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is, as usual, making a powerful speech. Christian Aid noted recently that an oil company in Uganda had approached Mossack Fonseca in an attempt to avoid paying £400 million worth of taxes there. That is equivalent to the budget of the entire Ugandan healthcare service. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the avoidance of such taxes is not a victimless crime?

Mark Durkan: Absolutely. That example amplifies the point that I was making. I want to acknowledge the work of not just Christian Aid, but Oxfam, ActionAid, Global Witness and Transparency International. Those organisations have worked with many Members of Parliament for years to make us more aware of these issues. Not least, I want to acknowledge the work of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption, including the contributions of the hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). The hon. Member for Amber Valley cannot be with us today, but he has taken a keen interest in many of the issues that have now surfaced in an even more dramatic form in the Panama papers.

It would have been interesting to hear from the Minister whether the Government were actually shocked by the Panama papers. We know about all the attention and fuss about the Prime Minister, but did the Government regard the other issues as par for the course? Did they know they were going on? Were they therefore informing their various measures against corruption, or did the revelations tell them that the issue was bigger than they were aware of? Given that Mossack Fonseca is not the biggest firm in Panama, what worries have they about what else is going on there?

We heard the Prime Minister say earlier, “The agencies that deal with this are independent and we cannot deal with them.” Someone somewhere should be asking them, “Is this what you knew? Has this shocked you? Are you doing anything more in response?” Journalists are being asked to provide the information. Is anyone else being pursued for the information? Is anyone having their door knocked or collar felt? It seems not. That seems odd.

As the Prime Minister is hosting a global anti-corruption summit, he should be showing himself to be much more active in response to the papers. Now that he has perhaps in his own mind dealt with the issues that arose about himself, he can address the wider issues. Perhaps if he had addressed the wider issues last week, people would have thought that that was misdirection and that he was trying to avoid the issue on his part. However, he needs to address those issues now if the summit is to be worthwhile.

It is particularly disappointing to hear the Prime Minister being the spin doctor for the Crown territories and their role. I cannot believe they are not a tax haven. He is trying to say that, because they have moved a bit following what he said in 2013 about what he was going to do, that is enough. There has been progress. There are indications of possible progress, but he should not be lessening the pressure on the Crown dependencies in the lead-up to the summit. He should be ratcheting up the pressure on them and everyone else.

He should be doing so by showing a stronger response here in relation to our own agencies.

In the debate, there has been much discussion by Members about the difference between avoidance and evasion. Let us be clear. A syndicated effort has gone into the artefact that is involved in some of these shells, slams, scams and schemes. We know that the architecture of avoidance is fitted with the engineering of evasion, so there is not that much of a difference. We need stronger global action.

That is why I again ask the Government to consider their attitude to some global measures. In the past, when they said they wanted to lead against corruption
and were putting taxation central stage at the UN summit and beyond, they also set their face against any notion of a financial transaction tax. If there were a financial transaction tax at a global level, it would at least ensure that there was more marking of what was going on in all these different schemes and moves, where companies appear to trade with shadow versions of themselves and shells are registered in different places. The very existence of a uniform global transaction tax would bring some tracking and tracing to some of those schemes and bring more transparency, which people say is needed.

The Panama papers represent discovering what has been done in terms of the recovery of tax. The Government seem to have a pretty pedestrian attitude to that at this stage. They seem to be more concerned about the media flap last week about the Prime Minister being embroiled in some of this. They think that that is over, but they seem to be taking a fairly pedestrian approach to an issue that is scandalising many still and is burdening people in poor countries.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the many organisations that have been involved in supporting the inquiry on the issue of the Panama papers. They include Oxfam, Tax Justice Network, Global Witness, Transparency International and Christian Aid. They have played an invaluable role. I also thank all Members for their contributions to the debate. They include the hon. Members for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and my hon. Friend the Member for Blydon (Mr Anderson), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), all of whom have raised important issues.

We have heard about tax being not a donation but a legal requirement, and about the need to take the non-payment of tax incredibly seriously. We have also heard that the work of the Public Accounts Committee is vital in this area. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said that this was a pivotal moment that the Government must not squander. We have also heard about the challenges relating to prosecutions owing to the complexity of the structures of multinational companies, and about the need to extend the law further to tackle the wider issues of economic crime.

This is a moment that we must seize. The public and the media have not always been engaged with this issue, but they can now see the scale of the injustice not only in the UK but across the world. The Panama papers have lifted the lid, and there is no going back. These revelations have provided concrete examples of what we have all suspected; they have exposed details of the worst excesses of our international financial system.

At the heart of the issue is the matter of public trust and confidence in the fairness of our tax system. People rightly say, “I pay my fair share towards the cost of vital public services. I can’t dodge or negotiate with the tax authorities, so why should wealthy individuals and companies get away with not paying their fair share?”

Despite all the claims that we have heard from the Government, people do not think that they have done enough to tackle the problem, either here or in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies for which we have responsibility.

This is a global issue and it needs a global response. Today’s debate reflects the widespread public view that individuals and companies should pay their fair share, and we are calling on the Government to implement Labour’s tax transparency enforcement programme. Labour has a strong record on tax evasion and avoidance. The measures that we introduced while we were in power will still raise 10 times as much over the coming years as those introduced by the Tories in the last Parliament. That is the conclusion of analysis carried out by the Financial Times.

Over the past week, the Government have had the chance to step up and take a strong lead. It is disappointing that they have failed to do so. The Government’s taskforce and other measures represent a missed opportunity to end the secrecy ahead of next month’s anti-corruption summit. In 2013, the Prime Minister wrote to overseas territories and Crown dependencies calling for greater transparency and for fully resourced and properly managed centralised registries. He wrote again on this subject. We have had written questions and oral questions, but we can now see that it is not the Government’s intention to push the issue of public registers further. Instead, the information that has been agreed on will be available only to UK law enforcement and tax authorities.

The beneficial ownership agreement with the Cayman Islands allows only designated Cayman Islands officials directly to obtain and provide to the UK details of beneficial ownership of companies incorporated in the Cayman Islands. Furthermore, the UK’s Swiss tax agreement announced in 2011 has raised just a fraction of the promised £5.3 billion. So the Government are very good at spin, but their record does not stand up to scrutiny. What is particularly stark about the Panama revelations is that more than half the companies named in the papers were registered in UK-governed tax havens. That is something of which we should be ashamed. We believe that the UK should be leading the global campaign to fight against aggressive tax avoidance and evasion; instead, we are lagging behind.

There are a number of other vital issues. We have talked about the need for an independent inquiry. While there have been moves across the world, including an important meeting in Paris today organised by the Joint International Tax Shelter Information & Collaboration network, our officials have not yet managed to make it to Hitchin to undertake their own inquiries into the Panama papers.

The issue is effectively one of theft. Every year, about $200 billion of untaxed income is taken out of poor countries by international corporations that are avoiding paying tax. Speed is another issue, as was highlighted by the chair of the JITUSIC network, who emphasised today the need for immediate information exchange. Far from seeing the Government heed that call, they continue to slow down, not accelerate, their action to tackle tax avoidance.

We have a lot more to do. We need greater parliamentary scrutiny, a specialised tax enforcement unit, greater public sector transparency, including having companies that want to bid for public sector contracts make public
their beneficial owners. We need greater co-operation with our European partners, country-by-country reporting and protection for whistleblowers. The issue also highlights the importance of our membership of the European Union in tackling complex problems that do not stop at national borders. We have called on the Government to take much more action and fast. We have called for stricter minimum standards for Crown dependencies and overseas territories, but the lack of stronger international standards was cited by the Financial Secretary today as a reason for not pushing for public registers of beneficial owners.

Let me add one more point in conclusion. On Monday, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) said that the Opposition should “snap out of their synthetic indignation” and that we risk having a House “stuffed full of low achievers who hate enterprise”. —[Official Report, 11 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 34.]

Sadly, the Financial Secretary seemed to back him up. This is not about begrudging entrepreneurs and those who succeed in business their success; it is about basic fairness in our society. This is an issue on which the rich and poor who believe in fairness are united. When we shirk our responsibility to crack down on tax havens, we let down our country and our constituents. That is why I urge the House to join us in voting in support of Labour’s proposed measures today.

3.52 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriet Baldwin): I am again delighted to be given the opportunity to outline the action that the Government are proud to have taken to tackle tax evasion, tax avoidance and aggressive tax planning. No Government have done more to ensure that people and companies pay the taxes they owe and to crack down on those who do not play by the rules. That is why, from day one, we have introduced measures after measure to close the tax loopholes we inherited, to increase the punishment for those who break the law, to drive forward tax transparency and ensure that the UK is at the forefront of new global standards, to ensure that international tax rules are fit for the 21st century, to reform the regimes in overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and to increase HMRC’s powers to collect the money that pays for the public services on which we all depend.

Yes, individuals and companies should pay their fair share of tax, which is exactly what this Government have been ensuring that they do. The activities in Panama are already the subject of intensive HMRC investigation. It is imperative that the leaked data are examined closely, where there is evidence of any wrongdoing, rapid action will be taken. The Government also attach great importance to giving HMRC the resources to protect our tax base, which is why at last year’s summer Budget we announced an extra £800 million to fund additional work to tackle evasion and non-compliance by 2020-21. That will enable HMRC to recover a cumulative £7.2 billion in tax over the next five years.

The Opposition motion talks about beneficial ownership. Thanks to this Government’s action, our register of company beneficial ownership will go live in June. We are the first major country to have such a list in place, free for anyone to access. In addition, we are consulting on requiring foreign companies that own property or bid on public contracts in England to provide beneficial ownership information, too.

We heard from a range of speakers today. The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has a new-found interest in a topic he asked no questions on during 13 years of Labour government, but he has managed over the past week to confirm his party as anti-aspiration and anti-wealth-creation, and as wanting to create an atmosphere of envy. We heard from the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), who was much more welcoming of the measures the Government have introduced, and he also attacked Labour’s lack of action in 13 years. We heard a very informed speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), a member of the Public Accounts Committee, who shared with us his expertise in that area. We also heard an interesting speech from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who is chair and founder of the all-party group on anti-corruption. She will be aware of the proposed new offences that we are introducing in terms of prosecuting companies that fail to prevent evasion. She will want to participate in that consultation and in the process of legislation on that offence.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) brought in his expertise in business, highlighting the steps the Government have taken to help low earners. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) used some fairly dodgy statistics, but I am pleased to confirm that the amount of £1.8 billion has been made available for compliance and enforcement, which is an increase in resources, over the last two Parliaments. She raised questions about trusts, asking whether the arrangements relating to the beneficial ownership of companies should be extended to trusts. There are many legitimate reasons for creating a trust and the vast majority of trusts across the UK are used for legitimate purposes. Setting up a blanket requirement would distract action from the areas of most concern, such as shell companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) made an interesting speech, in which he recommended abolishing corporation tax completely. The Government are not ready to do that at this point in time. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) made an angry speech that included rather a lot of personal attacks on individual Conservative politicians. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) made an excellent speech highlighting the Labour party’s politics of envy and our steps to make our income tax system even more progressive.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) spoke up for the low-paid, but I detected a strong streak of the politics of envy for anyone else in his speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) made a good speech about the credible action against corruption and criminality that this Government have taken. He gave an excellent and incisive summary of what we have done, drawing on his knowledge of the art world. We heard an interesting speech from the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and I can confirm that HMRC does work closely with Interpol and is indeed finalising the list for the anti-corruption
[Harriett Baldwin] 

summit as we speak. We heard helpful contributions from Members from Northern Ireland, who welcomed some of the steps the Government have taken.

In conclusion, this country is leading the way on tackling tax evasion and tax avoidance, bringing in billions from offshore tax evaders since 2010 through the actions we have taken. We have made more than 40 changes to tax law in the last Parliament alone, and in this Parliament more than 25 have already been announced for legislation.

Although Labour has suddenly decided to give lectures on tax, I remind the House that when we came into office there were foreign nationals not paying capital gains tax when selling UK property, private equity managers paying lower rates of tax than their cleaners, and rich homebuyers getting away without paying stamp duty by owning homes through companies. We have taken action to fix that. We have increased the amount paid in income tax by the top 1% from £31 billion 10 years ago to £47 billion now. We have made our taxes taken action to fix that. We have increased the amount paid in income tax by the top 1% from £31 billion 10 years ago to £47 billion now. We have made our taxes more internationally competitive. We have cut income tax for tens of millions of hard-working people, rewarded aspiration and made the tax system better, fairer and more efficient. That is our record. We are proud of it, and rich homebuyers getting away without paying stamp duty by owning homes through companies. We have taken action to fix that. We have increased the amount paid in income tax by the top 1% from £31 billion 10 years ago to £47 billion now. We have made our taxes more internationally competitive. We have cut income tax for tens of millions of hard-working people, rewarded aspiration and made the tax system better, fairer and more efficient. That is our record. We are proud of it, and I urge the House to vote against today’s Opposition motion.

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 300.

Division No. 235] [4 pm

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Tellers for the Ayes: 

Sue Hayman and 

Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrows, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair

Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Urmunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valérie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Elidith
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeiicher, Daniel

Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frey, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Graying, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Har, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hudson, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCann, Jason
McCann, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merce, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millington, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Oford, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Palter, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philips, Stephen
Phillip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. It may assist the House if I explain that, as this is not an allotted Opposition day—in other words, it is not one of the 20 Opposition days required under Standing Orders—the usual procedure governing the handling of amendments does not apply. After the Opposition spokesman has spoken and moved the Opposition motion, the Minister will be called to move the Government amendment. The debate will then take place on the question that the amendment be made. At the end of the debate, the question on the Government amendment will be put, followed by the question that the main motion, amended or not as may be the case, be agreed to.

4.16 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House believes that every child deserves an excellent education; notes that the Government is proposing to force all primary and secondary schools in England to become academies as part of multi-academy trusts or chains by 2022 at the latest; further notes that the vast majority of schools affected by this policy will be primary schools, over 80 per cent of which are already rated good and outstanding; notes that there are outstanding academies and excellent community schools but also poor examples of both types of such school; further notes the Fourth Report from the Education Committee, Academies and free schools, Session 2014-15, HC 258, which highlights that there is no evidence that academisation in and of itself leads to school improvement; notes that the Schools White Paper proposes the removal of parent governors from school governing bodies which will reduce the genuine involvement of parents and communities in local schools; and calls on the Government to put these proposals on hold as there is insufficient evidence that they will raise standards.

I am pleased that we have secured this debate following the Government’s rushed publication of their schools White Paper, which has caused much concern among parents, communities, heads, teachers and others. The main and most controversial proposal is to force all primary and secondary schools to become academies and the vast majority into multi-academy trusts or chains by 2022. That is the proposal on which we have decided to focus this debate, because we believe that the plans are deeply flawed, are not supported by evidence, have already caused huge disruption in schools, and notably, seem to have very few supporters.

There is a growing alliance of those with concerns, including Conservative Members and local government leaders, as well as leading headteacher unions such as the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders. It is my intention that this debate be used as an opportunity to air such concerns, and I hope that the Secretary of State will listen carefully, put the plans on hold, and not plough on regardless.

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There are elements of the White Paper that we can support, such as the independent college of teaching, but we cannot support the main thrust of forced, wholesale academisation.

The Government’s plan has been met with such concern, even by the very school leaders they claim to be supporting, because it is a bad policy with no evidence base. It is yet
another policy from this Government that is obsessed with school structures instead of standards. What is more, given the very real pressures faced by schools today—including huge teacher shortages, real-terms cuts to school budgets for the first time in 20 years and major overhauls to curriculums, assessments and exams—the idea that heads should spend time, money and energy on a £1.3 billion top-down reorganisation of our schools system is, at best, a distraction and, at worst, will have a very damaging impact on school standards.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I declare an interest as a governor of Denton West End primary academy in my constituency. The point is that that school chose to become an academy because parents and teachers decided that that was the best model for school improvement. Should not we also respect the parents and teachers at those schools that wish to remain under local authority control?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, which I will come on to make myself shortly.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the proposal could lead to more school closures in the public sector? More importantly, we might face difficulties recruiting teachers. The £1.9 billion could have been better spent on public services rather than on an ideological argument.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend echoes the concerns raised by the NAHT union in a memo it sent this morning to all MPs.

The Tory obsession with school structures has completely missed the point. Just as there are some excellent academies, there are some excellent community schools. There are also some poor academies and some poor community schools. No type of school has a monopoly on excellence. We need to build an education system that provides an excellent education for all children, rather than pitting one type of school against another. Nearly a month has passed since the Chancellor made the announcement, but we have yet to hear any answers to the question “Why?” When schools that want to become academies can already do so, as my hon. Friend said. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) has said, and when schools that the Government deem to be failing or coasting can already be put into an academy chain, why force all others? This is not about school improvement, nor is it about autonomy and freedoms. The multi-academy trust model is in its infancy, and real questions are emerging about accountability, probity, capacity and, for some, standards.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will make some progress, because a lot of people want to speak. I will take interventions shortly.

Lucy Powell: I will take some interventions later, but I am going to make some progress.

The Government claim that there are more children for some, standards. 80% are already rated good or outstanding. In secondary, where more than two thirds of schools are already academies, there are more failing academies than non-academies. In places such as Doncaster, Bexley and north-east Lincolnshire, where school improvement remains a real concern, all the secondary schools are already academies.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Would she care to reflect on performance in Greenwich, which has become one of the highest-performing education authorities in the country without the enforced academisation of a single primary school, and in which only three secondary schools have become academies? That performance has been achieved without enforced academisation. Parents in our borough are concerned about why they have been removed from the process and will not be consulted about changes to their schools.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that we have an absurd situation in Coventry North West? The Secretary of State refused to meet me about this, but she is aware of it. After having been encouraged to become an academy, Woodlands underwent forced academisation a couple of years ago. Woodlands Academy is not doing well, but instead of putting in an intervention team, as the Prime Minister indicated at Question Time, the academy is being closed and another one is being started a mile up the road. What a waste of resources.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Only today, Ofsted has reported that the performance of secondary schools in Reading is “not strong”. Eight out 10 secondary schools in Reading are already academies and are directly accountable to the Secretary of State. Why has she failed to improve those academies, and what is the Government’s school improvement strategy for that and other areas?

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: I will take some interventions later, but I am going to make some progress.

The Government claim that there are more children today in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010, as proof that academisation leads to school improvement. However, the Secretary of State knows that, as ever, she is being selective with her figures. The truth is that the vast majority of those new good and outstanding places are in primary schools, where academisation is limited. Moreover, according to Ofsted, the number of pupils in inadequate secondary schools has risen by a staggering 60% over the last four years where academisation has taken hold significantly. Not for the first time, the Government’s selective use of statistics and their dubious link between cause and effect do not withstand any scrutiny. Perhaps that is why the Conservative majority Select Committee on Education recently concluded, after an extensive inquiry:

“Current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change”
and:

"There is...no convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment".

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of governors of Goole Academy, an academy school that is doing very well. In north Lincolnshire, we have had a big academisation programme, and we have gone from having 38% of kids in good and outstanding schools to having 92% of children in such schools. Although I may agree with some of the points that the hon. Lady has made, will she confirm that the Labour party's position is to support academies? Her speech so far has seemed very anti-academies, and that concerns me as a governor of one.

Lucy Powell: Not at all. As I made clear in my opening remarks, there are some excellent academies and other types of schools. Academisation can be an ingredient of a wider school improvement programme, but the overall evidence is underwhelming at best.

Several hon. Members rose—

Lucy Powell: I am going to make some progress.

Although the Sutton Trust found excellence in a small number of academy chains, it found that the majority were underperforming. Not only is the forced academisation programme evidently not about school improvement, but the Government's drive on it may greatly diminish what capacity there is in the system for school improvement. The regional schools commissioners, their officials, the energies of school leaders and local authorities will now, as we are already seeing, shift almost entirely away from schools that need improvement towards creating trusts and changing the legal status of a huge number of schools, most of which are already performing well. Indeed, the national schools commissioner and the Department for Education have not even acquired the powers they sought from Parliament in the Education and Adoption Act 2016—they will get them on Monday—to put more schools they deem to be coasting into academy chains. Was that piece of legislation therefore a complete waste of time?

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about coasting schools. In the NHS, which had a huge reorganisation that nobody voted for, performance absolutely went down while people had to deal with that big reorganisation. Is she worried, as I am, that this is heading in the same direction? If there is a big reorganisation that nobody has voted for, performance in our schools and the achievement of our children will fall away.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Government, as they have no other ideas, seem to enjoy such reorganisations. I will shortly return to some of the very real concerns about the performance of academy chains, but I first want to look at another of the Government's arguments for forced academisation, which is that it is about autonomy and freedoms. This Government say they are for choice in education. Choice? What choice is there in a one-size-fits-all policy? What is autonomous about forcing a high-performing school into an academy chain? Will the Secretary of State promise that every outstanding school leader who wants their school to remain as it is can do so? No, she cannot. Where is the autonomy for the small village school, which the White Paper makes clear cannot be a stand-alone academy? I see some nods from Conservative Members to these points. Perhaps this is why even one of the Secretary of State's main allies, Toby Young, has described this policy as Stalinist. The curriculum and other freedoms described by the Government could easily be given to all schools without the need for a change to legal status.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is talking about autonomy and democratic control. We have a model of that in the form of co-operative schools, in which parents, pupils and school leaders all work together. Why does she think they should be forced to academise?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes another excellent point.

On curriculum freedoms, the Secretary of State and I both know that the autonomy the Tories say they are providing just does not exist. During the past five years, parts of the curriculum have been personally drafted by the Education Secretary and then circulated for sign-off among Cabinet Ministers. This sort of ministerial diktat on the curriculum puts schools into a straitjacket. In fact, what we are actually seeing with academisation is a further narrowing of curriculums as schools aim to improve their Ofsted judgments on an increasingly narrow set of measurements.

While the academy programme was originally about bringing new partners and innovation into the system, a wholesale academisation programme will undoubtedly create an increasingly sclerotic and one-dimensional system. It is no wonder that the chief executive of England's largest academy chain, Academy Enterprise Trust, recently admitted that there is in fact less autonomy for schools in multi-academy trusts than there is for local authority schools.

Steve Brine: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: If the hon. Gentleman wants to comment on that, I am more than happy for him to do so.

Steve Brine: No, my intervention is not about that, but I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is being very generous with her—or probably our—time. She asks us to support the motion on the Order Paper, which is in her name and that of the Leader of the Opposition. This point came up at Prime Minister's Question Time earlier. She says that the White Paper proposes the removal of parent governors from school governing bodies, but paragraph 3.31 on page 51 of the White Paper makes it very clear that it will not do so. Clearly, she did not have an opportunity to clarify that during PMQs, but will she now take the opportunity to strike that phrase from the motion?

Lucy Powell: I am happy to clarify that the Government propose to remove the requirement for parent governors. If the hon. Gentleman wants to have a semantic debate
about that, it is in the White Paper, on the page to which he referred. The Secretary of State will have the opportunity to talk about that in a moment.

That brings me to the evidence for and the performance of multi-academy trusts—MATs—or chains as they have become better known. It may come as a surprise to many Conservative Members that the Government’s free school and academy agenda has quietly but significantly shifted in policy and practice from stand-alone academies to MAT or chain models. That shift was made clear in the White Paper, in which the policy preference is emphatically for schools to become part of chains. Indeed, Department for Education guidance issued yesterday said:

“We expect that most schools will form or join multi-academy trusts as they become academies.”

There is evidence that schools do better working collaboratively with clusters of schools, especially where they are clustered geographically, as many do in local authority areas.

However, the evidence for the performance of chains so far is mixed. There are some notably good academy chains, but there are many more that are not good. Of the 850 current MATs or chains, only 20 have been assessed, and just three have proved more effective than non-academies. The chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, wrote to the Secretary of State only a week before the Budget highlighting “serious weaknesses” in academy chains. He went on to say that, in many cases, “academy chains are worse than the worst performing local authorities they seek to replace”.

To continue with forced academisation of all schools after such a damning letter is frankly irresponsible.

There are major questions for the Government on capacity too. Academy chains are in their infancy and clearly require a closer look, yet the Government want them to take on thousands more schools. Maybe that is why the Secretary of State cannot rule out poorly performing chains being given otherwise good schools under the proposals. One of the main reasons why the track record of many chains is not good is the dearth of any real oversight or accountability.

I share the concerns expressed by many Members of all parties, including my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), who said that we are in danger of creating distant, unaccountable bureaucracies for schools. That the Department for Education, via its small group of schools commissioners, can provide robust oversight and accountability of all schools in the country, is frankly for the birds. It is an impossible job, and it is also not desirable.

The Secretary of State seems hell-bent on cutting out communities, and cutting out parents from having any say over how their child’s school is run. First, let us take the Tories’ plan to scrap the requirement for parents to sit on governing bodies. Abolishing parent governors and removing any role for parents in choosing whether their child’s school becomes an academy and what type of academy it becomes has unsurprisingly been met with a huge outcry. I understand that the Secretary of State wants to take this opportunity to clarify that parents can still be governors. However, as she well knows, under her plans, there will no longer be a requirement for governing bodies to have them. I do not think that that is the kind of clarification parents are looking for. Perhaps she would like to take the opportunity to go further. In any case, she and I both know that in a world of academy chains, the role of the individual school governing body is greatly diminished and key decisions are taken by the two new levels: the board of trustees and the member board above that; bodies that are all too often appointed by the head or the chief executive whom they are supposed to be holding to account.

If we want to avoid more scandals such as Perry Beaches, Kings Science Academy and E-ACT, to name just a few, and if schools are genuinely to be held to account, we need a much more robust governance regime than remote trustee boards appointed by their executive, held to account only by a regional schools commissioner, who is responsible for overseeing thousands of schools.

There are also very real issues on the ground about accountability and responsibility for excluded children, placing children with SEN and admission policies. They all have very real problems under the fragmented schools system. Such a system of oversight also needs to have recourse to the needs of the local community. We cannot have a situation where the needs of the local area are not considered, such as the case of Knowsley, where the last A-level provision across the entire borough is about to be lost, based on a decision taken by one school. There has to be a better-joined up approach to school improvement and local oversight, involving school leaders and councils as well as parents.

The Government claim to lead the devolution revolution, so their centralisation of schools is both wrong-headed and contradictory. In places like my own, Greater Manchester, the Chancellor talks of releasing the combined authority and elected Mayor to create a northern powerhouse. That the skills and education of the next generation are being taken away at the same time shows what a sham that project is.

That point leads me to one last argument the Government make, which is that it would be simpler to have one funding system. That argument is nonsense and certainly does not support the £1.3 billion reorganisation of the schools system that is being proposed. It is also disingenuous of the Government to link the proposals to the fair funding consultation. There is broad support for a fairer funding model, as long as deprived areas and areas that require improvement do not lose out. Forcing all schools to become academies does not need to be linked to that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State was absolutely right to say at the start of her remarks that this should not be a debate about quality. Does she agree that if we reach a certain tipping point in the number of schools recognising the direction of travel and academising, it is sensible to have a discussion about what, if any, future role there should be for LEAs as we understand them, and what the future of education planning will be for the next 20 or 30 years? It seems to me that we have arrived at that tipping point and so it is right to have that debate.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but disagree that we have reached that tipping point. We certainly have not done so with primary schools, as only 17% are academies. A longer-term look would be welcome, but an arbitrary timetable set by the
Chancellor and Prime Minister as part of their legacy is a totally false track. For decades, we have had a multifaceted funding arrangement for our schools. There is no real reason why that cannot continue.

The proposal to force all schools to become academies and part of academy chains is a costly reorganisation that schools do not want or need. Heads are dealing with some very real and big challenges, such as teacher shortages, significant real-terms cuts to their budgets, flux and chaos in assessment, and insufficient school places. Asking them to take time out to change their legal status and to become an academy against their wishes is wrong, and will impact on standards.

This agenda is not about school improvement, as most of the schools affected are already good or outstanding. It is not about more autonomy or more choice, as a one-size-fits-all approach is being forced on all schools. It is not about parents, as they are being cut out of the picture. It is not about devolution, but centralisation. There are real and serious concerns about capacity, oversight and accountability under the Secretary of State’s plans.

There is a growing alliance of heads, governors, parents, teachers, politicians from all parties and many of the original advocates of the academy programme against forced wholesale academisation. Yet this Government, who used to say they were all for choice, profess to be about standards and claim they are being cut out of the picture. It is not about devolution, but centralisation. There are real and serious concerns about capacity, oversight and accountability under the Secretary of State’s plans.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call the Secretary of State to move the amendment, I will let Members know that I will be imposing a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “educating,” to the end of the Question and add: “welcomes the transformation in England’s schools since 2010 where 1.4 million more children are now taught in good or outstanding schools; notes that the academies programme has been at the heart of that transformation because it trusts school leaders to run schools and empowers them with the freedom to innovate and drive up standards; further notes that there remain too many areas of underperformance and that more needs to be done to ensure that standards in England match those of its best international competitors; and therefore welcomes the Government’s proposals in its White Paper to further improve teacher quality, ensure funding is fairly distributed, tackle areas of chronic educational failure and devolve more power to heads and school leaders to ensure both they and parents have more of a voice in the running of their schools; and welcomes the commitment to achieve educational excellence everywhere.”

Education is at the heart of this Government’s mission, because we all know that a good education transforms a child’s future. Our White Paper sets out our ambition to deliver real social justice by ensuring that every child gets an excellent education.

The Opposition motion is a deliberate misinterpretation of our proposals to transform England’s schools. As we have already heard, it contains at least two errors, including, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), one about parent governors. I am afraid that contributions from the shadow Secretary of State are starting to follow an all too familiar pattern of scaremongering and ignoring the achievements of both the teaching profession and our education system. I note that since her appointment, she has yet to propose a single positive idea, and we heard no more today about how we can raise standards across England’s schools.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on initiating this debate. Will the Secretary of State address what for Brentford and Isleworth in the Borough of Hounslow are the three most pressing problems: first, the recruitment and retention of good quality teachers, particularly in EBacc subjects; secondly, the desperate need to build sufficient secondary school places in time for 2017—unfortunately the Education Funding Agency is the cause of that delay; and finally, the need to ensure that our children have the skills for the local employment market when they leave? Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have got the message.

Nicky Morgan: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is engaging in issues that are of real concern to her constituents, and she is right to do so. I do not know whether she has had a chance to read all the White Paper, but it contains many of the answers, and I will come to on to talk about teacher recruitment and career development in a moment. This Government have so far spent £23 billion on building new accommodation for school places, and we have created 600,000 more school places since 2010.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: Let me finish answering the hon. Lady’s point. I hope that she has engaged with the new enterprise adviser from the Careers and Enterprise Company in her area, which is doing exactly what she said—engaging many more young people in those careers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: Let me make some progress and then I will take more interventions. Given the drafting of the motion, I must ask how much of the White Paper the shadow Education Secretary has read. Only one of its eight chapters is concerned with every school becoming an academy. It is not a schools White Paper, as the motion states; it is an education White Paper, and there is a critical difference.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I will take an intervention in a moment.

I have not heard anything from the hon. Lady about the other seven chapters of the White Paper, including our vision to spread educational excellence everywhere,
for the profession to take responsibility for teacher accreditation, and to set high expectations for every child with a world-leading curriculum.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am a supporter of the academies programme, and the experiences of my constituents have been largely—although not exclusively—positive. I am disappointed to see the Opposition go cold on one of their proudest innovations. As a Conservative, I also believe in choice, so will the Secretary of State outline the downside of allowing schools to migrate organically to academy status if they choose, rather than imposing a compulsory and arbitrary timeline on them?

Nicky Morgan: I will come on to that. My hon. Friend is right, and it is perfectly fair to ask that question. We are allowing six years for the change to be made. As a former Education Minister, he will recognise the benefits of allowing front-line professionals—heads, teachers and governors—to run their schools.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Like most Conservative Members, I am a great supporter of academies and they have been a great success in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State say something about the capacity of small primary schools, particularly in rural areas, to make that change?

Nicky Morgan: I will, and I recognise that there will be challenges for smaller schools in taking on the responsibilities of becoming stand-alone academy trusts, and we look forward to working with Members across the House on that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Point 4.49 on page 65 of the White Paper states:

“The role of parents is crucial...Our approach puts parents and children first, not through symbolic representation on a governing board, but through engagement with schools.”

What conclusion are parents meant to come to when the experience of parent governors over three decades is wrapped up in the world “symbolic”?

Nicky Morgan: The conclusion they will draw, one which I will come on to, is that we want parents to be engaged not just via governing bodies but through parent councils, through the ability to make complaints and be involved in their child’s education, and through being aware of how their child is taught. There are many more ways, in addition to being parent governors, that they can be engaged.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I am going to make some progress. The truth, as the Government amendment makes clear, is that there is no silver bullet to improve standards in education. Instead, concerted effort and innovation are required on every front. That is what we have done over the past six years. Since 2010, we have seen 1.4 million more pupils in good and outstanding schools as a result of our reforms, translated into reality by an outstanding teaching profession, to raise standards, restore rigour and free heads and teachers to run their schools in a way that works for their students. For all that we have unlocked excellence, we do not, as I have said many times before, yet have that excellence everywhere. For me, that “everywhere” is non-negotiable.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that schools will lose 8% of their funding in real terms over the next five years. What does the Secretary of State say to parents about the unfunded £1 billion cost of enforced academisation when schools are already facing that financial pressure?

Nicky Morgan: Opposition Members need to refresh their maths, because that calculation is completely wrong. Our White Paper outlines exactly how we are going to ensure excellence everywhere. It makes it clear that while we have the most qualified teaching workforce in our country’s history, we can do more to ensure that every teacher has the support to do the job as well as they can.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think it is extraordinary that, despite the volume of noise from the Opposition Benches, not one Labour Member has had the courage to stand up and say there is something fundamentally and totally inaccurate in the Opposition motion? It claims that the Secretary of State and our Government are trying to ban the role of parents on school governing bodies. Every single secondary school in my constituency is an academy and they all have parents on governing bodies.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

Lucy Powell rose—

Nicky Morgan: Let me answer the point and then I will invite the shadow Education Secretary to clarify what the Opposition motion actually says. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are two errors in the motion. The first is that it says we are abolishing the role of parent governors. We absolutely are not. The second is that we will force all schools to join multi-academy trusts. That is also not the case.

Lucy Powell: This may be a semantic argument, but does it not say in the White Paper that the Secretary of State is removing the requirement for parent governors? Is the Secretary of State removing the requirement—yes or no?

Nicky Morgan: Let me just remind the hon. Lady what her motion says. [ Interruption. ] Opposition Members do not want to listen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): If we are going to ask a question, let us hear the answer.

Nicky Morgan: I do not think they want to hear the answer, because they do not want to hear the clarification. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I want to hear your answer, Secretary of State. Come on!
Nicky Morgan: I am very grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The shadow Education Secretary’s motion states:

“the Schools White Paper”—

it is not a schools White Paper—

“proposes the removal of parent governors from school governing bodies”.

It does not. [Interruption.] If the hon. Lady, in drafting her motion, cannot put all the words from the White Paper in the motion, then frankly she needs to go back and do her English lessons.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I am going to make some progress.

It is important that hon. Members hear what is in the White Paper. We are outlining reforms of how teachers are trained and accredited, which, alongside the establishment of a new college of teaching and a new framework for professional development, will help to put teaching where it belongs—on a par with other professions such as medicine and law. It outlines our commitment—[Interruption.] I am not going to give way, because I am going to set out what is in the White Paper for the benefit of hon. Members, some of whom on the Opposition Front Bench clearly have not read it. It outlines our commitment—[Interruption.] I have just said I am not going to give way. It outlines our commitment—[Interruption.] Honestly, Mr Deputy Speaker, I think they are deaf. The White Paper outlines our commitment to make sure that school funding is fairly distributed—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I want to hear both sides. If we cannot hear it, what about the people who are listening out there? Let us try to keep it in order, because this is a very important debate that affects all our constituents, whichever side of the argument we are on.

Nicky Morgan: As I was saying, the White Paper outlines reforms of how teachers are trained and it outlines our commitment to make sure that school funding is fairly distributed across the counties, ending the gross inequities and distortions, so that heads and parents can have the confidence that the same child with the same characteristics and the same costs receives the same level of funding. It reaffirms our commitment to ensure that every single child reaches their potential, from stretching the most able to supporting those who, for whatever reason, have fallen out of mainstream education. It proposes a bold new strategy, which I think all Members should welcome, to tackle areas of chronic underperformance through new educational achievement areas that will target school-led improvement support from national leaders of education, teaching schools and the national teaching service in the most needed areas.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): As the Secretary of State is aware, the last sixth-form A-level provision in Knowsley in Garston and Halewood has now been withdrawn by the academy concerned, so she will appreciate that there is concern about that issue in Knowsley. Will she explain why she has refused to meet my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) and me to discuss our concerns?

Nicky Morgan: Of course we will meet them, and the Schools Minister has agreed to do so.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) has said previously that she was proud of Labour’s academy programme, which transformed a small number of failing schools. [Interruption.] I am sorry, I intended to give way to my hon. Friend.

Steve Brine: That is very kind of my right hon. Friend; she is being very generous. She knows that as an MP from Hampshire, where 85% of our schools are good or outstanding, I have many questions about this policy, but if I were to sum up the concerns expressed to me by local teachers, it would be with the word “confusion”. They are confused about why something that is so obviously not broken needs fixing. My concern, which I am sure my right hon. Friend can dispel, is that we must not allow the bad to become the enemy of the good. What would her advice be to Hampshire, where the numbers converting to academy status are relatively low because schools are getting a good service from the existing local education authority? Is there any reason why Hampshire should not create, for instance, a new independent organisation, through which services that our schools—including those that are already academies—so value can continue to be delivered?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much. He is absolutely right to say that there is a new role for local authorities, for talented individuals in local authorities to set up their own multi-academy trusts to provide services to schools and to build on the excellence that we already have. I shall set out why I think that schools run by front-line professionals is the best and most sustainable model for raising standards for all pupils.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I am going to make some progress.

Many Members wish to speak, and because of the noise I have not been able to set out exactly what is in the White Paper.

Why not spread the transformation that we have seen via academies across the country to enable excellence for every child? One of the first things we did in the last Government was to turbo-charge Lord Adonis’s academy programme. We saw how autonomy gave strong sponsors the freedom and flexibility they needed to turn around failing schools, and we saw no reason why “good” and “outstanding” school leaders should not have that freedom as well. The White Paper proposes the next phase in our reforms to empower heads and teachers, to make sure that schools are run by those who know them best, to enable greater collaboration and co-operation, and to give parents and local communities more of a say in the running of their schools by moving over the next six years towards a system where every school is an academy.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): There is no doubt that we all want the best for our children. In Dorset, we have both types of school: state-run schools and academies. May I suggest caution as we proceed because a “one cap fits all” approach always makes me nervous? A natural progression from one to another, as suggested by some of my colleagues, is probably the best way to go, rather than imposition.
Nicky Morgan: I entirely understand what my hon. Friend says, based on his experiences. I have had the benefit of visiting schools across the country, so I know that despite schools becoming academies, there are lots of different models, with different sizes of schools and different opportunities for heads, leaders and teachers. There are big schools, small schools, schools in collaboration, schools working formally together, special schools, and schools with alternative provision. We have an amazing education system. The collaboration that is going on should be welcomed and celebrated.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I want to join many Labour Members in talking positively about the transformative effects that academies have had in our constituencies. I am particularly proud of Colne Valley High School, Marsden Junior School and Moor End Academy. However, I am a Conservative because I believe in choice. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should put our trust in parents and governing bodies, and will she please look again at the word “forced”?

Nicky Morgan: I, too, trust parents and governing bodies. I note that there is an appetite across the country for parents, governing bodies, heads and teachers to take more responsibility for their schools, and, rather than being told what to do by local authorities, to make the real choices that are best for their schools, their pupils and their communities. I look forward to engaging in that debate with my hon. Friend.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I will take one last intervention.

Sir Edward Leigh: I think the Secretary of State will confirm that we are talking about a White Paper. I know that she will listen carefully to colleagues, but will she also work with Conservative-controlled county councils such as Lincolnshire, which have a wonderful record of keeping small primary schools open? The possibility of their closing is what we are fearful of. May we, at the end of this process, have a compromise whereby county councils will not necessarily be forced to give up control of their small primary schools? It is essential for them to be kept open in rural areas. I know that the Secretary of State wants to proceed in a spirit of compromise, and does not wish to force anything on anyone.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, I met some members of the Local Government Association and council leaders this morning to discuss exactly that issue. They welcomed the moves that we are making to clarify how the system will look in the future, and also the option of supporting schools which are making progress. We have established there? Even post-academisation, the local authority accepts that these children are our children and we have an ongoing responsibility for them. The authority has concerns about a forced academisation programme, as indeed it should, but will my right hon. Friend look closely at a system that accepts that these children are our children whatever school they are at?

Andrew Percy rose—

Nicky Morgan: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Andrew Percy: I am pleased that this is such a popular intervention.

My right hon. Friend has just referred to the role of local authorities. Some authorities have clearly frustrated the academy process, but that has not been the case in North Lincolnshire, May I commend to my right hon. Friend the model of educational standards boards that we have established there? Even post-academisation, the local authority accepts that these children are our children and we have an ongoing responsibility for them. The authority has concerns about a forced academisation programme, as indeed it should, but will my right hon. Friend look closely at a system that accepts that these children are our children whatever school they are at?
Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am still looking forward to visiting his constituency at some point to meet teachers in his area. I will of course look at these models. The achieving education excellence areas that we outlined in the White Papers may be a suitable model.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I will take more interventions in a moment.

We have already been shown to respond quickly in the minority of cases where academies underperform. To date we have issued 154 formal notices to underperforming academies and free schools and changed the leadership in 129 cases of particular concern. The powers introduced under the Education and Adoption Act 2016 will allow us to intervene swiftly from day one—much more quickly than happened under many local authorities.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State not allow parents a say in whether their local school becomes an academy?

Nicky Morgan: We had that debate when the Education and Adoption Act was going through. We recognise that many new sponsors will involve parents, rightly, and we will encourage that in the academisation process.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Member for Manchester Central asked why we were doing this now. On current trajectories, three quarters of secondary and a third of primary schools will be academies by 2020, even if we did not do anything else. That will, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said, make it increasingly difficult for local authorities to manage an expensive bureaucracy with fewer and fewer schools. As I have said, we will work with local authorities to ensure that they are able to enter partnerships and work with schools.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: Something else that the Opposition have deliberately failed to understand is that this policy is fully funded. We have over £500 million available in this Parliament to build capacity, including recruiting—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. In fairness to the Secretary of State, she has given way a lot. If she wants to give way, that is fine, but do not keep clamouring and shouting because I want to get you all in and I will not achieve that.

Nicky Morgan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

As I say, we have over £500 million available in this Parliament to build capacity, including recruiting excellent sponsors and encouraging the development of strong multi-academy trusts. As ever, however, the back-of-a-fag-packet calculation that the hon. Member for Manchester Central seems so fond of, and that was put out by the Labour party press office, uses grossly inaccurate costings—in one case, for example, erroneously calculating that the average cost of academisation will be £66,000. In fact, costs per academy have fallen from over £250,000 in 2010-11 to £32,000 today. The cost per academy will continue to fall significantly in the years ahead as we move towards full academisation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about the £500 million available in this Parliament. Will she give an undertaking to publish in great detail the Department’s costings to reassure us that this is indeed a fully funded policy and that all the costs have been fully taken into account? I am afraid to say that her figures seem a bit pie in the sky.

Nicky Morgan: I assure the hon. Gentleman that my figures are absolutely not pie in the sky. We publish a huge amount of information and if he wants to write to me about how much it will cost to academise all the schools in his constituency, I will be happy to respond.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con) rose—

Nicky Morgan: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

James Berry: I am glad that Members have been waiting for this. In Kingston, we have the best GCSE results in the country, bar the Isles of Scilly, and only one of the schools is not an academy. It is legitimate to have a debate about whether that model should be mandated throughout the country. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that whatever the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) misrepresented, what she did not misrepresent—[Interruption.] I am saying that she did not misrepresent—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: I know he wants to withdraw that immediately.

James Berry: What she did not misrepresent was the guff about asset stripping, privatisation and profit that many of her colleagues have engaged in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Berry, we are not being helpful to each other. You are withdrawing the comment about misrepresentation. I think you have got your question across. I am going to hear the Secretary of State. You have withdrawn the remark. That is great. Thank you.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is passionate about this programme and about raising standards in schools in his constituency. I join him in that.

Let me refute another falsehood in the Opposition’s motion—that we will force all schools to be part of multi-academy trusts. Schools will not be forced to join a trust with other schools. As it happens, many schools want to join a trust because they can see the benefits. Two thirds of current academies have chosen to be part of multi-academy trusts, and of course outstanding schools can set up their own MATs. But to be absolutely clear, we will never make any successful school, large or small, that is capable of operating alone, join a trust.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the Conservative Benches, we are grateful for the fact we have finally made progress on the issue of fairer funding, which is incredibly important—particularly in rural constituencies. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the progress on fairer funding does not depend in any way on enforced academisation?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that those on the Opposition Benches had 13 years to sort out the inequities in our school funding system and that we heard absolutely nothing from them. On the trajectories for moving on to the new funding formula, we hope to start in the 2017-18 financial year, and on academisation we have six years for schools to become academies and to work out the best way for them to do so and the collaboration that that will involve.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way; she is being incredibly patient and long-suffering. We have many small schools in East Anglia. Can she confirm that, in the procedures for closure, the Secretary of State’s final decision will always remain in place?

Nicky Morgan: Absolutely, but what I do not envisage under this process is the closure of small schools. If they are serving the community well, if they are popular with parents and pupils and if they are providing excellent education, why would we want to close them?

We know that just becoming an academy does not improve results in itself, but it does set heads, teachers and governors free to do the things that increase standards. Our reforms and the hard work of teachers have led to remarkable success—[Interruption.]

It is a great shame that the shadow Secretary of State never wants to recognise the success in England’s schools. We still have a long way to go to achieve excellent education everywhere, and we will work with schools and local councils to continue the transformation.

Our White Paper sets out our wider plans for the next five years, building on and extending our reforms to achieve educational excellence everywhere. Where great schools, great leaders and great teachers exist, we will let them do what they do best—help every child to achieve their full potential. Where they do not, we will step in to build capacity, raise standards and provide confidence for parents and children. We will put children and parents first. The Opposition’s motion has no ambition to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that. For that reason, I am going to ask the House to reject their motion, to support our amendment to achieve that.

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This 122-page White Paper contains a huge number of issues that we could deal with today, but it is inevitable that we shall concentrate on the forced academisation policy. There is no justification for it, and that is illustrated by the fact that it started in my constituency during the last Parliament. An effort was made to force Wright Robinson College in my constituency to become an academy, and the only reason that that did not happen was that the then Secretary of State—now the Secretary of State for Justice—ordered the withdrawal of a warning notice that would have forced Wright Robinson to become an academy.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree with my constituent Glendra Read, a governor at a school that has fought academisation before, when she says that “If schools and parents are meant to have ‘freedom’, then our freedom of choice is to remain within” local authority control?

Sir Gerald Kaufman: That is a valid point.

Wright Robinson College was rebuilt under the Labour Government at a cost of £47 million and is a model structure. I quote from a letter that I received from the headteacher last month:

“On the evening of Tuesday 2 March 2016, I attended a meeting with my Deputies and the Ofsted Team, to receive their detailed feedback on the Section 5 Inspection that took place on 1 and 2 March 2016. I then experienced the proudest moment in my entire professional career when we were told that the College had received the full five ‘Outstanding Judgements’ against the criteria of the new and challenging Ofsted Framework.’

That would not have happened if the Government had had their way.

There was an attempt to turn Birchfields Primary School in my constituency into an academy, but I worked with the staff and governors to prevent that and we won. We do not always win. Not long ago, another school in my constituency, now Cedar Mount Academy, was forced to become an academy in a particularly odious manner because it was obliged to merge with schools that are not even in the city of Manchester. From that came a person called Dana Ross-Wawrzynski, who turned the whole situation into what she called “Bright Futures” for which she pays herself more than £200,000 a year. That is what academisation is about: people making money out of an unnecessary structure that does not benefit pupils.

We read in the White Paper that the agglomerations of schools that would be put into academy groups are in some cases not even in the same county. It is nothing to do with locality, local feeling or local sentiment, and parents will have no voice at all. The Government are to create something called “Parent Portal” through which it is alleged that parents will have a voice, but they will not. They will have no voice in the decision as to which school their child will attend or in the quality of the child’s education. The White Paper offers remedies, one of which is to go to the Department for Education. However, if I write to the Secretary of State, she will send me a courteous letter, but she will not deal with the issue that the parent has raised, because she will say that she deals only with policy, not individual or family issues. Another course parents can take is to go to an ombudsman. I worked for Harold Wilson when he
created the ombudsman system, but can anyone tell me when somebody went to an ombudsman and actually got a result that improved the situation?

The structure the Government are setting out in this White Paper is compulsory. It is not going to give local authorities any voice. It contains a section about the voice of local authorities, but if we actually read it, we see that local authorities do not actually have any voice, except that they are assigned the role of making sure that kids get to a school. Well, that is not going to happen with an independent academy run by people who are paid hundreds of thousands of pounds—they will tell the local authority to get lost.

This is not simply about the local authority; it is also about the fact that the Government are going to create 500 free schools. We have free schools in my constituency. We have free schools run by the Church of England, and they are very good. We have free schools run by the Catholic Church, and they are very good. The Muslim community wants to be involved as well, but it will not get involved in this because we will be faced with an edict from this Government, who do not care about public education at all. That is the issue: academies are not about public education; academies are about giving people who are paid hundreds of thousands of pounds—the Government— authority over millions of people.

Ruth Cadbury: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Gerald Kaufman: Of course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just say that we are very tight for time in this debate?

Ruth Cadbury: What many of us in areas with a growing population were looking for in a White Paper was the ability to bring on new schools quickly. In five years, we have not been able in Hounslow to deliver the community school that is needed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that despite the ability of faith schools and some other academy trusts to develop new schools, the community is excluded?

Sir Gerald Kaufman: My hon. Friend is right about that. The fact is that, certainly in my constituency, where I am heavily involved with the schools, it is not a matter of the Government providing a choice for the parents; it is the Government taking away the choice of parents and putting it in the hands of extremely well-paid bureaucrats. This Government are making a big mistake and they need to think again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We are now on a five-minute limit.

5.18 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): This debate is actually about children and the interests of children; it is about making sure that they have opportunities to fulfil their lives. We would not have been having a debate like this if local education authorities in the past had delivered opportunities to all children in a proper way—that is an absolute fact.

The Labour Government under Tony Blair would have agreed with me, because they started off the academies programme and they emphasised the importance of “Education, education, education.”

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is right to pay tribute to the last Labour Government’s academies plan for what it did for school improvement in the most disadvantaged areas. Surely he would agree with the former Education Secretary Lord Blunkett, who said that the current Government’s approach, which is not based on evidence, risks “discrediting the entire academy programme”.

Neil Carmichael: Lord Blunkett was correct when he was expressing concern about schools in Yorkshire and wondering why there was not a commission on schools there to deal with the problems that he has identified—that came up in the all-party group on Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire—so I think the hon. Gentleman makes a good point well.

We need to think about the current position in our education system. The “long tail of underachievement” report published by Ofsted back in 2012-13 makes it clear what the problem is: there are too many failing schools or coasting schools, particularly in the primary sector. They are the ones letting down young people and causing a problem. When children leave primary school without the ability to read or write, as too many children did back in 2010, they struggle and they continue to struggle in secondary school. The evidence is frightening. Analysis of the data on children who had a bad start shows that they never recover.

We need to think of an alternative way, and the academies programme has delivered success. More than 80% of academies are good or outstanding. That is why it is important to have more academies. However, the framework for academies needs to be carefully explored. It is important for us to understand what a good multi-academy trust looks like, and the Education Committee will be looking into that. That does not mean that all academies should become members of MATs, but it does mean that a good MAT will attract a lot of good schools because of the range of opportunities it provides, the emphasis on partnership, the strength of leadership and so on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) spoke about primary schools, and that is exactly the right subject for us to talk about. We must make sure that primary schools get together, work together and form partnerships. That is why I was pleased to be present when the Association of School and College Leaders and the National Governors Association launched their report entitled “Forming or Joining a Group of Schools: staying in control of your school’s destiny”. That is about bringing schools together, hopefully through a structure that will benefit their transition from maintained to academy status if that is a direction of travel that they need to take.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the issue of choice? Whitmore High School in my constituency was rated outstanding by Ofsted last year and is on the Department’s list of 100 best schools for value added. Why should it be forced to choose to become an academy?
Neil Carmichael: Because we want all schools to be able to be autonomous, to work with other schools and to form relationships which are right for their pupils. We always talk about the worst schools or the best schools, but we should focus on those in the middle. They are the ones that provide most of the education and tend to coast if that is allowed to occur. Too many local authorities have not intervened quickly enough or robustly enough when the situation demanded it. That is the context in which the Secretary of State correctly referred to interim executive boards.

On parent governors, the Government are not saying, as I understand it, that there will no longer be any parent governors. There are two points to make. The obvious one is that they are not being outlawed. Secondly, everyone can be a parent governor. It is not necessary to be a parent in order to be a non-parent governor. That is important. The idea that parent governors are an exclusive source of wisdom may well be right in some schools, but not in all.

One of the reasons why I set up the all-party group on school leadership and governance was that I was concerned that we did not have sufficient skills or all the skills needed for a governing body. We talked about the role of stakeholders, including parent governors. There was general agreement in that group, of which the NGA is the secretariat, that skills were the most important thing to recruit to a governing body. It is therefore right to talk in the terms that we are using.

I want quickly to mention regional schools commissioners, because they will play a really important role in this. The Education Committee discussed that role with the Department through a formal inquiry, and we will continue to look at it, because as the academies programme develops, of course, we will need to see more scale and capacity through the regional schools commissioners. I put it on the agenda right now that that needs to be considered in the medium term.

Finally, fairer funding is a critical part of the story, because it will give schools more flexibility and ensure that those that have suffered so badly in the past as a result of underfunding get a fairer slice of the funding. Schools should be encouraged to grow when the demand is there, and I think the Department is doing that. Last but not least, we have to think about catchment areas. One of the things that I find stultifying my area is the county council’s refusal to be a bit more open-minded about catchment areas and the ability of parents to go past one school or whatever as they choose. Those are the points that I wanted to make, and I think that the Education Committee is right—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I stand here as a member of the third party in this House. We will be abstaining this evening, on both the motion and the amendment. However, I am a member of the Education Committee—I sometimes feel that I have international observer status—and, on that basis, I would like to make a few points on the White Paper.

I was very interested to read in the White Paper that the national curriculum will become a benchmark, hopefully to be exceeded. I find that difficult to understand. When we did our report on holocaust education, we found that it is supported by the Government but not required to be taught in all schools. I find that quite strange. I wonder how far that will pertain if the elements of the White Paper go ahead.

Another interesting part of my work on the Education Committee involved having private discussions with teachers and their representatives on how to attract and retain teachers, which is a very large problem in England. I fail to see how having six years of what is perceived to be forced academisation will help to attract and retain teachers, especially if, as can happen in academies, terms and conditions will not be national, in the sense that I understand it from Scotland.

I find it strange that the forced removal of local authorities from schooling in England, against the wishes of local authorities, parents, governors, trade unions and others, will go ahead, and that the Secretary of State can match giving them new responsibilities with taking away any control they have over what happens in schools.

I also find it interesting, from an international perspective, that it was the Chancellor of the Exchequer who brought this matter to the House in the first instance, followed shortly by the Secretary of State’s White Paper. The Chancellor always makes me think of costs, and I am concerned for English schools, pupils, parents and everyone involved, that the cost of academisation will take away from money spent on teaching children. That is a really important point. I have a background in further education in Scotland so I know that change costs and that focus can sometimes shift.

Finally, the Department for Education is currently unable to present its accounts because of the problems involved in consolidating academies’ accounts with its own. If the academisation of all schools goes ahead, that will create further issues and problems. I think that any delay in publishing accounts for any Government Department is a delay in public accountability.

I realise that this is a very passionate and forceful debate on both sides of the House. I wish all Members well in it, but I will not be taking any further part.

5.29 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this important debate and to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), with whom I served for a while on the Education Committee.

I applaud my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her statement at the beginning of the White Paper. She says that education

“is a matter of social justice—extending opportunity to every child”.

A headteacher in Romsey wrote to me immediately the White Paper was released, describing it as the best White Paper he had ever read.

As I said, I was a member of the Education Committee until recently, and I have a feeling I might be on my way back at some point. I joined the Committee during work on its 2014-15 Session report on academies and free schools. As part of that inquiry, we met inspirational school leaders and chief executives of academy chains, we visited schools and we met primary heads involved in multi-academy trusts. We did not look just at the
good; we also delved into where academy chains were underperforming. We came up with a report that drew some interesting conclusions.

In Romsey, we have two excellent academies, both of which are converter, stand-alone secondary academies led by great headteachers, to whom I pay tribute for their vision and determination. Today, I have received exhortations from not one constituent but many, asking me to speak out against academies because they are supposedly undemocratic and exclude communities from having an input into how they are run. That is not my experience at all. In fact, I would go further: there is enormous community input into both the academies in Romsey, which go out of their way to involve local businesses, to bring in people from outside to take part in how the school is run, and to give the best opportunities and experiences to their pupils. Both academies are members of the Eastleigh consortium of secondary schools and colleges, and both are real leading lights in sharing best practice and spreading their knowledge and expertise. So, no, I will not speak out against academies, because my experience of them is excellent, and I pay tribute to Heather Mcllroy of the Mountbatten School and Jonathan de Saussure of Romsey School for the fantastic job they do for Romsey’s children.

However, I must emphasise the conclusions the Select Committee report drew. We do not have to dig far into the report to find the quote given by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell):

“Current evidence does not allow us to draw...conclusions on whether academies are a positive force for change.”

I fully accept that the report is now a year old, and there will be additional data, so it may now be possible to have a fuller picture. The report certainly called on the DFE to do further research into the impact of academy status on primary schools.

In Romsey and Southampton North, not one primary school has converted to an academy, and that may be for many good reasons. I have certainly spoken to some excellent headteachers—most notably the head of the most outstanding primary school in my constituency, which is repeatedly rated as outstanding by Ofsted—and the response I have consistently received from her as to why the school has not converted is that those involved have looked at the possibility many times and have not thought that it was right for them. They have welcomed the support and the challenge they have had over the years from the local education authority. Far from seeing that as the shackles of local government, they have enjoyed the robust support and challenge they have had from a consistently high-performing children’s services department.

It is of course possible that my view is entirely coloured by the opinions of headteachers who have worked with Hampshire County Council over many years, and that, were the authority less good, I might be faced with headteachers actively seeking liberation from its bonds. However, they have had the freedom to do that, and they have not done so.

In Hampshire, many of our rural schools are already federated, sharing headteachers and best practice incredibly successfully. I point to the example of the brilliant Jo Cottrell, who is executive head of the outstanding Halterworth Primary School and two smaller village schools in Awbridge and Wellow. I would also like to mention Marcus Roe, head of Ampfield School and of John Keble School in Hursley, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine).

Steve Brine: On that point, my hon. Friend and I have both had a letter from the aforementioned Mr Roe. John Keble School in Hursley is in the federation she mentioned. I was struck, and I wonder whether she was, by one line in his letter:

“Surely, the model of ‘headteachers know best’—

which we all agree with—

“also applies to whether we believe academy status is right for us or not.”

As I said earlier, many of my primary schools, like hers, do not believe it is right for them, and they have had the choice to become academies, but they have not exercised it. I wonder whether she noted that line in his letter.

Caroline Nokes: I noted that line and that which said:

“Hampshire has been highly regarded by Ofsted for the excellent work it has done to support children in the county and beyond.”

I appreciate that Hampshire may be able to continue to provide services to schools. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to look at ways that the good can be exempted from a system of prescription.

I want to emphasise an important element of the Education Committee report. Page 64 states:

“Academisation is not always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school.”

This morning I spoke to Ruth Evans, headteacher of Cantell school in Southampton, who has emphasised that Cantell is the fastest improving school in Southampton and rated in the top 5% in the country for value added, but it is not an academy and it has not been able to convert, because of the private finance initiative agreement to which it is bound. What happens to such schools, and how many others are in the same boat? Ruth’s view—I will conclude on this point, because I think she is absolutely right—is that what really matter are the staff and the culture. The school pursues partnerships with its cluster of primary schools and undertakes a peer review to ensure that it is at the forefront of improvement.

5.35 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): I am glad to take part in this debate, because there is a situation involving a school in west Coventry that affects my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). I have tried to draw the issue to the Secretary of State’s attention and I have asked her for a meeting. It concerns the closure of one academy—it has been a failing academy for a few years—and the setting up of another. The new academy is being given a great amount of Government funding and they are closing what used to be a fine school, but which was turned into an academy under pressure from this Government.

I say to the Secretary of State that academisation in itself solves nothing. It is not a panacea. The case for compulsory academisation does not exist. The Government have no mandate for it and there is no proof that it is a universally popular or effective policy. If the Secretary
of State would accept that, it would be a great step forward and she would have to rethink a major plank of the White Paper.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Robinson: I will not give way, because time is limited and many Members on both sides of the House wish to speak.

If the Secretary of State will not take my word for it, she should listen to the words of wisdom being spoken by her fellow Conservative Members, who also wish to undo the policy. Nobody sees the case for compulsory academisation of all our schools.

The whole point about education should be choice. We agree with that. There is a role for academies—we started them and there is no doubt that they have a role to play. In many instances they have been successful and stimulating and have set an example, but we cannot make one size fit all, and nor should we try to do so. If that is going to be the Government's national policy, it will be a failure. I fear that one of the consequences will be similar situations to that in Coventry, where one school is being forced to close and another academy is going to start up barely a mile down the road. It does not have places and there is no planning or demand. The main demand for the school down the road comes from the parents of children at the school that is going to close, who are looking for places that do not exist in the new academy. There is a lack of planning and forethought. That is what happens when someone believes they have found the holy grail or the secret key that can unlock the solution for all schools.

I beg the Secretary of State to think again, because the situation in Coventry is as follows: we are closing one school, which is a sports academy, and we are eliminating a boys-only school, a girls-only school and one school, which is a sports academy, and we are starting them and there is no planning or demand. The Department for Education got involved smartish. The schools joined an established multi-academy chain entirely free from local authority involvement. There was a full restructure of staff, shared leadership, new timetables, new day structures, new approaches to behaviour, and new leadership and governance. It is early days, and I will not claim that all problems have been solved, but an early DfE monitoring visit found excellent examples of good practice. Two of the schools fell below one third, and in one school almost three quarters of children failed to achieve five good GCSEs, including maths and English, in consecutive years. Overall, 80% of children in receipt of the pupil premium leave school without five GCSEs. Those children have been failed for a lifetime.

So, what did we do in Telford? What happened to solve the problem? The Department for Education got involved smartish. The schools joined an established multi-academy chain entirely free from local authority involvement. There was a full restructure of staff, shared leadership, new timetables, new day structures, new approaches to behaviour, and new leadership and governance. It is early days, and I will not claim that all problems have been solved, but an early DfE monitoring visit found excellent examples of good practice. Two successful Ofsted visits showed the impact of the academy trust and its leaders. Those strengths were identified. In fact, Ofsted said—it is important to put this on record—that the academy trust chain had "played a crucial role in removing barriers to the academy's progress...the structures, mechanisms and foundations are now in place to begin to secure sustainable improvements."

We can see from Telford’s example that the academy structure makes it easier to put in place the essentials to drive up standards, and it allows underperformance to be tackled. That is what matters, so I support the Government’s determination to ensure that every child has the best start in life, a good education and the opportunity to be the best they can be.

I sound a note of caution on primary schools. We have many good primary schools—in Telford. Many teachers and parents tell me that they do not want an unnecessary change or interference with what our children are thriving and achieving. That is what matters. Do our children thrive and achieve in Telford? If they do, that is a good thing.
5.44 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I want to pick up on what the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) has said. All Members, from all parts of the House, strive to make sure that every school is a good school, and that children are taught by great teachers. Academisation of schools does not, in itself, achieve that. It is important that we make that clear and that we do not pretend otherwise.

I would like to send my condolences to the family of John Cope, a former regional secretary of the GMB, who passed away yesterday. John fought long and hard for teachers all across north London, fighting to ensure that all schools were good ones, and those schools always welcomed John to their school. This might be wide of the mark—I could be completely wrong—but as I read and tried to make sense of the White Paper, I thought that part of this policy might be about stopping trade unions supporting their members. Now, more than at any other time, the one thing that will keep people—which they work as a teacher, a cleaner, a dinner lady or a teaching assistant—connected and united in an educational establishment is the trade union movement. Rest in peace, John. The fight continues.

In Brent Central, we have five academies. Of all our other schools, only one is rated inadequate. The schools that became academies under Labour were failing schools that became academies in order to turn themselves around, which has indeed worked. That was a process for schools, rather than something that was forced on them. That point will be made throughout this debate.

In 2015, a parent contacted me in complete distress, saying, “They are forcing us to turn into an academy.” She asked me to go to a meeting, and I said, “Yes, not a problem.” I was quite surprised at how distressed all the parents and teachers were at the meeting. I was careful to obtain all the facts before forming an opinion, because that is what we do. I was told that, despite the objections of the unions and the parents, no proper information had been given to them. The parents wanted to have a ballot—a secret one, even—and they were willing to pay for it, but the school would not allow that to happen. Strikes and marches by the parents followed, and the school was forced, because the school was forced to turn into an academy. I worry that that will follow when other schools are forced to turn into academies.

Councillor Melinda Tilley, the cabinet member for education on Oxfordshire County Council, said on BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme last month:

“It means a lot of little primary schools will be forced to go into multi-academy trusts and I just feel it’s the wrong time, in the wrong place. I’m fed up with diktats from above saying you will do this and you won’t do that. This is not why I became a Conservative. It makes my blood boil. I’m put in a position where they’ve gone bonkers.”

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some very good points about small rural schools. I do not believe that the Secretary of State addressed those points when she was questioned by MPs from her own side of the House. I have schools in my constituency with as few as 13 pupils. What kind of academy trust will want to take on a school that small?

**Dawn Butler:** That is a good point, and my hon. Friend makes it very well. The chief executive of England’s largest multi-academy trust, AET, has admitted that there is less autonomy for schools in academy trusts than there is for schools that are maintained by local authorities. He has even said that schools will not be able to opt out if the ethos does not fit that of the school. That is a problem.

The Secretary of State talks about money going into schools. It is a fact that there has been a cut in the amount of money going into schools. Actually, with the loss of the contextual value added funding, many schools have lost up to £800 per pupil, and the pupil premium has done nothing to bring that money back into the school system. It is absolutely outrageous.

I have been trying to find out what the proposal is really about. It is certainly not about ensuring that all schools are good schools and that we have good education for kids in Brent. Local authorities will pick up the legal cost of doing this. I do not know what the cost will be, because we are apparently wrong. We had it as £1.3 billion, but the Secretary of State says something different. It would be nice to know definitely what the figure will be.

What I can say is that we will lose £260 million in London schools alone. My right hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who is the Labour candidate for London Mayor, has not only said that he will work “with councils to challenge coasting or poor-performing schools”, but that it is “a scandal that more than 44,000 children in London are taught in classes of more than 30—with some taught in classes of more than 40.”

**He says:**

“I’ll play a city-wide strategic leadership role, seeking to make a big dent in the school places crisis.”

I urge the Government to stop and listen to the teachers who are staying in the profession, as well as to those who are leaving it, and just do a U-turn on this flawed White Paper.

5.50 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). I declare any necessary interests as my wife is a primary school teacher.

I want to raise my concerns and those of my constituents about the proposal to require every school to become an academy by 2020. Let me be clear: I believe that there is a place for academies in our education system. They have played a part in helping to turn around schools and improve educational attainment for children throughout the country, although I do not believe that that improvement can be attributed solely to their being academies. I am not convinced that academies are the only direction for our education system or that they will somehow deliver the next great leap in academic results.

First and foremost, there is no evidence that academies are automatically better than state-maintained schools. Indeed, there are plenty of good and outstanding schools throughout the country, including in my constituency, which are maintained by the local authority.

Furthermore, I fear that forcing schools to become academies, especially when they do not want to, will be an unnecessary shake-up for the school and the local council.
Bob Stewart: Academies can be really good—for example, the Harris academy in Beckenham, which has improved greatly. However, we are considering a White Paper—an evolving document for discussion—not a directive, and I disagree with the idea if parents and governors do not want it to happen.

Will Quince: Call me old-fashioned, but I hold the view that if a school is well governed, well run and performing well, it should be left alone and allowed to do its job.

No one quite knows what the outcome of the proposal will be, especially given that there seems to be a rather disjointed approach to the role of local authorities. We are telling local authorities that they are no longer responsible for schools, but still responsible for home-to-school transport and admissions. They are expected to be champions for parents when they are still responsible for the two most contentious matters when it comes to schools.

I do not believe that moving the control of schools from local authorities, which are run by elected representatives, to unelected regional schools commissioners makes schools more accountable to parents. We need decentralisation of education, which gives more control to teachers and parents. The proposal risks centralising power in Whitehall and giving power to unelected bureaucrats.

As my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) pointed out, we are considering a White Paper, and there is therefore time to put the proposals on hold and have a rethink. The White Paper is unquestionably generating a lot of uncertainty in our schools, and we should be in no doubt that the public have concerns.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no doubt and there should be no concern about the role of parents as governors? I declare an interest as a parent and a parent governor. It is clear from the White Paper that parents will be encouraged to continue to serve on governing boards.

Will Quince: On that one point I am very disappointed by the Opposition’s motion. I largely agree with their points, and, given that we are talking about a White Paper, I could even have supported the motion, had it not been factually incorrect. [Interruption.] There is no question but that it is factually incorrect. It has a word missing. We do not mark exam papers on the basis of, “It was what they meant to say, so we’ll give them an A.”

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry—the hon. Gentleman is a most courteous individual, but we must now move on. There are 21 remaining colleagues who wish to speak and probably fewer than 50 minutes. There will now be a three-minute time limit in a bid to ensure that we maximise the input.

5.54 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As a member of the Education Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute this afternoon. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I am aware of the significant public interest in this issue, with petitions about it that have more than 150,000 signatures. But most importantly, as a constituency MP and a parent of primary-age children, I am in a state of real disbelief at the frankly ludicrous proposal to force all schools to go down the academy route by 2020. I know my view is shared by many constituents, parents, teachers and support staff across Newcastle upon Tyne North. As with so many of this Government’s policies, it is entirely unclear what problem this policy is intended to fix. It is an absolute distraction from many of the real issues that the Education Secretary should be dealing with urgently.

Next week, parents across the country will find out whether their child has a school place in September, through an admissions process that is increasingly difficult for local authorities to manage. Councils such as Newcastle find themselves in the impossible position of being unable to consider establishing new community schools to cope with existing demand while being legally responsible for ensuring places. Demand is only going to increase given the increase in house building expected during the next few years, with 21,000 new homes across Newcastle by 2030. I genuinely want to understand this, and so would like an explanation of how local authorities are going to ensure that there is new school capacity at the right time in the right places under the current proposals. Any enlightenment from the Minister would be welcome.

The White Paper states that local authorities will retain a role in

“Ensuring every child has a school place...including that there are sufficient school, special school and alternative provision places to meet demand.”

But the Local Government Association has highlighted that

“Under these new plans, councils will remain legally responsible for making sure that all children have a school place, but it is wrong that neither they nor the Government will have any powers to force local schools to expand if they don’t want to.”

As for other pressing issues, the Education Secretary should turn her attention to teachers’ increasing workloads and the recruitment crisis. It is little wonder that SCHOOLS NorthEast has said that schools across the region

“face an uphill battle with nearly 9 in 10...Head Teachers reporting issues with recruiting staff in the past year.”

Teachers feel overworked and underappreciated.

Instead of dealing with those crucial issues, the Government are focusing on a top-down forced reorganisation that will see 20,000 schools come under their direct control. The Department for Education cannot even file its own accounts to Parliament on time, so can it really cope with that additional workload? It is presiding over a total fiasco with the new key stage 1 and 2 tests, with information about delivery given very late to teachers. Finally, at a time when we are reading that many schools in poor areas are now “running on empty”, who is going to pay for all this?

5.57 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who I think must have been reading a different White Paper from the one that I have read.
I start by tackling a comment from the shadow Secretary of State. In moving the motion, she made some totally unexceptional remarks, many of which I agreed with, but said that the White Paper was not about school improvement or autonomy but about a forced ideology that was not necessary. Let me tell her and others about my ideology on this issue. She and other Opposition Front Benchers occasionally use the word “ideological” in a negative and derogatory way. I will quote from the Google result:

“An ideology is a body of ideas, and those who agree with the main idea of something take an ideological stand to support it.”

My ideology on education is very simple: everyone should have access to good education. One aspect of our job as MPs is to help to find ways that give the strongest likelihood of our schools providing that. I am happy to take a stand to support that. I suspect that the shadow Education Secretary is, and I hope that every Member across the House is. That is what the White Paper aims at.

My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has spelled it out very clearly that, through the White Paper, she is trying to achieve a discussion on how to resolve the problem that, as she says, there are “too many pockets of educational underperformance—areas where too many young people miss out on the chance to benefit from the best possible education. This is deeply unfair.”

That starting point should be shared by all of us. This is a White Paper, not legislation—a point that many of our constituents do not seem to have grasped in their emails about the issue. We should be looking at what ideas are proposed in the White Paper.

Several points of interest have not yet been mentioned, including an independent college of training, which must be a good idea. We would all like to know more details about changes to qualified teacher status, but it is an interesting idea. The White Paper mentions a fairer national funding formula—surely we are all in favour of that, although it has not yet been mentioned by any Opposition Member so far today.

The debate has focused on two aspects: changes to a skill-based requirement on the selection of governors; and the conversion of schools into academies. Let me discuss that briefly—I will have to be very brief because you reduced the time limit by two minutes, Mr Speaker, just before I got up to speak. I have time to say only that anyone who listens to this debate must understand that parents can, should and will have a key role on the governing boards of academies, and the business of whether all schools should be converted to academies can wait for a fuller debate.

6 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): Let me start with an old proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Local parents and communities must be at the heart of decision making about their children, to increase accountability across schools. Constituencies such as mine have added complexities regarding what teachers face because of community demographics and socio-economic factors. I cannot go and sell to my community and constituents a White Paper that is not based on evidence or the needs of that local community, or that contains unnecessary costs that will not tackle deep-rooted issues of failure and falling educational standards. Funds have been cut for pupils and pupil places, and in my constituency some schools have not had funding through the schools building programme allocated to them and have had to stop their work. We must address such issues in my local schools.

We need investment, not drawn-out and expensive governance change. Structural changes do not tackle poor attainment—in fact, they detract from it, and that does not support headteachers and teachers in leading their staff and developing our children and their education. Instead, we focus on targets, as opposed to achievements and developing our children, and that is simply not good enough.

As many Members have highlighted, the Government have not hit on a magic formula. We have seen massive outcome disparity from academisation, and massive attainment difference in the chains into which the academy is incorporated, in much the same way that different local authorities get different results. Governance changes are not a substitute for front-line investment or an answer for failures, and I urge the Government to rethink them.

In conclusion, I like cooking and my mother always says to me, “If you’re going to cook a curry and it is not right, changing the pot and getting a fancy one will not fix the curry.” We need to get the ingredients right for this, and those in the White Paper do not make that curry for my constituents in Bradford West. I urge the Secretary of State to rethink this issue.

6.2 pm

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): I rise primarily in praise of academies, because in my constituency their spread has been transformative. We have some of the finest schools in the country, and I want the system that has brought us such success to be offered to many more children across the nation. In my constituency, six of our seven state schools have achieved academy status, and all save one produced results that greatly exceed the national average. The other one began to convert to academy status only in 2015, since when Ofsted reports that it is making very good progress.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way because I know that he is pressed for time, but I wish to back up what he has said, particularly for the secondary system. For example, in Taunton Deane in January, Court Fields School, which had problems, became an academy and was highlighted by Ofsted inspectors as having made vast improvements, including a 20% increase in maths results.

**Julian Knight**: My hon. Friend has added grist to my mill.

The greatest success in my constituency has been Tudor Grange Academy, which for four consecutive years has registered more than 90% of its students as achieving five A to C grades, including in maths at the end of year 11. We also have our first primary school, St James, which I am pleased to report has risen above the national average for reading, writing and mathematics. It is clear that putting teachers and headteachers in charge is a recipe for success. Those Solihull school
success stories should give pause to all those who deny that academies can make a powerful, positive difference to our young people.

I believe that Solihull, with its very high levels of academisation and excellent results, is a model for the future of our education system. A first-rate school system is essential if our children are to compete in the globalised economy they will grow up in. In too many instances, the old structures have failed to help talented young people to fulfil their potential.

At a time of great pressure on public finances, it is to the Government’s credit that they have chosen to invest so heavily in education. However, I have certain concerns about the academisation proposals with regard to rural primary schools. I would like to see whether, in further discussions, we can allay concerns about whether those schools are the right size and whether the process can be managed effectively over the extensive six-year time period.

In the main, the reforms give school leaders the freedom and authority to find educational solutions that work best for them, based on their first-hand experience and understanding. In particular, they are a vote of confidence in our teachers. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, teachers will now be afforded the same status as other professionals, such as those in law, medicine and the sciences.

Our move away from the top-down approach to reform has other benefits. A sad consequence of the central control of our school system has been an unhelpful level of standardisation. In pursuit of the laudable goal of equality, the drive has too often been to make sure that every school is the same. Our predecessors knew far less than we do about how pupils learn. We are now aware that children learn in many different ways and that a one-size-fits-all approach leaves too many far behind.

6.6 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Einstein said that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different outcome. At the start of every Parliament somebody suggests that, before political capital is exhausted, there should be an attempt to restructure a major public service, with the hopeful, if naive, expectation that delivery will somehow be improved.

In 2010, the health service was turned upside down for reasons that people have now largely forgotten. Well, that all turned out so well! In 2016, it is the turn of the school and education sector. To be fair, the radical change started in 2010 with the introduction of the Academies Act 2010. That Act was rushed through the Commons before the ink was dry on the coalition agreement. Even then, there was hostility to parental involvement. I moved an amendment to guarantee a parental ballot if governors were undecided on conversion to academy status. It was voted down on 26 July 2010. It was also opposed, incidentally, by Ed Balls and the Labour party, but by too few of my own party, who at that stage had a misplaced faith in the good intentions of their coalition colleagues.

To be fair to the Government, they are entirely serious in their attempt to raise standards and equalise life chances. I want to give them credit for that. However, they seem to have forgotten that all the research shows that the really decisive factor in a child’s educational outcome is having the parents onside, empowered and involved. They seem to have forgotten that the evidence on the benefits of academisation is at best equivocal. They seem to have forgotten that money used on the process of academisation cannot also be used for revising the school formula—it cannot be allocated and spent twice. They also seem to have forgotten their own legislation on coasting schools, because they are actually abolishing schools in name. They seem to have forgotten the painful progress we have all made on the national curriculum, because it simply will not apply.

I am struggling to explain such selective amnesia, such bewitchment of minds. I have decided that two irrational forces are at play. One is a magical belief in the benefits of renaming schools and altering their governance. Whatever the educational problem—slow progress, poor behaviour, low aspiration—the answer, the universal magic, is academisation. The second irrational force that has to be acknowledged is the active distrust, positive dislike and contempt in current Conservative and Government culture for local councils. My local primaries are high achieving. They are happy with their LEA relationship. They are busy, hard-pressed and fun to be at. To them, this change is disruptive, unwelcome and—by any measure—utterly pointless.

6.9 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): We all agree that every child needs an excellent education, but I was disappointed to read the Opposition motion, which attempts to stall our efforts to deliver it. Academisation has been a lifeline for some schools in my constituency. For many years, lots of schools in my constituency were at the bottom of the league tables, and the local authority was failing to bring about improvement. The new director of education in Portsmouth city council is making a positive difference, but that does not wipe the slate clean for the many children who have been let down.

Charter Academy in my constituency is one example of where academisation has been an enormous and immediate success. Threatened with closure and placed in emergency measures in 2009, as St Luke’s School, Charter Academy is now one of the most improved schools in the country. Free from local authority controls, the teachers and leadership of Charter Academy, with parents included, have shown that putting more power into the front line has vastly improved the life chances of its pupils, who are largely from the most deprived area.

Ark Ayrton is a primary school in the same deprived area. The head was not happy about being forcibly academised but she later said that she had wished it had happened a lot earlier. She now gets the professional development, including resources and the ability to innovate, that was lacking before. Giving teachers power and the ability to teach in their own unique style is one of the mainstays of the new curriculum. I hope that these freedoms will attract more people into teaching. That is one reason why I welcome the freedom of headteachers to set their own pay and conditions, and I hope that the freedoms will include job sharing and flexible hours.

In fact, I would like to see a much more flexible working day, with schools able to extend the working day, as mentioned in the White Paper, so that pupils can
have a wider range of education. For example, giving those not doing art at GCSE or A-level the chance to continue this important subject can be of great benefit. The same applies to music, sport and many other subjects. I hope that teachers will be given more time during the day to mark books and plan lessons or continue their professional development, rather than spending evenings and weekends working.

The message is clear: teachers up and down the country have already risen to the challenge. If we give teachers and school leaders the freedom to deliver an excellent education, we will see a continual improvement in our country’s education system. I welcome the White Paper and look forward to working with schools in Portsmouth to become an outstanding city for education.

6.11 pm  
Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I would like to put on the record the fact that my partner is a school governor at St John’s in Baxenden.

The point I want to raise is the negative impact that forced academisation will have on grant-maintained local authority nurseries. In an answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on 22 March, the Minister said—I summarise—that at some point in the future, the Government would think about whether state nurseries would be forced to become academies.

As of 4 March this year, there were 41,227 young pupils in grant-maintained nurseries at 406 nursery schools in England. Some authorities have very low numbers of such pupils in schools, and the plain fact is that small nurseries with small class sizes are not big enough to academise. Their size and nature mean that they cannot afford to procure central services themselves, so they are reliant on the local education authority. This ideological shambles of forced academisation has resulted in the Government having to leave these nurseries out on a limb. Councils will still have to retain core educational support services.

What comes next for these local authority nurseries? In the meantime, with an uncertain future, they are unable to plan. The Government have injected a huge degree of instability. The all-party parliamentary group on nursery schools and nursery classes reported last month that there is growing evidence that the maintained nursery schools in particular are at risk of closure.

We must remember the important difference between primary education and early years childcare. Early years childcare is a multi-agency environment. Many of these nurseries are already losing co-located services and income because of this Government’s policies. The outrageous cut of £685 million from Lancashire county council has resulted in one of my local authority nurseries, Fairfield, losing the presence and shared cost base of its neighbourhood centre, as the county council consolidates and contracts these services.

It is not just damaging cuts and forced academisation that threaten these LEA nurseries, because the Government’s shambolic unplanned provision for increases in free childcare has also created problems. The net result is chaos for the UK’s two, three and four-year-olds and their parents. According to the House of Commons Library, in Bristol alone, 23.2% of three and four-year-olds attend LEA nurseries, while in my own county of Lancashire, 15.3% of three and four-year-olds attend them. Let us not forget that parental choice is about choosing high-quality, state-provided nurseries. Local education provision is important to parents, who want fully qualified staff and support services. The reality today is that this Government have no answer to the forced academisation programme, and grant-maintained nurseries are going to suffer as a consequence.

6.14 pm  
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome the White Paper and the broad thrust of policy, which is about standards. If England were a school, it would not be “outstanding” and it would not be “good”, and that is not good enough. We owe it to our children to raise education standards across the board, especially in the most disadvantaged areas.

However, while I certainly see a role for academies in transforming schools that are failing, I have many reservations about the specific proposal for enforced academisation, and like many other Members, I have particular reservations in relation to rural primary schools. I recently visited All Saints Primary School in Lawshall, near Bury St Edmunds. Its excellent headmistress, Clare Lamb, is a national leader. The school is outstanding in every sense of the word, and it has told me that it does not want to become an academy. What I fundamentally struggle with—is this a very simple point—is the idea that I should go to that school and say, “Although your school is outstanding, and all your staff are working brilliantly and delivering a fantastic education, we are now going to force you to become an academy.”

I understand the reasoning behind this, and I understand the point about sustainability. The White Paper argues that as more and more schools become academies, it will become harder to sustain those that do not. However, it is forecast that only a third of primary schools will become academies by 2022; in other words, two thirds will not. There is an answer to the question of sustainability, which is fairer funding. I have written to all my local schools telling them I will campaign for fairer funding so that they can look forward to a better funded future. That has been our answer. We have never linked it to academies, and I was grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for confirming that there was no direct link.

During Prime Minister’s Question Time, I asked the Prime Minister about the principles underlying consultation on fairer funding. In his answer, which I sent to all my local primary schools, he specifically stated that he would support small rural schools in sparsely populated areas, and made no mention of academisation.

I know that both the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have a passion for education, but many of us have serious reservations about enforcement. We believe in choice, and we find it hard to defend the idea that we should force schools that are good or outstanding to become academies. A one nation education policy involves a national funding framework. A one nation education policy transforms the worst schools, making them become academies in the hope that that will improve them. However, I do not think that, at its heart, such a policy should mean forcing schools that are already good or outstanding to change their status, thus putting at risk the excellent standards that they are delivering.
6.17 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): May I begin by apologising to the Secretary of State? Owing to the reduced speaking time, I shall not be able to make my traditional pop at the Inspiration Trust. I am sure that there will be other opportunities in the future, but I wanted to put that on the record.

Like so many other Members on both sides of the House, and like so many parents and teachers up and down the country, I am baffled by the Government’s policy of forced academisation. Normally, when assessing a new initiative in any policy area, I consider three key questions: what does the consultation say and what are the views of the key stakeholders, what is the evidence for and against the policy, and how will new institutions created by it be held to account?

The answers to those questions are usually quite long and complex, and that is especially true of education, because it is a complex topic and there are many different views, often strongly held. However, in the case of the policy of forced academisation, the answers are not long and complex; they are brutally short and simple. Consultation: none. Evidence: none. Accountability: none. How are we to take this policy seriously? This is the most significant reorganisation of education policy in the United Kingdom since the second world war, and it was not even mentioned in the Conservative party manifesto, written less than a year ago. Was that the result of a deliberate choice to keep it secret from the electorate, or was it made up on the hoof at some point in the last 11 months? Whichever it was, one thing is certain: it has no mandate whatsoever from the public of this country. The White Paper that sets out this policy contains no evidence section to support the proposals it makes. It simply omits that, replacing it with a few cherry-picked, one-off examples that support the policy. Perhaps that omission has been made because the evidence simply does not exist. The fact is that this is just another lurch in an incoherent and unthought-out policy of forced academisation. Normally, when assessing a new initiative in any policy area, I consider three key questions: what does the consultation say and what are the views of the key stakeholders, what is the evidence for and against the policy, and how will new institutions created by it be held to account?

The answers to those questions are usually quite long and complex, and that is especially true of education, because it is a complex topic and there are many different views, often strongly held. However, in the case of the policy of forced academisation, the answers are not long and complex; they are brutally short and simple. Consultation: none. Evidence: none. Accountability: none. How are we to take this policy seriously? This is the most significant reorganisation of education policy in the United Kingdom since the second world war, and it was not even mentioned in the Conservative party manifesto, written less than a year ago. Was that the result of a deliberate choice to keep it secret from the electorate, or was it made up on the hoof at some point in the last 11 months? Whichever it was, one thing is certain: it has no mandate whatsoever from the public of this country. The White Paper that sets out this policy contains no evidence section to support the proposals it makes. It simply omits that, replacing it with a few cherry-picked, one-off examples that support the policy. Perhaps that omission has been made because the evidence simply does not exist. The fact is that this is just another lurch in an incoherent and unthought-out series of zig-zags on how our children are educated.

Perhaps it is on the question of accountability that this whole policy really shows up the hypocrisy of this Government. We have heard again and again in recent days about how keen they are on “transparency”. We have heard them many times talk about “choice” and “localism”. Yet again this Government say all the right things but do the exact opposite.

The White Paper in effect begins the process of accelerating the handover of the entire state education system to a series of semi-private bodies that are completely unaccountable to parents or the communities in which they reside. Why? Because parents, teachers and communities will no longer have the right to representation on boards of governors. Therefore, I urge the Conservative Members to have the honesty and integrity to put paid to this White Paper. If you do want it, put it in your next general election manifesto and take it to the people—let them decide their children’s future. See if they are as keen to have millions of pounds of public assets handed over to the private sector for next to nothing. No transparency. No choice. Another nail in the coffin of local democracy.

6.21 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Learning changes lives because it changes life chances and we all get only one chance at school. In 2010, Labour left this country with one in three children unable to do basic maths or to read. That is a damning indictment of its 13 years of education policy. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Government to take steps to improve standards. How do we do that? We do it by changing structures. Structures beget better standards—Tony Blair said that. I am a passionate advocate of more freedoms for teachers and for schools. If we free up teachers from bureaucracy, box ticking and form filling, they will fly.

I helped to set up one of the first free schools, in Wembley in Brent, where we are seeing our teachers flourish and live out their passion for their subjects, free from bureaucracy and diktat. We are seeing our children’s discipline and behaviour turn around. Therefore, I speak in favour of the White Paper, which represents the next logical step in the reforms that are radically improving and changing the life chances of children in this country.

I particularly welcome two key points. The first is the reforms of Ofsted. For too long, we have seen Ofsted expand its role and have a debilitating and pernicious effect on teachers. It is cited as one of the key reasons for leaving the profession. It provides an unfair and distorted image of a school. It is inconsistent and incoherent. The Trojan horse schools were rated as outstanding by Ofsted. It is clear, then, that reform of its remit is needed. I welcome the announcements in the White Paper to reduce its role and interference in schools.

Secondly, on academisation, it is important that schools are free to choose how they are run. Hampshire, in which my constituency is located, is performing well. The authority has an opportunity here. It can take advantage of that to become a MAT. It can outsource its services. This is a great opportunity to reform standards and schools, to change structures and to improve standards by allowing more collaboration, whether in CPD, teacher training, leadership training or back-office sourcing.

I therefore welcome this White Paper to improve children’s life chances.

6.24 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): It has been a fairly polarised debate on academies and community schools and whether one is right and the other wrong. The education system is complex and because of that we should not allow the debate to be so polarised; it should be a meaningful and deep debate. However, a number of the points raised need to be challenged, not least the point that was made by Conservative Back-Bench Members that when Labour left office one in three children left primary school unable to read and write. That claim has been made before by Conservative Members. The UK Statistics Authority has challenged that and said that it is not true. We need to make sure that that is put right. More than that, there has been a recommendation that the official record should be changed to reflect the facts.

The Local Government Association’s meeting with the Secretary of State has been referred to. To hear the report from that meeting, anyone would believe that the LGA supported the Government’s proposals, but nothing could be further from the truth. So, to provide a bit of balance in the debate, let me tell the Secretary of State exactly what the LGA is saying. It has stated: “The wholesale removal of democratically elected councils from all aspects of local education, to be replaced by unelected and remote civil servants, has rightly raised serious questions about local needs and accountability”.

Preceding page content:
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): My local council, Rochdale Council, has just passed a motion to say that it totally deplores the attempt to force academisation on our schools. It will not be the only council to do that. Would my hon. Friend like to comment on that?

Jim McMahon: Absolutely, but I shall just conclude the quote from the LGA, which went on to say that the Government’s proposals “will further weaken vital local voices in our schools.”

There has been a debate about whether the point in the motion about the removal of parent governors is accurate, but I can tell the House that there are serious concerns about the intent of this Government when it comes to democracy and local accountability. When I wrote to the Secretary of State to ask whether the Department would intervene to prevent E-ACT academies from sacking their community governors and parent governors, she refused to intervene; she supported their right to do that. There will be schools up and down this country in which parents no longer have a right to sit at that table and make their voice heard. If that is not the Government’s intent, why did the Secretary of State or the Minister not intervene and say that when they had the opportunity to do so?

Local areas are stepping up, and I commend the education and skills commission in Oldham for the work that it did, supported by Baroness Estelle Morris. The three MPs representing Oldham wrote to the Secretary of State to ask for a meeting to discuss the outcome of that work, which was genuinely about creating a family of education in Oldham involving parents, schools, governors, teachers and the community right across the spectrum of free schools, academies and community schools, but we have not even had a response. How can MPs in their constituencies have any faith in a further centralised education system in which a Secretary of State has all the power when she clearly does not even have the time to respond to a letter?

Ultimately, this is a trust issue. I do not believe that the Government are really interested in community voices or in teachers’ voices. I actually do not believe that they are particularly interested in what happens to young people in Oldham. I am really questioning who they do listen to. I have very serious concerns about the academy sponsors and I want to know, as do the public, in whose interests this Government are working.

6.28 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am aware that there is a certain sense of irony, this being an education debate, that I am at the bottom of the pile again—probably the last person to speak from the Government side of the House—for speaking too much. However, Mr Speaker, thanks to your policy that all must have prizes, I shall get my two minutes, and I am delighted to have them. I am also conscious that, yet again, I am the kid who no one wants to sit with. [HON. MEMBERS: “Aah!”] I am delighted to speak in the debate. I also made a speech on education in the Budget debate, along similar lines to the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) delivered.

I welcome the White Paper. I have found much in it that will make our schools better, which I endorse and celebrate. The point has been made that if a local education authority school is outstanding, why should it be forced to become an academy? I should like to put a counter-proposition to that point. My constituency has five secondary schools, but only one has a sixth form. As a result, sixth form children have to be bussed out for miles. That is very much an LEA principle that has been put in place. One of my outstanding schools, which has not asked to become an academy, has asked to expand to include a sixth form but it has been unable to do so. Sometimes in order to encourage schools to use autonomy and to acquire their rights, we almost have to impose that will on them in order for them to take those powers. It is not just a question of whether the change is right for schools. There are parents who want their children to attend an outstanding sixth form in my constituency. If a school becomes an academy, there will be a sixth form and there will be more choice. Choice drives up standards, which is key for me as a constituency MP and a parent.

Having transformed a failing school, a headteacher in my constituency has now moved to another school at which the LEA may require some changes that she does not want. Such changes may help other schools, but there will be an impact on that headteacher who moved to the new school to take it from good to outstanding. Would she have the right to run the school how she wanted were it an academy?

The White Paper shows the areas where teachers are a long way from their teacher training provider and Bexhill and Battle is at the bottom of the pile, so any chance of reform that leads to better locations for teacher training is to be welcomed. While my contribution is about parts of the White Paper, many parts that have been ignored today will be welcome and will drive up standards.

6.31 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Like many Opposition Members, I am proud of the record of the previous Labour Government and particularly proud of what we did on the academies programme. We went into many struggling schools that were finding it difficult to attract the right staff and made them attractive for new people, but I see nothing in the Government’s approach that builds on that. They are butchering the Labour Government’s record on academies, and they are wrong to claim that the changes are an extension of what the Labour Government did.

I am pleased to say that virtually all Opposition Members have recognised in today’s debate that there is a huge number of good academies, because we are not here to say that academies are a mistake. Chesterfield has several academies. Newbold Community School was taken over by Outwood Grange, which I have visited and in many ways is doing a good job, as are the many schools under local authority control. Our argument today is not anti-academy, but anti the Government’s dogmatic approach to forcing good schools that are working well under local authorities to become academies.

I take issue with the Government’s amendment where it states that “it trusts school leaders to run schools and empowers them with the freedom to innovate”, because many academies are parts of chains that operate in exactly the same way in many areas. Outwood Grange has 13 different schools, and the schools are run identically.
in Scunthorpe, Worksop or Chesterfield. I put it to the organisation that that represents the “McDonaldisation” of education; it did not disagree and said that every one of its schools is exactly the same. The idea that headteachers have all the power in academies does not necessarily stand up to much scrutiny. The Government’s rigid approach to the national curriculum prevents local headteachers from innovating, so the Government’s record does not back up what they are saying.

It is clear from today’s debate that the Government do not have the support of their own Members, who are right to worry about the impact on small rural primary schools, because there is no way that academy chains will be interested in taking over such schools, which will close. I have no doubt that the policy will collapse, and it is massively disruptive for schools to have this hanging over them. By far the best thing that the Secretary of State could do is not to carry on clinging to a policy that we can all see has no chance of being delivered, but to announce at the Dispatch Box that she will rethink and close. I have no doubt that the policy will collapse, and get everyone concentrating on the key issues that face our schools, not this forced academisisation.

6.34 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): As a teacher, parent and experienced school governor, I know that giving children access to an excellent education is the best start that we can give them in life, so it is a shame that the Government have not come to us with a serious plan to improve educational standards. The proposal before us is nothing more than a gimmick. There is no evidence whatsoever that academies consistently raise standards. The fact is that educational standards rise and children succeed when they experience excellent teaching, and the evidence shows that it matters not whether that takes place in a local authority or an academy. The Government are choosing to ignore the evidence and are riding roughshod over both public and professional opinion.

The proposed changes are not just unhelpful; they are downright damaging. Some 85% of all primary schools are already judged to be outstanding, so why are they now to be forced to become academies? What is this expensive top-down reconfiguration going to cost? School budgets face a real-terms cut for the first time since the mid-1990s, so why, when schools are facing such huge challenges, are we asking teachers to take time, money and effort away to implement a change that has no track record of success? If the Government come forward with a genuine plan to raise educational standards by ensuring that schools are properly resourced and teachers are properly supported, I will back it, but I will not be backing this irresponsible meddling.

In my constituency, 35 state-maintained schools stand to be affected, and hundreds of parents, governors and teachers have already written to me to oppose the Government’s proposals, which fly totally in the face of localism. Where is the democracy in this proposal? Where is the accountability? Why are parents to be excluded from the governance of their children’s schools? Why are the views of the professionals—the teachers—being ignored? I will stand up for the parents of Burnley and Padiham, I will stand up for teachers and governors, but above all I will be opposing the forced academisation of our schools, because I care passionately about the education of our children.

6.36 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Schools in Salford are under immense strain: there are chronic shortages of teachers; class sizes are rising; and the extra-curricular services, such as mentoring, which can often mean the difference between a child from a disadvantaged background succeeding or failing, are being scaled back. With all the Chancellor’s rhetoric about the northern powerhouse, now is the time to raise standards and to skill our region for the future, not to take money and effort away from education by undertaking an extremely costly and unnecessary programme to convert all schools into academies.

I am also concerned that the Government appear to be undertaking such a policy with no evidential basis to show that academies are more effective than maintained schools. Even the Local Government Association education chair, Roy Perry, has stated that “only 15% of the largest academy chains perform above the national average”. Furthermore, schools should be rooted in and accountable to their local communities, but the Government’s proposals create quite the opposite, taking schools away from local authority control and removing the express requirement to install parent governors. That is quite contradictory from a Government who only a few years ago championed localism.

Let me turn now to the treatment of land assets, which many describe as a land grab reminiscent of the dissolution of the monasteries. The new plans will see all school land transferred directly from local authorities to the Secretary of State, who will then grant a lease to the relevant academy. The Minister may recall that back in 2010 the primary care trust land was transferred to a property management company, NHS Property Services Ltd, with the sole shareholder being the Secretary of State for Health. I have questioned the necessity of creating such a company when the Secretary of State holds the land in any case, but it would of course make perfect sense if there was, say, a proposed sale of that property management company in the future—I say no more. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed today whether such a company would be created for land held under the Government’s proposals.

As for the leases themselves, details do not appear to be available at the moment, so I would be grateful if the Minister could provide clarity. Most importantly, will an academy tenant be required to seek consent from the Secretary of State for any underlettings? Will there be any degree of local engagement to ensure that any tenants are deemed beneficial to the school and the wider community, rather than simply offering a financial gain for the academy?

On future land sales, I am very concerned about how this system will be managed by the Secretary of State, particularly in respect of who will derive benefit from any proceeds of sale. The current proposals are extremely ambiguous and do not clarify where proceeds will be directed, but I suggest that they go to the relevant local authority so that they can be put to good and beneficial local use.

6.39 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I declare an interest as a councillor in the London borough of Redbridge, a borough that has a high level of retention of schools as
part of the local authority family, and also an excellent and constructive relationship with the free schools, academies, grammar schools and independent schools that make up the rich diversity of education in our borough.

This Government have got their priorities on education very badly wrong. When they should be focusing on school standards, they are focusing on structures, without any focus whatsoever on evidence. It has been striking that so few Government Members have stood up in support of the Government’s proposals. We have heard many excellent speeches against those proposals and against the outrageous attack on parent choice and voice. I will not single them out, because being called a red Tory is a cross that no one should have to bear.

The Secretary of State should have been at the Dispatch Box today talking about the first real-terms cut in school budgets since the 1990s. She should have been talking about how she is going to deal with the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention that is seeing many excellent teachers leave the profession because of the stress of their workload and also because of the offence caused by people in this place and in Whitehall continuing to tell professionals how to do their job.

Our job is to make sure that every child gets the best start in life, and to ensure that the accountability mechanisms are in place to assure ourselves that that is the case, and, if it is not, to intervene. What justification can there be for the fact that the majority of schools that will be affected by the policy are primary schools, more than 80% of which are already good or outstanding? Why are we focusing on excellence when we should be focusing on underperformance?

Why is the Secretary of State not taking advice from her own chief inspector of schools who, after an inspection of seven multi-academy trusts, highlighted serious weaknesses, sometimes the same as in the worst performing local authorities and often accompanied by the same excuses? Conversion to academies and placing schools in the hands of multi-academy trusts is not a panacea or a magic wand. We should follow the evidence when setting education policy.

That is my fundamental problem with the White Paper—it does not follow the evidence. There is no evidence that making a school an academy will somehow make it better. Yes, we need more freedom for schools and more trust in professionals. We need to follow the example that we saw under the Labour Government. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) said, I am proud of what the Labour Government delivered on education. I am a product of it. I went to school in London when London schools were left to sink. Instead, we had the London Challenge. Excellence in Cities and a raft of measures that came through funding and also through focus on outstanding teaching and outstanding leadership. That is what the Secretary of State should be talking about today. Instead, she has a dogmatic, ridiculous White Paper that will not deliver what she says it will.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachael Maskell to speak until 6.44.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for squeezing me in, Mr Speaker. I want to talk about the excellence that has been built in York’s education system—a partnership between the local authority schools and the local authority itself. It is an excellence recognised by this Government—it is a top performing local authority across Yorkshire and Humber and has the top 14% of GCSE results in the city. The Government have recognised it to pilot its childcare strategy.

That excellence, which is threatened by this policy, has been built on the close partnership, the interdependence and collaboration between the local authority and local schools. It is those schools that are saying, “Leave me alone.” There is a strong relationship between parents and their school, and that partnership makes things work. Standards in education in York have been built up over decades. It is a fantastic story of triumph and it does not stop there. The York Challenge is modelled on the success of the London and Greater Manchester Challenges, to drive that excellence in partnerships between schools, the local education authority and parents.

One MAT has been created in York. The schools involved said that they had jumped before they were pushed because they were offered £100,000. It has fundamentally changed the relationship between the parents and the schools. It has also meant that the head did not have time to sign off the reports for the children, and that more teachers have moved into admin and headship roles, away from direct input in children’s education, leading to more irregular classroom cover. What I would say to the Secretary of State is, “Don’t break what doesn’t need fixing.”

6.44 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Let me start by declaring an interest as a lifelong member of the National Union of Teachers and a former teacher and college principal—I am not sure whether or not it is a benefit in this debate to have led a high-performing educational institution. This has been an excellent debate, begun from the Back Benches by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), who pointed out in a very able contribution that the Government are making a big mistake and asked them to think again.

My hon. Friends spelled out the need to think again. We heard contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell). We also heard extremely positive contributions from the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for Southport (John Pugh), for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond).

I would like to draw particular attention to the concerns expressed carefully, and quite properly, by Government Members. Concerns about removing choice and forcing academisation were expressed by the hon. Members for North East Hampshire and Petersfield (Mr Green), for South Dorset (Richard Drax), for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). The hon. Member for South Suffolk also expressed concern
about the independence of small primary schools, as did the hon. Members for Newbury (Richard Benyon), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Telford (Lucy Allan) and for Solihull. The hon. Members for Winchester (Steve Brine), for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) asked why, if something is broken in Hampshire, can the schools not stick with the local authority? I think that the Secretary of State indicated that there might be a concession to allow local authorities to form a multi-academy trust. If that is the case, it should be welcomed.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Nic Dakin** (Bootle) (Lab): I am going to make some progress.

I thought that the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) made a really excellent speech. He made it clear that there is no evidence that academies are always better and expressed the fear, which many of us genuinely feel, that this may prove to be an unnecessary shake-up. He was complimented on that argument by his colleague the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

The big question that everybody is asking is: why? Why force every school to become an academy? Why remove the historical partnership between local communities and their schools by saying that schools can no longer choose to remain in local authority families? Why remove the right of parents to be elected by their peers to serve on their child’s school’s governing body, as is clearly proposed in paragraph 3.3 of the White Paper? I listened very carefully, but no credible answer has yet come forth, and there has been no evidence to support the huge upheaval that this forced academisation represents.

It is not as though those working in education do not have challenges to focus their energies on, such as teacher shortages, inadequate school place planning, managing the chaos of initiatives on exams and assessment being imposed on schools, or managing the first real-term cuts in schools funding since the mid-1990s, with the need to make around £7.5 billion of savings. With limited resources, one might think that a Conservative Government would focus their energies on these very real issues.

I think that the Bow Group put it well:

“The proposed changes to schools follow a worrying trend in recent years to further centralise decisions away from local communities, which have more nuanced understanding of the issues they face daily. This adds to an ongoing ideological drift between the Party and conservative values.”

The leaders of the four largest groups on the Local Government Association are right to point out that 82% of local authority schools are good or outstanding, adding that there “is no clear evidence that academies perform better than council maintained schools.”

That echoes the conclusion that the cross-party Education Committee came to after its in-depth inquiry into the matter. The National Association of Head Teachers is right to warn that “the proposals present a particularly high risk to the future viability and identity of small, rural schools, nurseries and special schools.”

The professional associations are right to point out in their joint letter that a “forcible transfer of 17,000 schools to academy status...will be a huge distraction from schools’ core functions of teaching and learning...This is not what parents want from their schools, nor was this a proposal part of the manifesto that the current government put before the electorate.”

That is from the leaders of the Local Government Association’s leading groups. Evidence that they are right can be seen in the angry reaction of parents on Mumsnet to the suggestion that schools should be forced to become academies, whether or not that is needed or the school community and parents want it.

Her Majesty’s chief inspector has recently written to the Secretary of State to raise serious concerns about the performance of seven large multi-academy trusts:

“Given these worrying findings about the performance of disadvantaged pupils and the lack of leadership capacity and strategic oversight by trustees, salary levels for the chief executives of some of these MATs do not appear to be commensurate with the level of performance of their trusts or constituent academies. This poor use of public money is compounded by some trusts holding very large cash reserves that are not being spent on raising standards.”

It is no wonder 146,000 people have already signed a petition calling on the Government to stop going down this road.

“Schools Week” asked a pertinent question: what will forced academisation mean for pupils? It came up with a perceptive answer: “Almost nothing.” However, there will be an impact on children and parents. School leaders will have to put scarce energy and money into researching and managing academisation. An additional £1.3 billion will be spent on the process, which is money that could be directly spent on children in our schools.

Time and money that should be spent tackling the real problems facing schools—managing cuts in funding, recruiting and maintaining the education workforce, and providing sufficient school places—will be spent on managing a process of structural change. However, it is worse than that. There is not the capacity in the system to support wholesale academisation. There are already insufficient potential sponsors to give schools that need or want to become academies a choice.

The regional schools directors charged with ensuring school improvement will be distracted from focusing on that as they marshal capacity for wholesale academisation—a capacity that might well include expanding already-failing academy chains, which was something the Secretary of State failed to rule out when pressed to do so by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) in the Budget debate. We have a strategy that would deliver the ideological outcome of forced academisation but do nothing to improve outcomes for the UK’s children or UK plc.

I hope all right hon. and hon. Members who believe that such massive changes to our school system should go ahead only if the evidence is in place to support them will vote for the motion on the Order Paper if they are not convinced that the time, money and energy that will be spent on forced academisation will improve outcomes for children, families and communities.

6.52 pm

**The Minister for Schools** (Mr Nick Gibb): This has been an excellent debate, with a large number of superb speeches. I apologise if, in the time available, I am not able to respond to them all.
The Government’s education policy is focused on raising academic standards in our schools. Many Governments promise to raise standards; this Government are raising standards. We are raising standards in children’s reading, with 120,000 more six-year-olds this year reading more effectively as a result of our focus on phonics. We are raising standards in maths, with a new primary maths curriculum that is raising expectations and bringing us closer to the expectations in the top-performing education systems of the world. We are raising standards so that pupils leave primary school fluent in arithmetic. The plan is for all pupils to know their times tables by heart, which is why we are introducing a multiplication tables test at the end of primary school. Our policy is resulting in children starting secondary school having learned the rules of grammar and punctuation for the first time in a generation. The Government have eradicated grade inflation in our public exams—the GCSE and the A-level—which are being reformed so that they are on a par with the best qualifications in the world.

What the Government are doing in education is real; that is why it is controversial. It started under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and it is now entering a bold new phase under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the current Secretary of State.

If real education reform were easy, it would have been done already. However, every step of the way, we have had to fight and take on the vested interests—the self-appointed experts, the professors of education in the universities and the education quangos. We have challenged local authorities where too many schools were languishing in the performance tables year after year. We have transformed many of their schools into academies with a strong sponsor driving up standards—1,300 schools so far since 2010. We have taken powers in the Education and Adoption Act 2016 to automatically turn into an academy every school that Ofsted has put into special measures and to do the same for every coasting school that is not up to the job of raising its game.

Those schools will be supported by outstanding schools that are leading multi-academy trusts, which are formal groupings of academies spreading what works in the best schools to improve pupil behaviour, raise academic standards, promote sport and the arts, and share back-office functions. That means that small schools are more likely to be financially viable. There are now more than 640 multi-academy trusts led by outstanding schools.

Many strong and effective local authorities have seen the educational benefit of giving professionals control of their schools and have encouraged their good and outstanding schools to become academies and spread their winning formula and expertise. For example, in Bournemouth, 87% of all local authority schools, including primary schools, are now academies, as are 83% of schools in Bromley. Nationally, 66% of secondary schools and 19% of primary schools are now academies.

In 2010, there were just 203 academies; now, there are more than 5,600. The direction of travel is clear. Every month, more and more schools are converting to academy status. At some point, we have to draw the line, and that is why the White Paper sets out what we need to do over the next six years as more local authorities reach the levels of academisation in Bournemouth, Bromley and elsewhere.

Local authorities will continue to have an important role to play as the champions of parents and pupils—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Many people asked questions of the Minister. They want to hear his answers. We must listen to the debate.

Mr Gibb: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, local authorities have a role to play as the champions of parents and pupils with regard to place planning, administering admissions and ensuring that children with special educational needs are properly supported in their education.

May I apologise to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) for the occasional split infinitive in the White Paper? There were many more split infinitives in the earlier drafts. The Secretary of State and I have done our best to eradicate jargon, and we will redouble our efforts to do so.

Despite those split infinitives, my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) read an excerpt from a letter from a headteacher in her constituency, stating that it is the best White Paper he has ever read. She was right to point out that, in her experience, there is enormous community involvement in the academies in her constituency. We are putting greater expectations on academies to involve parents and to take their views into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), who chairs the Education Committee, made the important point in his excellent contribution that, of course, the academies programme started under Labour—but that was new Labour, not old Labour—and this Government have turbo-charged that programme.

This has been a lively debate about an issue that could not be more important to our country: the education of the next generation. This Government have a clear plan for education reform and it is already raising standards in our schools. By contrast, we hear nothing from Labour about standards, improving the teaching of reading, instilling a love of books, attainment in mathematics, improving our GCSE and A-level exams or improving pupil behaviour in our schools. For Labour, it is all about politics—it is all about cosying up to the vested interests and the NUT.

Our White Paper is an ambitious plan to ensure that our school leavers, wherever they live and whatever their background, are properly educated and equipped for life in modern Britain. It is clear from today’s debate that the Labour party has learned nothing from its defeat. It has no credibility on the economy, no ambition and no plan to raise standards in our schools. and at the first whiff of controversy it runs to attach itself to the vested interests.

The public want a Government who take difficult decisions and who act not in party interests, but in the national interest. I urge the House to reject Labour’s self-serving motion and to support our amendment—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.
Question agreed to.
Question put accordingly, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 204.

Division No. 236] [7 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, Sir Richard
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, Rt Alistair
Cairns, Philip
Cairns, Sir Alasdair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Rh Greg
Clarke, Rh Mr Kenneth
Clevery, James
Coffey, Dr Theresa
Collins, Damien
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Rh Stephen
Davies, Barnaby
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.

Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, Rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollobone, Rh Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, Rh Said
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Rh Mr David
Jones, Rh Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Lee, Rh Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, Rh Mr David
Lilley, Rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Rh Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, Rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mencer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Rh Anne
Mitchell, Rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, Rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paris, Neil
Patel, Rh Priti
Paterson, Rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Claire
Philips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickers, Rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Powe, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Rh Mr Dominic
Redwood, Rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Rh Grant
Sharma, Akil
Simpson, Rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, Rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, Rh Anna
Spelman, Rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Strier, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaine, Rh Mr Desmond
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
The House divided:
Main Question, as amended, put.

Question accordingly agreed to.
Main Question, as amended, put.
The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 201.

Division No. 237] [7.13 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria

Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slahra, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valeria
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jeff Smith and Sue Hayman
Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House believes that every child deserves an excellent education; welcomes the transformation in England’s schools since 2010 where 1.4 million more children are now taught in good or outstanding schools; notes that the academies programme has been at the heart of that transformation because it trusts school leaders to run schools and empowers them with the freedom to innovate and drive up standards; further notes that there remain too many areas of underperformance and that more needs to be done to ensure that standards in England match those of its best international competitors; and therefore welcomes the Government’s proposals in its White Paper to further improve the needs to be done to ensure that standards in England match those of its best international competitors; and therefore welcomes the Government’s proposals in its White Paper to further improve teacher quality, ensure funding is fairly distributed, tackle areas of chronic educational failure and devolve more power to heads and school leaders to ensure both they and parents have more of a voice in the running of their schools; and welcomes the commitment to achieve educational excellence everywhere.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

INSURANCE

That the draft Third Parties (Rights against Insurers) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.—(Margot James.)

Question agreed to.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Chris Grayling relating to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of...
Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(Margot James.)

**PETITION**

**Post office closures in Long Lawford and Bulkington**

7.26 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to post office closures in Long Lawford and Bulkington, led by John Beaumont in Bulkington and Peter McLaren in Long Lawford, and signed by 1,551 individuals who request that the post offices remain open and that jobs are protected. The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Post Office and the Co-operative Society to reconsider the planned closure of post offices in Long Lawford and Bulkington.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,
Declares that the post office facilities in Long Lawford and Bulkington, run by the Post Office and the Co-operative Society, should not be closed; further that the closures would result in redundancies of current post office staff; and further that local petitions on this matter have been signed by 1551 individuals.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Post Office and the Co-operative Society to reconsider the planned closure of post offices in Long Lawford and Bulkington.

And the Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

P001683

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**Economic Value of Golf**

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

7.27 pm

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Two weeks ago, I was particularly pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate in the wake of the launch, hosted by the all-party group on golf, of which I am chairman, of a report by Professor Shibli at Sheffield Hallam University on the benefits to the UK economy of golf. The report was instigated and funded by the Royal and Ancient, the home of golf.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister is aware, and as maybe you are Madam Deputy Speaker, many facets of life depend on impeccable... timing. Indeed, all the sports that I regularly play, many representing parliamentary teams, rely on good co-ordination and timing. The report’s launch and this Adjournment debate coincides with last weekend’s exciting golf, where Danny Willett won the US Masters. Six of the top 15 players at the tournament were British. Perhaps they were told last weekend about the importance of this upcoming Adjournment debate and my starring role—although I think other factors may have provided any extra incentive they might have needed.

Our great sporting nation invented or codified practically every global sport—an amazing achievement. Golf is no different. Among the constant clatter and chatter of football, the hurly burly of rugby union or league and the more measured poise of cricket, golf stands out as a sport that can be played and enjoyed by all in our society. Indeed, there are about 3,000 golf clubs across the United Kingdom. No player can rely on his or her team mates, the decisions of a referee, or the noise from the home crowd. It is one man or woman against one course—that is all. Two foes fighting each other for control: the ultimate battle both physical and mental. I was recently informed that some view golf as a game played across a distance not of a course or a fairway, but of the five-and-a-half inches between the ears. It can be a sport as frustrating and rewarding as one wants it to be.

Among all the preamble, I mentioned the report that I was proud to help launch. The report, “A Satellite Account for Golf in the UK”, shows explicitly the value, in a monetary sense, of golf to the UK economy. This debate will enable the House to recognise and celebrate golf’s contribution on myriad levels, including economically and to the health of participants.

At this point, I would like to congratulate Martin Slumbers and all at the Royal and Ancient who supported the report, and Professor Shibli of Sheffield Hallam University Sport Industry Research Centre who produced it—the first of its kind for an individual sport in the UK.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I would like to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and to acknowledge his work as part of the all-party group on golf. He raises an important point about economic value. Does he agree with me that there is a particular value to small business, as I know round about St Andrews and elsewhere in North East Fife? He is also right to acknowledge the health benefits for people of all ages of taking part in golf.
Karl McCartney: I thank my colleague and fellow all-party group chairman for his welcome intervention. I am aware that the Government have set five priorities in their “Sporting Future” strategy, one of which is economic development. When the results of the widely available report I referred to were published last month, it was clear that golf makes a vast contribution to our economy, much of which has been unheralded and unsung thus far. I trust this debate will go some way towards promulgating the good news.

The economic value is clear: with nearly 4 million people playing golf once a year and 1.5 million people playing golf every four weeks—a number even larger than those employed in the national health service—the total economic activity of golf exceeds a staggering £10 billion per annum.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am glad that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Although I cannot challenge St Andrews, Dorset has many fine golf courses. In terms of economic benefit, golf provides useful employment, especially for younger people living in a rural area. Does he agree that that is vital in our more rural areas?

Karl McCartney: Indeed it is, and I thank my hon. Friend for making the case for Dorset, as one of the many parts of the nation, both urban and rural, where golf is important. I shall come on to some of the statistics later in my speech.

Overall, golf’s positive contribution to the British economy is over £2 billion per annum, not just directly through golf clubs and through our vibrant golf equipment industry and golf shops, but indirectly through the construction and real estate industries.

I am particularly pleased that England Golf is the home of the amateur game in this country. It is based in my county of Lincolnshire in Woodhall Spa in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), so the game’s contribution is well spread across our nation. I doubt that even colleagues who want us to remain in the European Union could come up with a scare story about the damage that leaving might hypothetically do to this great game of ours—the Ryder cup is surely safe, no matter what happens on 23 June.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and namesake on securing this debate. I have a family interest in that my dad and constituent Bob is a keen player at Meltalh golf club in my constituency. In talking about the economic benefits, will my hon. Friend also acknowledge those in the clothing and equipment supply chains? Glenbrae Leisure in Slaithwaite, for example, makes lots of jumpers and leisure wear, and the cloth in the green jacket that Danny Willett wore in Augusta at the masters was woven and dyed in my constituency on the outskirts of Huddersfield.

Karl McCartney: I thank my good friend, distant relative and fellow all-party group officer for his interjection. He never fails to take the opportunity to make a good point in this Chamber.

The final piece of the economic jigsaw is the number of people who work in golf, with an estimated 75,000 people directly employed in the UK—the equivalent of 54,000 full time workers from Land’s End to John O’Groats. When the sport is on the world stage, as it will be at the Royal Troon for the British open in July of this year, the economic benefits for the local economy stretch far and wide. Even our friends from the north in Scotland must concede that the English have assisted in the promotion and healthy aspect of their tourism industry, where golf is concerned.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As the Member who represents Royal Troon, in my maiden speech I paid tribute to it and welcomed people to come and attend the open in July. As I said, my house is not quite big enough, but my garden is quite big if people want to bring a tent. Anyone wanting advice on eateries, travel or anything else about Royal Troon is welcome to speak to me.

Karl McCartney: That is very kind of the hon. Lady. I am happy to have been able to tee that up, so that she could drive that intervention down the fairway! Sorry, everybody; I must stop it.

Of course, golf is not just about jobs and money, vital as these are. Golf is the fifth largest sport in the UK in terms of participation, and the health benefits are clear for so many who take part in it. If everyone played a round every week, perhaps the obesity problem we face in our country would soon be eradicated. No one can play golf without indulging in physical exertion. Indeed, the game has been described by some as a good walk interspersed with some elation and frustration, often in unequal measure. Golf is a sport that supports our Government’s aim of ensuring that the nation’s population are active. On average, a game of 18 holes involves walking about six miles, although I personally would disagree with that figure. Given my playing standard, I often find myself walking perhaps double that distance as I search for my balls in the rough off the fairway—often on both sides—and dig them out of bunkers. Some have remarked that I am lucky to have a soft touch in my short game.

More seriously, golf is a sport that supports participation by men and women across all age groups. It is not subject to the decline in participation in some sports, such as team sports, by people who have reached their early twenties. Golf participation rates tend to increase until people are in their thirties and remain steady until they retire. It is, indeed, a game for all.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he agree that municipal golf courses are particularly important? Is it not disgraceful that my local council, Pendle borough council, is proposing to close the only municipal golf course in Pendle in order to save £50,000 a year? The same council, in the same month, spent £300,000 on the purchase of a disused building in another part of the borough, so it clearly has a lot of money and does not need to make that saving. It simply does not recognise the importance of golf to people in all age groups. This is a real sport in which everyone can get involved, and the borough should save our local golf course.

Karl McCartney: I thank my good friend and fellow traveller for his intervention, but unfortunately that is not the only example in the country. In my home area,
Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Karl McCartney: Very quickly, if that is OK.

Dr Whitford: In Troon, we are lucky enough to have 12,000 souls and nine golf courses, three of which are municipal. The hon. Gentleman spoke of people playing until retirement. In fact, golf is one of the few sports in which people can engage in their eighties and nineties. Our ladies’ club certainly includes players who are well into their nineties. Such courses should not be got rid of.

Karl McCartney: I shall come on to some of the other options for people who want to play golf in their retirement.

All that shows why golf adds such value to our economy, to employment, to our environment, and to our public health. I felt that it was important to secure this debate because I wanted to ensure that golf received the recognition that it deserves, and also to build on the recent re-formation of the new all-party parliamentary group for golf—an important new step. For far too long, golf has only been recognised in both Houses by the Parliamentary Golf Society, an august and traditional body whose role, it seems to some, has been to help traditional parliamentarians to play 19 holes together rather than celebrating the positive impact of the game throughout the nation. Some of us who came up against that closed shop in the last Parliament decided to reinvigorate the APPG with the simple aim of promoting participation in golf across the ages and sexes. Our European neighbours see ladies’ and girls’ participation rates that are double ours in the UK, and we want to close that gap. Golf can be, and is, a game to be enjoyed by all the family.

The first priority of the APPG is participation, but hand in hand with that goes an aim that is just as important—the aim to change the perception of golf. This great sport is for all ages, and we want to encourage young girls and boys to try it, whatever their background and wherever they live, and to continue to play throughout their lives with their friends and families. Who knows? It may not be a further 20 years before we see another British winner of the US Masters.

Some great work has been done by England Golf and its new chief executive, Nick Pink, by the Golf Trust and by others. All four home unions have specific projects in inner-city areas, including the national Get Into Golf campaign and help for those with disabilities to take part in the sport. In the neighbouring constituency of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips), Lincoln Golf Centre recently launched a project to help people with dementia to play and continue to play golf, which is happily hosted by Brian Logan and supported by Anthony Blackburn, founder of Golf In Society. Before Easter I was invited to meet players and their families, friends and carers, some of whom enjoyed a morning of respite while their husbands, wives, friends or partners enjoyed some golf.

The end of April marks the start of national golf month, which I am sure the whole House will support. On Wednesday 27 April there will be an event on Speaker’s Green to promote participation in golf. My right hon. Friend the Minister has been invited, and I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker—as a member of the all-party parliamentary group—and all my colleagues throughout the House would enjoy taking part.

The conclusion of the report demonstrates that golf is of considerable importance to the economic contribution of sport within the UK economy.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I am interested in investment in golf tourism, and the results of that and of direct spending in constituencies. In my constituency, we have 30 courses. A £10,000 investment by Visit Scotland and the local council has led to almost £500,000 of indirect and direct revenues. Should we not be using this debate—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree—to put pressure on tourist boards and local authorities to put more money into attracting golf visitors to the UK, because the bang for our buck there is clearly higher than it would be elsewhere?

Karl McCartney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree with virtually all the points he made. The many disparate and far-reaching organisations within golf need to work with those outside the sport to ensure that it achieves the participation level that it should, at various levels.

The conclusion of the report demonstrates that golf is of considerable importance to the economic contribution of sport in the UK economy. At the heart of the industry is a thriving club sector. However, the sport’s presence in tourism, hospitality, construction, equipment, clothing, betting and events are all notable areas of golf’s economic impact, as is its contribution to taxation.

The report provides a replicable economic baseline for the golf industry, against which the future development of the sport can be measured. With golf making its return to the Olympic Games at Rio later this year and the economy on an upward growth path, the economic and sporting conditions are favourable for the UK golf industry to develop further. So I am looking forward to hearing the response from my right hon. Friend the Minister, including his acceptance, I hope, of my invitation to him for a round of golf this summer at either Bexleyheath or Barnehurst golf clubs in his constituency, which have obviously noted his renowned sporting prowess.

I thank the House for its attention.

7.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney) on securing the debate and on his constructive and interesting speech. I commend all those who have made interventions highlighting the golf courses in their constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) for giving us some history about the jacket and the tweed involved. It is also good to see my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) in her seat. Before the debate, she highlighted the fact that I should mention the apprenticeships in her area and the green keepers and professionals in her golf clubs. We have had an interesting tour around the country and its golf courses.
It is particularly timely that we consider the matter in the wake of a hugely successful Masters tournament for British golfers. I add my congratulations to Danny Willett, whose fantastic performance led him to his first Green Jacket—the first for a British golfer in 20 years. I also congratulate Lee Westwood, Paul Casey, Matthew Fitzpatrick and Justin Rose on finishing in the top 10—quite an achievement and what a result for our country.

I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln for spearheading the recently formed all-party parliamentary group on golf. Its existence at Westminster is long overdue and I am sure the group will provide a strong voice for the sport in Parliament. The calling of this debate already shows that that voice is being heard, and we commend him. The new APPG is good news indeed for the sport. I wish it all success.

I agree with my hon. Friend that as MPs we should take an interest in the sport, whether we have golf courses in our constituencies, or we have people who are very interested in the sport and play elsewhere. Perhaps some people watch it just when there is an international competition. I thank him for his kind invitation to attend the APPG's first parliamentary reception in June. It is in the diary and I very much hope to be able to attend.

I should like to highlight the importance of golf to our nation’s economy as well as to the health and wellbeing of all our citizens who participate. Today we have heard in particular about the economic value of golf. Indeed, Sheffield Hallam University’s very helpful report has outlined how important the golfing sector is to our economy, and I commend its publication, which has stimulated considerable debate and interest. Its publication is timely as the Government’s new strategy for sport cites economic development through sport as one of five high-level outcomes. It is important in our strategy for sport to ensure that more people participate at every age. We have heard that people can continue to play golf to a considerable age and that is commendable. We know from the report that the golf market is significant to the health of our economy, accounting for 14% of all consumer spending on sport and employing more than 74,000 people in the UK golf industry. Golfers spent £4.3 billion on their sport in 2014, and golf paid almost £1 billion in tax in that period. That is a really significant contribution to the nation’s coffers.

Britain’s historic association with the game reaps many economic benefits from overseas visitors, as has been mentioned. Many flock to our shores to see the world’s best compete in the Open championship each year, while others come to play throughout the year on our world-famous courses, some of which have been highlighted this evening. Following the success of the 2014 Ryder cup at Gleneagles, the 2019 Solheim cup will also be played there, further cementing Scotland’s reputation as the home of golf. This will also generate further economic benefit for the country, and broadcast and media coverage will highlight Scotland’s natural beauty to the watching world. Speaking also as the Minister with responsibility for tourism, I welcome that opportunity.

I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that to stimulate the economic benefits further, we need to increase the number of people playing the sport. Golf is already a highly popular sport, with the latest Sport England survey showing that it is the fifth most played sport in England. It can be enjoyed by people of all ages, and participation has increased in the last year or so, which is welcome news. However, we must do all we can to increase participation further in golf, and in sport as a whole, for many reasons, not just the economic ones that we have already mentioned.

Sport England is investing £13 million in the current spending period on increasing participation through the England Golf Partnership, which is running a national campaign called “Get into Golf” to inspire people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to try the sport and to enjoy it. The campaign offers low-cost golf taster sessions and a range of courses for beginners and improvers. I have to tell my hon. Friend that I fear I would be an improver. I am pleased to say that more than 18,000 people took part in those sessions between April 2015 and September 2015, helping to take the sport to new participants.

In July 2014, England Golf also launched its new strategic plan, “Raising our Game”, built around the key priorities of more players, stronger clubs, developing talent and putting on outstanding championships, thereby improving the image of the game and ensuring excellent governance. As part of the plan, a new club information pack has been produced to help clubs to market themselves better and bring new people to the game. England Golf has also worked with 50 targeted clubs on demand-led marketing workshops to help clubs to grow, and it has developed a two-year pilot programme in Northamptonshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire to get more people playing the game in those areas.

A new programme is also working with 100 clubs to increase the number of women golfers. Much is being done to improve the health of the sport, although we should always look to do more. I welcome the Royal and Ancient’s decision last year to allow female members into the club. That has been a really long time coming, but I believe the decision will help the sport to move towards more balanced representation in the governance of the game. It will also be a positive step towards quashing the barriers within the sport. For golf to grow, it is vital that it demonstrates that it is an inclusive sport, open to all people of whatever background, age, race or gender. It is for everyone and, as we have heard this evening, people can participate at all levels.

It is important that we show that we are keen on the sport, and the inclusion of men’s and women’s golf at this summer’s Olympic games in Rio will give golf a unique opportunity to access a global audience, encourage fresh blood into the game and increase economic growth for the sport sector. I was interested to learn that this will be the first time that golf has returned to the Olympics for 112 years, having last been played at the games in 1904, with men’s and women’s tournaments taking place. Golfing authorities believe that the sport’s visibility will be greatly elevated by its inclusion in the Olympics, leading to greater participation. It was also announced earlier this month that gold medal winning golfers at the 2016 Olympics will win exemptions to next year’s majors. The men’s winner this summer will win entry to the Masters, the US Open, the Open, and the PGA Championship, which is really good news. The winning woman will also be given exemptions to the 2016 Evian Championship, the ANA Inspiration,
the Women’s PGA Championship, the U.S. Women’s Open and the Women’s British Open. All of that will have a positive, enhancing effect on the game.

Sport England has worked with the England Golf Partnership to achieve a much clearer understanding of the market and to tackle some of the barriers that get in the way of more people playing golf: time, cost, and accessibility. The APPG’s launch of national golf month at the Palace of Westminster on 27 April is a welcome boost, putting the spotlight on the sport and promoting the importance of golf to the UK’s health and economy. We must also never forget the most important thing: golf is fun. Part of the Government strategy on sport is about getting more people involved in sport for health, social and recreational reasons, but also because it is fun. In addition to all those other things, sport can be fun. It is fun even when we lose, because participation is about enjoyment. In today’s society, getting people going and doing things is fun in itself.

As I have mentioned, the economic impact of golf is important, but a 2009 study—it is a little out of date—of 300,000 Scandinavian golfers also estimated that those who play the game lived five years longer than non-players, regardless of age, gender or socioeconomic status.

Michael Tomlinson: Or ability.

Mr Evennett: Absolutely.

A further study found that walking 18 holes equates to moderate-to-high intensity exercise for older people and moderate exercise for the middle-aged—and that is without the added bonus of playing the game. It is good news all round. Golf suits participants of all ages. It is good for communities and for jobs and presents an opportunity for people to do something different. I encourage as many people as possible to participate and to look to golf as an option for their entertainment, enjoyment and sport.

In conclusion, I am delighted to highlight the valuable contribution that golf makes to this country, enriching the lives and wellbeing of those who participate and work in the sector, and contributing to the economic health of the nation. Tonight’s debate has been a welcome addition to the promotion of golf, encouraging participation and highlighting the work being done by so many excellent groups and organisations. Sport matters. It matters to this Government, to this House and to this country. Golf can play an important part in the Government’s new sports strategy, which aims to encourage a more active and participatory nation. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln for securing this debate today and thank those who have intervened and participated, because we want to get more people enjoying golf and working in the industry. I believe that that is the way to a successful sport. We want to see more great British stars winning on the international stage.

Question put and agreed to.
Deferred Division

**EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES, ETC.**

That the draft Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 241.*

**Division No. 234**

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Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie

Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel

Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie

Question accordingly agreed to.

Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight that important report. In places such as Kent, best practice is clearly being demonstrated. With regard to national training, which is happening now, we will see more and more use of live links from victims’ homes and other safe places to avoid the terrible ordeal in many cases of victims having to come to court to give evidence in the courtroom.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Providing effective and compassionate support for victims and survivors of sexual violence is pivotal to ensuring that more of these heinous crimes are reported in the first place, and, ultimately, that more offenders are brought to justice. Will the Minister tell me how the Government intend to improve victim and witness care within the criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady may already know that revised guidance to prosecutors and Crown Prosecution Service staff about victim and witness care in the courts is already being rolled out. There are also more staff in the court system to help and support witnesses and victims through the process. More work is being done and will be done to ensure that the objectives that she and I share are met.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Will the Solicitor General join me in welcoming the recent violence against women and girls statistics, which show that more cases than ever before are being charged, prosecuted and convicted?

The Solicitor General: I certainly welcome those statistics. Importantly, they make the point that, when it comes to people’s lives, more and more individuals are finding that their cases are being heard and that justice is being done on the perpetrators of these appalling offences.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with his counterparts in the Northern Ireland Assembly about the possibility of extending Clare’s law to the Province, particularly in the light of the revelation from Women’s Aid that six murders in Northern Ireland had links with domestic abuse?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises the important innovation of Clare’s law, which was introduced in the last Government. I was a key supporter of that legislation. I would be happy to have discussions with colleagues in Northern Ireland. However, it is a matter that, quite properly, has been devolved, but if it would help, I will of course hold those discussions.

European Arrest Warrant

2. Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on the use of the European arrest warrant as a prosecutorial tool of the UK leaving the EU.

[904462]
5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on the use of the European arrest warrant as a prosecutorial tool of the UK leaving the EU.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The European arrest warrant makes it easier to extradite foreign suspects to where they are wanted for crimes and to bring suspects back to the UK to face justice for crimes committed here. It is the quickest and most economical way to do these things, and other member states would not be bound to co-operate with us in the same way if we left the EU.

Jonathan Reynolds: The first piece of European legislation that I sat on in a delegated legislation Committee was a regulation that enabled us to track paedophiles more easily across different European countries. Why anybody would wish to end that kind of co-operation between European countries is beyond me. Does the Attorney General agree that the Brexit campaign is soft on crime and soft on the causes of crime?

The Attorney General: I have great respect for those who argue for a British exit from the European Union, but I am afraid that I believe they are wrong on this. For the reasons the hon. Gentleman has given, there is considerable advantage to Britain and to British citizens in being part of the European arrest warrant.

Diana Johnson: Just to be clear, does the Attorney General think that if we were no longer part of the European arrest warrant, criminals from the continent would see Britain as a safe haven because of the extradition arrangements and the concern that they would not be taken back quickly?

The Attorney General: There is no doubt that the quickest and easiest way of deporting criminals who face prosecutions in other European nations is, as I said, to use the European arrest warrant. Of course, those who argue for exit from the European Union would have to explain what alternative measures they would put in place to achieve the same objective. I am in no doubt that, as I say, the quickest and easiest way to do that is through the European arrest warrant, and any delay in that process will have very serious consequences.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister wrote that. As my hon. Friend might like to know that 268 people have been extradited to Romania since 2010.

The Attorney General: The first piece of European legislation that I sat on in a delegated legislation Committee was a regulation that enabled us to track paedophiles more easily across different European countries. Why anybody would wish to end that kind of co-operation between European countries is beyond me. Does the Attorney General agree that the Brexit campaign is soft on crime and soft on the causes of crime?

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Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend’s position take account of the European Court of Justice ruling on 5 April, which effectively drives a coach and horses through the whole of the arrest warrant procedure because it makes it clear that the European Court of Justice is in charge of whether or not a European arrest warrant can be applied for?

The Attorney General: I do not think that it is quite as bad as my hon. Friend suggests. In fact, what the European Court of Justice said in that case is broadly consistent with what our own Extradition Act 2003 says. He will know, of course, that in respect of the countries mentioned in that judgment, we already succeed in extraditing people to them. One of them is Romania, and my hon. Friend might like to know that 268 people have been extradited to Romania since 2010.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): In the Witney Gazette, the Prime Minister was quoted as saying about the European arrest warrant:

“Some other countries in Europe do not have our rights and safeguards. People can languish in jail for weeks without even being charged. I am not sure that the British people realise what is being done in their name. Are we really happy that with one telephone call from the Greek, Spanish or German authorities alleging that we did something wrong on holiday, we can be swept off to a continental prison? Rights and safeguards that we have enjoyed for centuries are being stripped away.”

Does the Attorney General agree with the Prime Minister?

The Attorney General: I do not know when my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wrote that. As my hon. Friend may recall, the Prime Minister and other members of the Government successfully negotiated changes to the European arrest warrant precisely to deal with the problems that my hon. Friend has just outlined. Now, UK citizens cannot be extradited unless the case is trial ready, and not unless the conduct in question would be a crime here and not unless it is proportionate to do so.

CPS: International Co-operation

3. Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to work more efficiently with international partners to reduce the threat of serious crime in the UK and abroad.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): CPS prosecutors work closely with law enforcement agencies to give investigative advice and to prosecute serious crime. They draw upon international co-operation agreements wherever necessary to secure evidence and to agree how and where cases that cover various jurisdictions should be pursued.

Oliver Colville: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer, but what are the Government doing to ensure that IRA terrorists are being brought back to the UK to face justice here?

The Solicitor General: I assure my hon. Friend that cases involving IRA suspects will be considered in just the same way as any other case. The special crime and counter-terrorism division of the CPS deals with cases of alleged terrorism. If a suspect is out of the jurisdiction, extradition will be considered if the prosecution evidential co-test is met.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that the Solicitor General has seen that yet another accused criminal has fled to Pakistan this week. Is it not a fact that we need greater European co-operation because we have no extradition treaty with Pakistan? Where a serious crime has been committed, the perpetrator too often flees to Pakistan—and however heinous the crime, we cannot bring them back.

The Solicitor General: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I mentioned multi-jurisdictional cases. Sometimes these perpetrators will cover more than one EU country and it is vital to have the mechanisms not just of co-operation, but of enforcement, which our
EU Withdrawal: Changes to UK Legal Framework

4. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What changes would be required to the UK’s legal framework in the event of the UK leaving the EU.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): Under article 50 of the treaty on the European Union, if the United Kingdom were to decide to leave the EU, it would need to negotiate and conclude an agreement with the remaining member states, setting out the arrangements for withdrawal. The EU treaties would continue to apply to the UK until the article 50 agreement entered into force or for two years if no agreement were reached and no extension to that period were granted. Any further changes to the UK’s legal obligations would of course depend on the nature of any further international agreements entered into.

Chi Onwurah: Newcastle has a thriving legal services sector with many internationally renowned firms as well as two excellent degree courses at our universities. Does the Attorney General agree that leaving the European Union would mean that we would face years of uncertainty and confusion over our legal framework, which would necessarily undermine the success of our legal and financial services sectors?

The Attorney General: First, I should say that I have boundless faith in the ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit of our legal professions, and I am sure that they would find a way through. However, the hon. Lady is right to say that there would be considerable uncertainty after any departure from the European Union, at least in part because there is a regulatory structure in this country that substantially depends on European regulation. We would have to decide how much of that to keep and how much we wished to change. She might also know that Professor Derek Wyatt, one of the leading experts on European law, recently gave evidence to the House of Lords European Union Committee. He said that “it will take years for Government and Parliament to examine the corpus of EU law and decide what to jettison and what to keep”. That is one of the reasons the Government believe that we are better off remaining within the EU.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given my right hon. and learned Friend’s immense legal brain and huge legal capabilities, will he confirm to the House that he would want to remain as Attorney General should this country vote to leave the European Union so that he personally would be best placed to negotiate a super-duper British exit agreement in double-quick time?

The Attorney General: I have nowhere near my hon. Friend’s faith in my abilities, but I do think that it remains in Britain’s best interests to stay within the European Union. However, if the British people decide that we should leave, the British Government will continue to do their best for the British public.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Attorney General of all people will not underestimate the scope of his scholarly cranium, because the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) clearly does not do so.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): A condition of our membership of the European Union is that we are also a signatory to the European convention on human rights. Can the Attorney General confirm that this Government are committed to remaining a signatory to the convention and not to join Belarus, the only European country that is not a signatory?

The Attorney General: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman’s first statement is entirely correct, but the Government’s intention is nevertheless clear: we are not seeking to leave the convention but we are seeking to construct a better and more sensible arrangement on human rights law in this country. We do not think that the interpretation of the convention by the European Court of Human Rights is always sensible, and we wish to see a good deal more common sense being brought into human rights law. I regret that that opinion is not shared by Her Majesty’s Opposition.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I appreciate that the Attorney General’s hands are tied somewhat, in that nobody in the Vote Leave campaign has been clear about what we would be leaving to, but surely his officials will have made some assessment of the amount of legislative time that would be taken up by this Parliament trying to unpick 43 years of our involvement in European laws, rules and regulations.

The Attorney General: I have just quoted the remarks of Professor Wyatt when he gave evidence in the other place. There is no doubt that considerable time and effort would be required in those circumstances. Of course it is difficult to be specific, because it would rather depend on what alternative arrangements were sought, post-departure from the European Union. The hon. Gentleman is right to say the onus is on those who wish to leave to explain what the world would be like if we did so.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): This is very simple to explain. What it would mean is that this Parliament and our courts would take back control of our human rights legislation. It is a simple matter. Does the Attorney General agree?

The Attorney General: The human rights laws within European law are extremely limited. The charter of fundamental rights within the European Union law canon does not create new rights and, as my hon. Friend knows, the European convention on human rights is a separate institution. He is wrong to suggest that this would be simple in any way; it would be extraordinarily complicated and take a very long time.

Internet Trolling and Online Abuse

6. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase prosecution rates for internet trolling and other forms of online abuse.
7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to increase prosecution rates for internet trolling and other forms of online abuse on social media; and if he will make a statement. [904468]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service recently revised its publicly available social media guidelines. They are subject to a current consultation, which will result in the publication of finalised guidelines on serious offences later in the year.

David Rutley: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the effect of online abuse on mental health can be damaging, particularly among young people? Will he urge the social media sector to engage with the CPS and other agencies to root out poor behaviour and signpost the support that is available to victims in law?

The Solicitor General: Online abuse can sometimes be worse than face-to-face abuse, because it is all-pervading and does not end at the school gates or allow for privacy at home. The Director of Public Prosecutions has met several social media providers, and the CPS will continue to work with them on measures to improve the reporting and prosecution of such abuse.

Michael Fabricant: Even I have been trolled on Twitter. I do not know whether it was Momentum or someone else, but people have doubted the provenance of my hair. Can you believe that?

However, a friend of mine has a young son of 16 who has also been trolled on Twitter. He did not take it as lightly as I do and the poor boy has harmed himself, which is a serious matter. I was interested to hear the Solicitor General’s reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), but what steps can we take to deter young people from bullying other young people on Twitter, Facebook and other social media?

The Solicitor General: I am naturally reticent to trespass upon the bailiwick of my hon. Friend’s hair, so I will confine my remarks to the serious issue he raised about the mental health impacts on young people. Work is being done on training so that CPS prosecutors can enable victims and users to report abuse and, in particular, to ensure that offending content can be removed by providers.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): What action is being taken in schools in conjunction with the Department for Education to try to curtail the amount of online abuse aimed at young people?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a massive amount of work is being done by not only the Department for Education, but the third sector on cyber-bullying and its effects on young people. The combined approach that is being taken in schools the length and breadth of the country is not only alerting young people to the dangers, but empowering them to make complaints, so that they do not have to suffer in silence.

EU Withdrawal: Effects on Human Rights

8. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the protection of human rights of the UK leaving the EU. [904469]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): Through the European Union, the UK amplifies its work to promote and protect democracy around the world, increasing the UK’s influence on a range of issues. When 28 member states speak out against the most serious violations of human rights, that can help to set the agenda at the UN and other international organisations. That is a valuable way in which the UK can promote its values.

Dr Cameron: The EU charter reflects wider international standards and obligations that the UK has a history of championing. By moving away from it, we risk undermining human rights and respect for international law. What advice does the Attorney General have about the weakening of legal human rights safeguards that could follow?

The Attorney General: If the hon. Lady is referring to the European Union charter of fundamental rights, it does not create new rights for British citizens, as made clear in protocol 30 of the Lisbon treaty, so there would be no significant consequence of departure in that way. However, there is a considerable advantage to the UK in communicating its views and aspirations on human rights protection not just in this country, but abroad, if we were no longer able to act through the medium of the European Union, as we do through other international organisations.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Justice recently told the Select Committee on Justice that, as far as he was concerned, the framework of human rights across the UK was a reserved matter. Given that the Attorney General advises the Government on legal issues, will he explain why the Government’s view is that the human rights framework is reserved when it is not included in the exhaustive list of reservations in schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is the Government’s view and mine that any change to the Human Rights Act 1998 as a piece of legislation is not a devolved matter—it is a reserved matter. That is the issue on which my right hon. Friend will shortly be bringing forward proposals.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): The shadow Attorney General, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Carl Turner), cannot be with us today because he is busy changing nappies. May we congratulate him on the birth of his first baby, a beautiful daughter, Stella-Mae? We wish him and his partner, Leanne, all the best.

Does the Attorney General agree that if the UK left the EU, it would not only be human rights in Scotland that would be affected? Surely there would be a question over the whole devolution process in Wales and Northern Ireland. We should not forget that the agreement that
tax gap, and there have been a very limited number of prosecutions. How can the public therefore be confident that the Government are doing everything they can to crack down on overseas tax evaders, given the performance to date?

The Attorney General: I do not accept that the performance to date has been ineffective. As I have explained, there have been successful prosecutions of those who evade tax. As the hon. Lady will know, it is not simply criminal prosecution that exists in order to take action against those who avoid or evade tax; civil penalties are also available to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and they bring in a substantial amount of money as a result of the actions that that agency takes. She is right about there always being more to do, which is why I highlighted two particular measures in the field of enforcement and criminal prosecutions that this Government are taking, and I look forward to the Labour party’s support for them.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

New Junior Doctor Contract

1. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health on the effect on gender equality of the proposed new junior doctor contract. [904441]

16. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health on the effect of the proposed new junior doctor contract on women in that profession. [904458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): The Secretary of State fully understands his obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and his public sector equality duty. He is aware that he must pay due regard to each of the statutory equality objectives, which cover all of the protected characteristics, not just those that affect women. The new contract is a huge step forward for achieving fairness for all trainee doctors. For the first time, junior doctors will be paid and rewarded solely on the basis of their hard work and achievement, whether they work full or part time. Pay progression will be linked to the level of training rather than arbitrarily to time served. On 31 March, we published the equality analysis and family test alongside the new national contract.

Paula Sherriff: By next year the majority of doctors working in our NHS will be women, yet the Government have freely admitted in their own equality impact assessment of the new junior doctor contract that aspects of it will disproportionately hit female doctors, so how can the women and equalities department possibly condone this shocking treatment by the Government?

Ben Gummer: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important matter to the attention of the House. I know that she will want to read the full equality impact
assessment over the weekend, and she will find if she does so that it makes it clear that this contract is good for women, that it is a fairer contract and that it does not directly or indirectly discriminate against women. That is why I am very keen to see it implemented as fast as possible.

**Tom Brake:** What estimate has been made of the expected drop in the number of women doctors five years after the contract has been imposed, and how will the skills gap be filled?

**Ben Gummer:** We anticipate that this contract is better for women in a series of different ways and we expect women to be able to engage more easily with the workforce than they have under the previous contract. We believe that it is better for working mothers and better for women who are taking time out for maternity leave. For those reasons, we hope that it will reinforce the continued progression of women in the medical workforce, of which we are very proud in the Department of Health.

**Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the new contract will mean that those who work the most intense and unsocial hours will be better rewarded?

**Ben Gummer:** I can confirm that. It will also ensure that women will not be subjected to the enormously onerous hours enforced under the current contract, which make the balance between work and family life completely impossible.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that under the existing contract two doctors doing the same job with the same level of responsibility and the same hours can be paid differently, but that under the new contract the total number of hours that can be worked will be reduced from 91 to 72, and that that will be especially welcomed by female doctors?

**Ben Gummer:** I can confirm that and it shows once again my hon. Friend’s attention to the detail of the contract. It should be made clear to the House that the British Medical Association agreed almost all of the contract that we are now putting in place, including many of the aspects that the Opposition are now seeking to attack.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It surprised me to hear both the Minister today and the Prime Minister, during Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, claiming that the contract is good for women, when the equality impact assessment provided by the Minister’s own officials specifically says that it will have a disproportionate impact on women—an equality impact assessment that the Minister will not be at all surprised to hear that I have read in detail. How can it be right to claim that the contract is good for women, when the woman’s human rights had been breached. Does the Minister think women in this country have had their human rights breached by the action that his Government have taken?

**Mr Vara:** The hon. Lady is an expert in the history of equality impact assessments and the Equality Act 2010, and she understands it well. I must reassure her that through the entirety of the process the Secretary of State has been mindful of his duties under the Act, but not just for form. He is very keen to ensure that this contract is good for women, which is why at every single stage, both in negotiations with the BMA and in internal discussions, he has been mindful of his duties while trying to ensure that the contract is an improvement on the existing one. To be frank, we cannot return to negotiations with a party that does not wish to talk, and I urge the hon. Lady to get her colleagues to condemn the completely unnecessary action taken by the BMA, which put patients in danger.

**State Pension Age**

2. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to address the effect of the increase in the state pension age on women. [904442]

6. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to address the effect of the increase in the state pension age on women. [904447]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions** (Mr Shailesh Vara): All women affected by faster equalisation reach state pension age under the new state pension system, which is more generous to many women than the previous system. In the first 10 years, around 650,000 will receive £8 per week more on average, due to the new state pension valuation.

**Diana Johnson:** Is the Minister aware of the recent Dutch case of a woman who was affected by changes to her retirement age, with more notice than many women in the UK have received? In that case it was found that the woman’s human rights had been breached. Does the Minister think women in this country have had their human rights breached by the action that his Government have taken?

**Mr Vara:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Dutch authorities are appealing that decision.

**Christian Matheson:** Nobody denies that the state pension age needed to be reformed, but it is the transitional arrangements that the Government have or have not put in place that have caused so much consternation. I cannot help wondering whether a cynical calculation has been made that those women will have reached retirement age anyway by the next general election. May I ask a straightforward question? Do the Government genuinely believe that the transitional arrangements are fair—and yes or no?

**Mr Vara:** The transitional arrangements that were put in place in 2011 were debated in both Houses. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that initially it was proposed that the equalisation should be fast-tracked by two years. Following various debates and intensive negotiations, that was reduced to 18 months, at a cost to the Treasury of £1.1 billion. Transitional arrangements were made in 2011 and the Government have no plans to review them.
Baroness Altmann stated that he had of State for Work and Pensions, Pensions Minister (SNP): Following the resignation of the previous Secretary seeking to do. Denmark, which have already achieved what we are fast as some other countries, such as Germany and equalise the state pension ages. We are not doing so as longer. Women on the whole recognise that we need to collect what is rightly and fairly theirs?

Mr Vara: We need to accept that equalisation was necessary, first, because it was required by European Union directive and, secondly, because people are living longer. Women on the whole recognise that we need to equalise the state pension ages. We are not doing so as fast as some other countries, such as Germany and Denmark, which have already achieved what we are seeking to do.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Following the resignation of the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Pensions Minister Baroness Altmann stated that he had “often been obstructive to my efforts to resolve important pensions policy issues such as on women’s pensions.” Now that the main impediment to change has been removed from Government, when can we expect an update on progress for the women of WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—who have been so unfairly treated for so long?

Mr Vara: I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s assessment. As I said in my previous answer, the Government do not intend to review this matter because it was heavily debated and dealt with in 2011.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the Minister for his response, but what is the purpose of the Department and, indeed, of the women and equalities ministerial role if they do not address the inequalities that exist? We have had four parliamentary debates on the issue, MPs have asked dozens of questions, 186,000 people have signed a petition and we voted in this House to agree that the policy is unfair, so after all that, why is the Minister still prepared to defend an indefensible position?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady was not in the House in 2011, but the issue, as I said, was heavily debated. A vote was taken after a Backbench Business Committee debate. As she knows only too well, a point of order was raised after that debate and the person sitting in the Chair at the time happened to be the first and former Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee. She made it abundantly clear that votes taken after debates tabled by the Backbench Business Committee are not binding on the Government.

Effects of 2016 Budget

3. Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of measures in the 2016 Budget on different genders. [904444]

10. Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of measures in the 2016 Budget on different genders. [904451]
Harriett Baldwin: I can confirm that the £15 million announced in the Budget will be allocated to the charities that the Chancellor announced. We have also announced a further £80 million of support for those kinds of initiatives to tackle violence against women in our society.

Maternity Discrimination

5. Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to tackle maternity discrimination. [904446]

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): I want to start by thanking the Equality and Human Rights Commission for the research it has led and for its report. The Government have accepted the great majority of its recommendations and will work with it, ACAS and employers to root out discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace.

Mr Thomas: I welcome the Minister’s answer. I am aware of a number of cases of new mothers in my constituency who have lost their jobs after giving birth or experienced some other form of discrimination at work. Will he set out a timescale for implementation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s recommendations, and will he create an opportunity, through the usual channels, for a debate in the House on that work?

Nick Boles: I am very happy to take up with the Leader of the House the possibility of having such a debate, because I would welcome it. The report made for depressing reading in some respects. Although it is welcome that 84% of employers think that it is important to support pregnant women and new mothers, it is frankly depressing that those in four mothers interviewed said that they had had a negative or possibly discriminatory experience during their pregnancy. We need to achieve a wholesale change in culture. I will resist putting a timeframe through the usual channels, for a debate in the House on that work?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many women still face difficult decisions when it comes to having a baby, particularly women in high-powered careers in places such as London, where house prices are extremely high and working part time simply is not an option. What are the Government doing to encourage businesses to adopt a modern approach, allowing women the prospect of a balanced work and family life and flexible working hours, where possible?

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but I know that he will welcome the introduction of the right to request flexible working and all the Government’s interventions to provide further childcare support for working women of all ages and all income levels. I believe that that will help women who want to be able to balance engagement in the workplace with bringing up young children.

LGBT Young People

7. Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that support and advice is provided to LGBT young people. [904448]

8. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that support and advice is provided to LGBT young people. [904449]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): We want every young person, regardless of their sexual orientation, to reach their full potential. That is why in March I announced a further £1 million fund to support schools to address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, in addition to the £2 million fund I announced in October 2014.

Clive Lewis: With Stonewall research showing that 55% of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people experience bullying, I am pleased to hear that the Government are spending extra money, but what else will they be doing to ensure that those issues are covered in the curriculum as well?

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the 55% figure. That is, of course, a drop from 65% in 2007, but we cannot in any way be complacent. In 2012, 96% of LGBT pupils reported hearing homophobic language in school. The PSHE Association published some excellent new guidance in October 2014 on diversity and relationships in its programme of study, as well as providing support to help teachers to tackle issues around bullying. Of course, having good personal, social, health and economics education and relationships advice, including material targeted at LGBT pupils and all their colleagues, is very important.

Clive Efford: Albert Kennedy Trust research has identified that 24% of the homeless youth population are LGBT. That is a disturbing figure, and the Government are planning to cut housing benefit for people under the age of 21. Does the Secretary of State think that the situation is going to get worse or better for those young people?

Nicky Morgan: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we gave just over £48,000 to the Albert Kennedy Trust in 2014-15 to develop national online mentoring services. We have also protected homelessness prevention funding for local authorities, totalling £315 million by the end of this Parliament.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Trans young people experience unacceptable and unlawful discrimination. Three months ago, the Women and Equalities Committee published a groundbreaking report outlining more than 30 recommendations to improve the lives of trans people. When can we expect a response from the Government?

Nicky Morgan: I had the pleasure last week of visiting the Young Transgender Centre of Excellence, which has just been opened by the LGBT Centre in Leicester, funded by BBC Children in Need. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the groundbreaking report published by the Committee that she chairs. She also mentioned the 30 recommendations, which we are working through. I am sure that, like me, she wants us to make
sure that when we respond, we do so in a full and open way. The report calls for significant changes to the law, complex changes to the NHS and changes to the policies and practices of more than a dozen public bodies, and I want to make sure that we get the response right.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): This Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, have done great things for equality for LGBT people, particularly with regard to gay marriage, but there is one area of terrible inequality—at least one. A promiscuous straight man can have sex with different women every night, and yet that man can give blood. A gay guy can be in a monogamous relationship, and yet he is completely forbidden to donate blood unless he is prepared to certify that he has been celibate for 12 months. That is medical and scientific nonsense. It is also unfair. When will it change?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend and I have discussed this matter, and he knows that I have also discussed it several times with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison). The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), has also been listening to what my hon. Friend had to say.

We have lifted the lifetime ban on blood donation for men who have had sex with men. As my hon. Friend will know, the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs, which sets blood donation guidelines, has announced that it is reviewing the evidence and the policy. We expect to hear from it sooner rather than later.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this year, LGBT mental health charity PACE was forced to end, we provided £4.9 million to 17 voluntary and community projects delivering support to children and young people with mental health issues, including almost a quarter of a million pounds £250,000 to Metro Centre to establish a mental health service for LGBT young people and to those working with them across London and Kent. We are obviously looking at what we can do in this financial year to make sure that services will continue to be funded. Again, I will work with my colleagues in the Department of Health to make sure that people of all ages with mental health issues get the support they need.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Martyn Day—get in there, man.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You caught me by surprise. Last July, the Prime Minister—

Mr Speaker: Order. You should start by just saying, “Question 11”. You can build up to your peroration ere long.

Gender Pay Gap

11. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps her Department plans to take to encourage businesses with fewer than 250 employees to close the gender pay gap.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): We are absolutely committed to eliminating the gender pay gap in a generation, which is why we are requiring larger employers to publish their gender pay gap, as well as their bonus gap. We will support all businesses to do that, regardless of their size, with a £500,000 package, which includes UK-wide conference events, online software and, of course, targeted support to some of the male-dominated sectors. We also have the Think, Act, Report initiative, which is available to businesses of any size.

Martyn Day: Last July, the Prime Minister promised that companies with more than 250 employees would have to disclose their gender pay gap. This has already been pushed back by two months. A survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has found that only one in four firms has done any analysis of this. Does the Minister think that progress in this area is good enough, and what will be done about it?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course, this is more progress than we had under any previous Government, but this Government are not complacent. The gender pay gap is the lowest on record and has virtually been eliminated for women under the age of 40 working full time. However, we have brought forward the quite demanding regulation that larger employers will now have to publish both their gender pay gap and their bonus pay gap, and also why we have released a big package of support to enable us to support them through that process.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Since the Government introduced tribunal fees, the number of equal pay claims has fallen dramatically. The Government talk the talk on equal pay, but why are they making it more difficult for women to challenge unfair pay claims?

Caroline Dinenage: We are reviewing this at the moment, but the hon. Gentleman must be aware that many more cases are going through ACAS—over 80,000 more cases went through ACAS last year. Surely he agrees it is actually much better to sort something out through mediation—in a friendly and consolidated way—so that people can go back to their workplace without stigma or any form of hostility.

Welfare Reform and Disabled People

12. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect on equality for disabled people of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Government set out our assessment of the impact of the welfare policies in the Welfare Reform and Work Act on 20 July 2015. Spending on disabled people will be higher in real terms in every year to 2020 than in 2010.

Margaret Ferrier: A Lords Select Committee report published last month said that the Government had hurt disabled people disproportionately through inaction on the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, through spending cuts and cuts to legal aid, and through removing protections with their red tape challenge. Will the Government apologise for their lack of respect for disabled people and for the complete contempt in which they hold them?

Mr Vara: If we look at the facts, we find that the Government are spending £50 billion every year on benefits alone to support people with disabilities or health conditions— that is more than 6% of Government spending. I think that answers the hon. Lady’s question very clearly.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Research by Unison indicates that no group will be more adversely affected by welfare reform than people with disabilities. We are at risk of regressing on issues of equality. When will the Government actively heed the voice of people with disabilities and reverse these damaging policies?

Mr Vara: I remind the hon. Lady that this Government have done more for disabled people than any Government before us. [HON. MEMBERS: “Rubbish!”] I have just outlined the amount of money that this Government are spending. Under this Government, there are more than 3.2 million disabled people in employment. Employment helps people to have more fulfilled lives. We do not give up on people.

Employment Tribunal Fees

14. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the effect of the introduction of employment tribunal fees on access to justice for women who have experienced discrimination at work.

Mr Vara: Pregnancy and maternity discrimination are unlawful and totally unacceptable. That is why the Government and the Equality and Human Rights Commission jointly funded independent research into the matter. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the review will take into account some of the findings of that research.

Public Appointments

15. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the proportion of public appointments made to women.

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): Increasing diversity is essential to appointing the best people to our public boards. We are making real progress in increasing the number of women who are appointed. In 2014-15, 44% of new appointments were made to women, which is up from 39% in 2013-14. The steps that we have taken to increase diversity include streamlining the application process and increasing the awareness of opportunities through outreach and other events, a central website and the use of social media. We have introduced unconscious bias training for senior personnel in the Cabinet Office, including permanent secretaries and, indeed, senior Ministers.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive reply, which has pre-empted my supplementary. I wonder whether, in some cases, it is a lack of confidence that inhibits women in making an application for a public appointment. Could more be done to communicate to women that their applications are encouraged and will be successful?

Mr Wilson: It is really important that we get the very best people into public appointments. Women will play a crucial role in that. We recently received a report from Sir Gerry Grimstone that was commissioned to make appointment processes much more efficient, effective and streamlined. We have hit the highest figures ever recorded for women in public appointments, but we have not done enough. We want to go much further and to hit the 50% target we have set ourselves.

Gender Pay Gap

17. David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle the causes of the gender pay gap (a) in general and (b) in STEM careers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Closing the gender pay gap is good for women and, of course, for employers and our economy. That is why we are requiring large employers to publish their pay gap data. Occupational segregation is one of the main causes of the pay gap, which is why we have announced the ambition of a 20% increase in girls taking A-level maths and science by 2020.

David Mowat: I thank the Minister for that answer. A continuing cause of the pay gap is the lower incidence of women studying science and engineering at university. Does she agree that closing the STEM gap is a prerequisite for closing the pay gap?
Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that jobs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics carry a significant wage premium. Although women make up 50% of STEM undergraduates, that simply does not translate into the workplace. That is why we have set up a new careers and enterprise company to bring schools and businesses together to inspire and inform young people. We have also published guidance called “Your Daughter’s Future” to help parents to guide their daughters in subject and career choices.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Women and Equalities Committee’s report on the gender pay gap showed strong and compelling evidence that increasing the availability of well-paid flexible work would make a significant difference in reducing the pay gap. What will the Government do to make flexible working easy and to encourage employers to offer it from the date of employment rather than having to wait for six months?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is why this Government have done more than any before to extend the right to flexible working to all employees. We will continue to work with businesses to encourage them to get the very best out of every single one of their staff.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The private sector has made great progress in gender equality in recent years, but there is still a big problem. Research by Simon Fanshawe has proved that there are more men called Andrew, David and John in senior positions in FTSE 100 companies than there are women. What more can the Government do to incentivise good practice and better gender equality in the FTSE 100? [Interruption.]

Caroline Dinenage: The answer is not to change the names of the men, as someone has suggested.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): More Carolines!

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, more Carolines. The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) is absolutely right, which is why the Government have done more than ever before to encourage FTSE 100 companies to address that issue. There are now no all-male boards in the FTSE 100. The next stage is to look at the executive pipeline and to make sure that we are encouraging women at every stage, so that we have more women on boards than ever before.
Business of the House

10.32 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business, please?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):

If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, I will first say that the shadow Leader of the House, myself and the Scottish National Party spokesman all have something in common this morning. We should feel slightly anxious after the march of the deputies at business questions just before the recess. I congratulate all three of them on doing a star turn. [Interruption.] There will be another opportunity shortly, as well.

The business for next week is as follows:

**MONDAY 18 APRIL**—Debate on a motion on the introduction of the national living wage and related changes to employee contracts, followed by debate on a motion on educational attainment in Yorkshire and the Humber. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 19 APRIL**—Remaining stages of the Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords].

**WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Energy Bill [Lords], followed by debate on a motion on recognition of genocide by Daesh against Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities. Debate on a motion on record copies of Acts. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**THURSDAY 21 APRIL**—My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will propose an humble address, to mark the occasion of Her Majesty the Queen's 90th birthday; I am sure the whole House will participate.

**FRIDAY 22 APRIL**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 April will include:

**MONDAY 25 APRIL**—Consideration of Lords amendments, followed by debate on a motion on education funding in London. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 26 APRIL**—Remaining stages of the Policing and Crime Bill (day 1).

**WEDNESDAY 27 APRIL**—Consideration of Lords amendments.

**THURSDAY 28 APRIL**—Debate on a motion on World Autism Awareness Week, followed by a debate on a motion on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs “Building our Future” plan. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 29 APRIL**—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 25 April will be:

**MONDAY 25 APRIL**—Debate on an e-petition relating to the meningitis B vaccine.

Chris Bryant: I, too, congratulate my deputy, my absolutely wonderful and magnificent hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), and all her opposite numbers, on their impressive appearance at the last business question. I think that was the first time that all three Front Benchers at business questions were

women, so in the words of Annie Lennox, “Sisters are doin’ it for themselves”. [Interruption.] I will come to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) in a moment.

I also wish my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and her fiancé Richard well for their wedding on Saturday. I note that not many Tories are in the Chamber today. I gather that is because there is an away day for the Conservative party, or perhaps two away days in different parts of the country. Apparently it is a dress-down event, and I have a horrible image in my mind of the hon. Member for Lichfield preparing his outfit; I will leave that there. [Interruption.] I have seen it before, yes, and it is not very pretty.

Mr Speaker, on 10 March I asked whether you could hear the slow ebbing down the beach of the authority of the Prime Minister, and boy wasn’t I right?

“When there is so much still to be done to improve the life chances of the most vulnerable, it is difficult to justify putting middle class tax cuts before the needs of the working poor, and the socially disadvantaged”.

That is not me; it is the Conservative hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Even Tories admit that the Prime Minister is now a busted flush, and we had a classic example of that yesterday during Prime Minister’s questions. I bet the Prime Minister thought that he was giving a helpful plug for the production of “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”.

However, the author of the book, Mark Haddon, was absolutely horrified when he heard that, and he immediately tweeted his agreement with Johnny Marr of The Smiths, who wrote:

“David Cameron, stop saying that you like The Smiths, no you don’t. I forbid you to like it.”

There are 63 private Members’ Bills on today’s Order Paper, and two new ones were added this week. When their proposers, the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), were asked, “Second Reading, what day?” by you, Mr Speaker, they replied “28 April”, even though they, you, I, and everyone else knows that we will not be sitting on that day or any other Friday this Session. Incidentally, why on earth do you say, “Second Reading, what day?” as if you are Yoda in “Star Wars”? Why can’t you just say it in proper English? Mind you, you do quite a good impersonation, especially when you call “Andrew Selooous”.

Yesterday there was an excellent debate on all these matters in Westminster Hall. Many hon. Members think that the current system of private Members’ Bill is a complete waste of time that frankly brings the House into disrepute. When the Procedure Committee produces its forthcoming report, will the Leader of the House make proper time for us to debate changes if that is what the House wants?

Will the Leader of the House do something about the small business Minister—I mean the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise—who has become terribly patronising of late? She called me “darling” on “Question Time” last week, and all I can say is that I have been patronised by much better women than her. I also have a terrible fear that she thinks she is becoming Maggie—Maggie Smith, that is, the dowager countess
in “Downton Abbey”. She cackles away through debates so much that she almost makes me seem calm and reasonable.

On Tuesday, the Minister praised the role that the Community union has played in the steel crisis, which is absolutely right. However, she and her colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills are the very Ministers who are forcing the Trade Union Bill through Parliament, which is an utterly partisan piece of legislation that tries to cut the legs off trade unions and is being cut to ribbons in the House of Lords. Would she be far better off listening to Community, which says that the Bill is a bad piece of legislation that will severely damage the finely balanced relationships between trade unions and business?

May we have a debate—this cannot be an Opposition day debate, because the Leader of the House has not given us one—on boardroom pay? The chair of the remuneration committee at BP, Professor Dame Ann Dowling, is giving its chairman a 20% pay hike, taking his remuneration to £14 million in a year when the company has made its biggest ever losses and cut 25% of its workforce. What message does it send from the Government that Professor Dame Ann Dowling has been a non-executive board member of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills since 2014? Why do the Government not just have a big sign printed and put up over the Department saying, “There is one rule for the rich and quite another for the rest of you”? In fact, why do they not just get 20 of them printed and put them over the Treasury, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and Downing Street? Fundamentally, that is the Government’s motto today, is it not?

Finally, may we have a debate on underachievement? Some people on the Conservative Benches seem to think that if you are not a millionaire you are a failure, but let me tell them who really achieve something in life. It is the woman who gets up at 4 am to walk two miles to catch the bus to clean a hotel for 13 hours for the minimum wage. It is the widower who does two jobs to make sure he can put food on the table for his children. It is the middle-aged woman who gives up her job to care for her elderly dad. It is the teacher, the squaddie, the nurse or the dinner lady who goes way beyond the call of duty. Frankly, I would be proud to sit in a House full of people like that, rather than have to face that bunch of real deadbeats over there: a Health Secretary who has completely alienated the whole of the NHS; a Business Secretary who does not know where Mumbai is; and a Chancellor who produces a Budget so unfair that it even made the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) cry.

Chris Grayling: May I first thank all those who were involved in organising the security stand in Portcullis House yesterday? I hope Members on all sides of the House will take advantage of the package and the equipment on display. I am very pleased to have learned that they ran out of equipment, such was the degree of interest. I am grateful to all those involved.

The shadow Leader of the House started by talking about poverty. Let me just remind him that under this Government child poverty and inequality are falling, and that the proportion of tax paid by the wealthiest in our society is rising. I will take no lessons from the Labour party after its shambolic decade in government left 2.5 million people unemployed and communities struggling with a failing economy. We have turned it around in a way that they could have never done.

The hon. Gentleman raised the Procedure Committee’s report on private Members’ Bills. It is, of course, open to any Select Committee to bring a matter to this House. I am very responsive to the thought that we should have a detailed discussion about the Committee’s recommendations. We should always look at ways to improve the system.

I was a little surprised to hear a “Star Wars” joke from the Jar Jar Binks of the Labour party, and I have to say it was a little unfair. I have always regarded you as a man of greater stature than Yoda, Mr Speaker, and I am surprised that the shadow Leader of the House would even make that comparison.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the purpose of the Trade Union Bill is to stop trade unions holding the public to ransom. We see time and again relatively small groups of workers bringing our transport system to a halt and doing damage to far more workers. That is why we are the party of the workers: we represent the millions travelling to work, not a tiny minority of trade unionists who want to cause trouble for our country.

On boardroom pay, it is of course a matter for private companies and their shareholders what they pay their directors, but I would never condone inappropriately large pay rises. I hope all those involved in scrutinising businesses and attending annual general meetings of shareholders will always look very carefully to ensure the message that boardroom pay sends out is consistent with a well-managed company and a motivated workforce.

I am very happy to have a debate on underachievement. Actually, we have one every Wednesday at Prime Minister’s questions, because the biggest underachiever in this House is the Leader of the Opposition.

I, too, will be joining the Conservative party away day this afternoon. The truth is that Labour would really struggle to hold an away day, such are the divisions in that party and the desire to remove its leader. It is extraordinary to see a once-proud party scrabbling to try to find an identity for itself, and to see Labour Members sitting stony faced behind their leader, who underachieves week after week after week...[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: There is too much noise in the Chamber. We must hear the Leader of the House.

Chris Grayling: Finally, something that I think will unite all in the House except Tottenham Hotspur supporters: I would like to wish Leicester City good luck for their final games of the premier league season. It would be an extraordinary achievement for 2,500:1 outsiders to end up winning. Talking of rank outsiders, I have been trying to put a few quid on another one: I asked the bookies if they would let me place a bet on the shadow Leader of the House winning the battle, in due course, to succeed you, Mr Speaker, but they thought the idea so bizarre that they would not even take my money.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The European referendum campaign has kicked off with a controversy about Government leaflets, and now the local election campaign in Southend is also mired in controversy. Will
[Sir David Amess]

my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on local authorities’ conduct during local election campaigns, because it is claimed that mine, which consists of seven individual groupings, is sending out blatant party political electioneering letters about an energy company, and is printing articles in magazines without the appropriate election imprint?

Chris Grayling: There are clear rules on how local authorities and others should conduct themselves in referendum and election campaigns. In a local authority, it is for the chief executive to ensure that those rules are followed, and there are appropriate authorities to complain to if that does not happen. I hope my hon. Friend will do that. As regards the national leaflet from the Government, suffice it to say it contains a fine picture of Felixstowe.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and I pay tribute to our efficient, effective and excellent deputies for the business questions we were unable to make a couple of Thursdays ago, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who was the undoubted star of the show.

On the question of odds, I am interested in the challenge put to the shadow Leader of the House. I tried to place a bet in Scotland on who would succeed in the race to be the next First Minister, and the odds are better for him than the actual Conservative candidate, Ruth Davidson.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) mentioned the number of benefits investigators working in the Department for Work and Pensions as against the number working in the affluent unit in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. After appearing just a tad bemused and embarrassed, the Prime Minister seemed to doubt the robustness of the figures, and said he would have them checked out. My right hon. Friend might have got the figures a bit wrong, because it is reported in The Guardian this morning that the 3,200 figure he quoted—the number of benefits investigators in the DWP—has swollen to 3,700. That compares with 320 working in the affluent unit. May we have a debate on these numbers? If the Prime Minister seems to doubt the robustness of the figures, and said he would have them checked out.

The Prime Minister has consistently and repeatedly refused to come before the Liaison Committee to answer questions about the EU referendum. It is an absolute and utter disgrace. He has a responsibility and obligation to come before the Committee Chairs to answer these questions. I do not know what is causing his anxiety and nervousness, but I am pretty certain that with a gentle approach from the Leader of the House, the Prime Minister might just be encouraged to fulfil his responsibilities and have a quiet, friendly chat with the Liaison Committee.

We were promised several statements on the military action in Syria, but we have not had any at all. I perhaps know why: there is nothing to report. There have been no military operations since the beginning of March, and the fabled Brimstone system was last used on 18 February. We are supposedly engaged in Syria in supporting opposition forces fighting Daesh on the ground, but there is little evidence that that has been happening, so can we secure these promised statements, even if they are just the Defence Secretary telling us that nothing much is happening?

Lastly, Nessie has been found, but I am sorry to disappoint the House: it is not the fabled monster of lore but a hollowed-out old wreck that has been stuck in the deep for decades.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Scottish Tories.

Pete Wishart: I could not possibly comment or add to that, but the fact that the chaotic Labour party is overtaking the Conservatives in an opinion poll is perhaps a testament to this Conservative Government.

Chris Grayling: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have absolutely no expectation or desire to be the next First Minister of Scotland. Equally, however, I am convinced that the Conservative leader in Scotland would indeed be an excellent First Minister, and it is clear that whatever the outcome of the Scottish elections, the Scottish people think that she would be a better First Minister than the current Labour leader in Scotland. I suspect that is something on which we could agree.

There are thousands and thousands of people in HMRC whose job, day in, day out, and week in, week out, is to ensure that the right amount of tax is paid by people in this country and elsewhere, and to secure that amount. This Government’s record is far better than those of their predecessors when it comes to securing the repayment of tax from overseas centres, and tightening the rules and closing loopholes—things that were never done when the Labour party was in power during the last decade.

I know that discussions are taking place between the Chair of the Liaison Committee and No. 10. Dates have already been provided, and dates are promised for the future. I have no doubt that the Prime Minister will continue to give evidence to the Committee in a proper way.

The last statement from the International Development Secretary on Syria was made in February, and I expect there to be a statement from the Ministry of Defence in the near future to update the House on defence matters there, as is right and proper. Back in March, the House was able to question the Foreign Secretary on what remain very important issues. I think all of us in this country hope that the ceasefire in Syria—which has not been completely kept, but which has at least taken things forward a step—will continue.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nessie and the Labour party, but what he said also highlights the fact that exciting developments in Scotland are sometimes fakes.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for a debate on an important issue of whether we should continue to use vellum to record Acts of Parliament, thereby asserting the right of the House of Commons to decide such matters. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that although a Cabinet Office Minister will respond to
the debate, this none the less remains House business, subject to a free vote—at least for the Conservative party—and offers us an opportunity to say to the House of Lords that we in this House feel strongly about these matters and want our view known?

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a sinful waste of money when the Government are cutting the incomes of disabled people.

Chris Grayling: It is, of course, custom and practice for Ministers to be in the House, week in, week out, to respond to Back-Bench business debates, and a debate of this kind is no different. The debate in question is on the Order Paper, as I announced earlier, and the House will have an opportunity to discuss the issues shortly. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) will clearly wish to speak against the proposal, and I think that the shadow Leader of the House will wish to speak in favour of it.

Mr Speaker: Ian Mearns.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): If I may continue the “Star Wars” theme, it is grateful that I am, Mr Speaker. Members will have noted from the business statement that Back-Bench debates will take place on four days in the next two weeks. I believe that there could well be two more weeks of business after that before the Queen’s Speech. We are still some way short of our 27 days, but we anticipate an amicable accommodation over the number of days allotted to Back-Bench business before Prorogation.

I know that we have just had questions to the Minister for Women and Equalities, but one thing occurred to me when it was too late to submit a question. The White Paper on education proposes the removal of the requirement for parents to be school governors. Parents will still be able to be governors, but as members of other categories. The removal of that requirement will have a disproportionate impact on women, particularly in primary schools, given the number of primary schools that are yet to convert to academy status. May we have a statement from the Minister for Women and Equalities about the implications of the White Paper for women and other minorities?

Chris Grayling: This subject was discussed in the House yesterday, and, as the hon. Gentleman says, we have just had Women and Equalities questions. Before any measures are formally introduced, the House will have further opportunities to debate them.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about the subjects of future debates. As a Minister, I would not normally make a representation to the Backbench Business Committee, but if I may, I shall break that rule today. I think it would be a very good idea—that there have been a number of requests for this over the weeks during business questions—for Members on both sides of the House to discuss the work being done by voluntary sector groups in their constituencies. I would venture to suggest to the Committee that providing such an opportunity in the next three or four weeks would constitute a very valuable response to those requests. Most of us have groups in our constituency that we value and to which we wish to pay tribute, and a day’s debate on the subject would, in my view, be enormously valuable.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): According to polling by YouGov, 85% of the public believe that the Government’s recent EU leaflet was biased, and 58% disapprove of it completely. May we therefore have a statement from the Government, stating that no further such materials will be produced during the referendum campaign? Will they confirm that, following yesterday’s designation, the leave and remain campaigns will have parity on funding, spending power and media coverage?

Chris Grayling: The Government’s position is to support remaining in the European Union, and that was the context in which the leaflet was distributed. The leaflet has clearly provoked strong views around the country, in households where it has been discovered—in my household it was buried beneath the pizza leaflets. It will be fundamental over the coming weeks that both sides of the argument receive the appropriate support under the rules in the Acts that we debated and passed last year. I am sure that will happen and that the Government will ensure that it does. The broadcasters will also want to ensure proper balance between the two sides in the debate.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): In the middle of all the work I have been doing on the steel industry and local transport, I received a phone call from a distraught couple who run a hedgehog rescue centre in my constituency. They are currently nursing back to health a hedgehog found in Sheffield the other week whose spines had been cut off with a pair of scissors. They expressed their frustration that the perpetrators of this wicked act are very unlikely to be brought to justice. May we have a debate on the need not only to extend and increase the population of hedgehogs, for which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) has very often called, but to increase protection for these wonderful creatures?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. I saw the shocking picture of that hedgehog. It beggars belief how low and unpleasant some people in our society can be—the act was utterly, utterly unacceptable. From time to time, we do find extraordinary examples of maltreatment of animals, and the law does allow for the prosecution of people who have committed such offences. I certainly hope that, if the perpetrators in this case are found, they will be prosecuted. That is a matter for the independent prosecution authorities, but I certainly urge them to take the issue very seriously. The Government will continue to look at ways of ensuring that we properly protect animals. I am sure that the hon. Lady will now join the campaign being led by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) to provide the protection that many tens of thousands of people clearly support.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May we have an early debate on the potential role of the House of Commons in providing information to the public in the EU referendum campaign? The public have given
up any hope of getting objective information from the Government. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that to maintain trust in our institutions the House of Commons Library could have a role in producing information so that our constituents can see the facts on how much we pay to the European Union each week, the negative balance of trade with the European Union, the impossibility of delivering our manifesto commitments to reduce net migration, and so on? Could we not put that on a dedicated House of Commons site, which would be respected as being objective?

Chris Grayling: We all pay tribute to the work done by the House of Commons Library—an immensely valuable service that provides dispassionate analysis. It also publishes the work it produces, although it is for Members to ask for that work in the first place. I have no doubt that my hon. Friend will seek that analysis so that it can be published and the public can judge for themselves the rights and wrongs of the case.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It has happened again: another young boy has been tragically stabbed to death in my constituency. Myron, a talented young rapper, was well loved by his family and friends. We had a Backbench Business Committee debate on the subject, and we were looking to set up a commission. The Deputy Leader of the House told me at the last business questions to go ahead and set up that commission. I will do that, but how do I access Government funds to ensure that it is successful, and how do we ensure that the Government respond to its recommendations?

Chris Grayling: I am shocked to hear what the hon. Lady has just told us. It is a tragedy every time we lose a young person in such circumstances, and for it to occur more than once in the hon. Lady’s constituency must be immensely difficult for her. I send all our condolences to the family and friends of the young victim. If it is helpful, I will ask Home Office Ministers to meet her to discuss the issue. We introduced further measures when I was Justice Secretary to tighten the law. A jail sentence is now the clear presumption where someone is caught carrying a knife a second time, and there are tougher penalties for aggravated knife crime. As much as anything else, it is about education and convincing young people of the dangers of carrying a knife—a task that should be shared across the House.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As a result of his disabilities, my constituent Daniel Baldawi needs a ceiling hoist in his bedroom. Like everyone else, he likes to travel and would like to stay in hotels from time to time, but he finds that very few—including in the largest chains—make provision in their bedrooms for his disability. May we have a debate on how large hotel chains can provide in all their properties at least one or two rooms with a ceiling hoist so that people such as my constituent can exercise their right to travel and stay in different parts of the country?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a really valuable point, which has not been brought to my attention before. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate and put these points to the Minister responsible. I hope that his bringing the issue up in the House will start to encourage hotel chains to think about doing something they might not have thought about doing in the past.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May we have an early debate entitled “Liberal democracy in the 21st century” to celebrate next Tuesday’s by-election for the hereditary section of the Liberals in the other place? Seven declared candidates will face an electorate of three—the noble Earls of Glasgow and of Oxford, and Baron Addington. Electoral Reform Services will conduct the count, and the full results, including the number of first preference votes for each candidate and the position after the transfer of votes, will be available in the Printed Paper Office. How long will a party that has been rejected by the people be kept alive through political life support by patronage? Does the Leader of the House really propose to reduce the size of this elected Chamber when more than 800 Members in the House of Lords participate in these farces?

Chris Grayling: I have the highest regard for the right hon. Gentleman. I always thought he would champion endangered minorities—but clearly not in this case. He asks about Liberal democracy in the 21st century. The answer is that there is very little of it left, but at least there is one election left that they will win!

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, I had the privilege of visiting Mumbai with Sewa International, and together we opened a new school for disabled children. This remarkable school started with 55 young disabled people living and being taught in a single room by incredible teachers. Thanks to donations from the India diaspora in this country, a brand new facility has been built to enable 100 children to live and be taught in the area. May we have a debate in Government time to celebrate the contributions of various diaspora in this country to making life better for people in their countries of origin?

Chris Grayling: What I proposed earlier would very much provide my hon. Friend, the vice-chair of the Backbench Business Committee, with that opportunity. I pay tribute to all members of the Indian diaspora who have been responsible for such valuable support. I saw during my visit to the Tamil market that the British Tamil chamber of commerce organised in my hon. Friend’s constituency last weekend further examples of first-rate voluntary sector work alongside exciting new businesses. I pay tribute to everyone involved in organising what seemed to me to be an enormously successful event.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Sir David Normington, having been liberated by retirement to tell the whole truth, said this week that he was approached in his office at least once a month by the Prime Minister and other Ministers and asked to favour Tory party donors, ex-MPs or other Conservative officeholders when making public appointments. When may we have a debate on patronage to discover why, for the past six years, the merit of applicants for key top jobs has been decided on the basis of their Tory party card or on the amount of money in their wallet?
Chris Grayling: There are times when I have to take a step back in amazement at the sheer cheek of Labour Members. Labour spent 13 years in government packing the public sector with its cronies and, six years later, we are still trying to achieve a sensible balance in our public services—so I will take no lessons from them. We are trying to provide a proper balance of expertise, background, gender and skills to ensure a properly representative public sector, not one simply packed with the Labour cronies we inherited in 2010.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): A constituent tells me that a year ago he discovered that his energy supplier had been changed without his knowledge or consent, and that it took him a lot of time and effort to resolve the matter. It is still unclear whether this was a genuine mistake or an underhand marketing technique. This is a serious problem; it is estimated that there are 55,000 such cases every year. May we have a debate to consider the obligations on energy suppliers to prevent erroneous transfers and to ensure that they have a valid contract before they take over supply?

Chris Grayling: This is an important point. There are also vulnerable consumers who are convinced on the doorstep to make inappropriate changes, alongside the potential examples of fraud such as the one my hon. Friend describes. It is the role of the ombudsman to look at these issues and to deal with complaints against these organisations, but this is an example of the kind of consumer issue that should be brought regularly before the House, and I would encourage my hon. Friend to use one of the channels available to him to do that.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) claimed in Prime Minister’s questions yesterday that Lancashire County Council was proposing to cut all funding to nine women’s refuges, but a representative of the council tells me that the opposite is the case: the Government have pulled the Supporting People money and the council is filling the gap. May we have an urgent debate on the funding of women’s refuges? This situation is far too serious for politicians to distort it for their own political purposes.

Chris Grayling: I make two points. First, we learned in Prime Minister’s questions yesterday that the Government have provided many millions of pounds to support refuges. Secondly, the hon. Lady has many opportunities to bring debates before this House, and if she wants to have a debate with my hon. Friends, she is very able to do so.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on the 2% levy that the Chancellor has allowed councils to charge for social care? It seems that Bradford Council is spending only a very small proportion of that money on the independent care home sector, despite levying the full 2%. May we have a debate so that we can find out exactly what the Government intended the money to be spent on, to ensure that councils up and down the country, especially Bradford Council, spend it on helping care homes to pay for things like the national living wage, which I thought was the intention, rather than on other things?

Chris Grayling: Treasury questions on Tuesday will provide an opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise that question directly with Treasury Ministers. He identifies something that we often encounter ourselves—that Labour councils spend money not on the services that matter but on bloated bureaucracies and on their own interests.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Huge portions of the Standing Orders of this place are frankly mine. They go out of their way to prevent scrutiny and representation, and instead ensure stacking in favour of the Government. The Procedure Committee has reviewed Standing Orders on a number of occasions, and it produced a comprehensive series of suggestions last year. Will the Government commit either to taking on the Committee’s suggestions or to rippling up the Standing Orders and starting again with something a lot more workable?

Chris Grayling: We have been open to change since we first entered government in 2010 and have made extensive changes to the way in which the House works. We have been open to new ideas, and I listen carefully to and regularly discuss the thoughts and issues raised by the Procedure Committee. In the time allocated to the Backbench Business Committee, the House has an opportunity to express its own thoughts on what needs to change, so I dispute what the hon. Lady says about there being no opportunity for Back Benchers to get their views heard. As Leader of the House, I am open to considering how we do things better.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): May the force be with you, Mr Speaker. I look forward to the Conservative love-in later today. May I recommend a similar no-knives-allowed event for the Labour party? Your biggest regret as Speaker is probably that you cannot attend.

One name that will not be on anyone’s lips at the love-in is that of Fraser Cameron, a Eurocrat who, since the Dutch referendum, has said that the EU should ban any further referendums on anything to do with the EU. Will the Leader of the House make a statement from the Dispatch Box now to inform Fraser Cameron, to avoid no doubt, we will not call him Mr Cameron—that we live in a democracy and believe in what the people say, that this Conservative Government have given the British people a referendum and that the British Government will decide when we have referendums on such matters?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has found an item on Europe on which the shadow Leader of the House and I would agree. The idea that we would deny people across the European Union the opportunity to hold referendums on issues that are important to them is absurd. There is a time and a place in a democracy for referendums and for consulting the people. The idea that we would not do so in future is ludicrous and the author should be profoundly embarrassed by his comments.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I offer an apology to the Leader of the House? During Foreign Office questions earlier this week, certain members of the anti-Europe brigade on the Government Benches shouted at those who were pro-Europe and I called them a bunch of grumpy old men. I realise now that that was a deeply ageist comment, for which I apologise.
May we have an early debate on consumer power? Through social media, we can now take on the likes of BP that pay disgraceful wages to their chief executives and the companies that are cutting ordinary workers' perks to compensate for the national living wage. May we have a debate on empowering consumers to punish these greedy people?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When people ask for a change in the law on this or that, it is always worth remembering that one of the most powerful weapons available today, through the emergence of social media and mass communication, is direct consumer pressure on companies. If consumers disapprove of corporate behaviour, they can take their business elsewhere, which has an impact on performance, requiring such companies to learn lessons quickly. The power of the consumer is perhaps greater today than it has ever been.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week the National Crime Agency stated that northern ports, particularly those on the Humber such as Hull, Grimsby and Immingham, were being targeted by people smugglers. When I last raised the matter with Ministers, they assured me that adequate resources were in place. In view of what the NCA has said, will the Leader of the House arrange for a Home Office Minister to make a statement?

Chris Grayling: I know that this is a matter of concern to my hon. Friend and, I suspect, to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). We do not want smaller ports to be used in such a way. If they are, the extra measures that must be put in place may disrupt legitimate trade. The Transport Secretary is here next week, so I suggest that my hon. Friend take up the issue with him first of all, but I will ensure that Home Office Ministers are aware of his concerns.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, may recall my recent Adjournment debate on the staffing crisis at Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, where staff had confirmed they were unable to deliver basic care owing to a lack of trained personnel. I was therefore highly alarmed to learn this week that the A&E department at Dewsbury and District Hospital was operating with less than half the minimum safe staffing requirement. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have an urgent debate on that alarming issue?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, the hon. Lady raises a significant problem for her and her constituents. I will make sure the Secretary of State for Health is aware of her concerns. She may wish to initiate a debate, but in my experience it is probably best to go to the Department straightaway and say, “There is an issue here. It has been raised in the Commons. Can you take a look?” I will do that for her, and I hope she has a happy birthday on Saturday.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Thanks to Mr Speaker’s own magnificent decision making, there will be a demonstration next Thursday on Speaker’s Green of land mines and their removal by some of the most important bodies in the land, including the HALO Trust, from Scotland. Given the importance of this humanitarian effort, may we have a debate in this Parliament about the impact of the conflicts going on throughout the world in terms of the subsequent clearing-up of the detritus of war?

Chris Grayling: As we know, land mines have created horrendous injuries and many thousands of people around the world are living with the consequences of them. The work that has been done by people across our society, from members of the royal family downwards, to help clear land mines and support their clearance around the world is immensely valuable. I pay tribute to those in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and in the rest of Scotland who have been part of that. The Secretary of State for Defence will be here on Monday, so the hon. Gentleman may also want to highlight the value of that work to him and talk about ways in which the UK Government can continue to help it.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was recently contacted by my constituent Rita Cuthbell, whose father Ronald Volante sadly died while waiting nearly two hours for an ambulance to arrive after he suffered a heart attack. Mr Volante lived in a housing scheme that had a lifeline service, which he first contacted after experiencing pain. The inquest identified that despite the lifeline service provider having Mr Volante’s full medical history, it failed to convey any information to the ambulance services. Had the provider done so, his previous heart problems would have been identified and that would surely have led to a greater priority being given by the emergency services staff who took the call. May we have a debate on the need to introduce a new standard for lifeline services so that any relevant information they hold is conveyed when a 999 call is made?

Chris Grayling: That is a shocking and very disturbing story, and we send our sincere condolences and good wishes to Mr Volante’s family and convey our distress about the fact that this could happen. Clearly, one would wish the housing association involved to be acting quickly to make sure on the ground that that cannot happen again, but I will also make sure that my colleagues in the Department of Health are aware that this happened and ask them to look at whether there are lessons to be learned for the future.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May we have a statement from a Minister on the crisis in funding for local services? How can it be fair that every household in Audenshaw, Denton and Dukinfield has lost £414.74 in Government grant since 2011 and every household in Reddish and the Heatons has lost £297.35 in that same period, yet every household in Epsom and Ewell has lost only £13.12? We are not all in it together, are we?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman quotes the change figures, but he may wish to look at the absolute figures. We attempt to provide a fair balance of funding around the country. We take difficult decisions that ensure that local authorities have funding they can use to deliver necessary services while also enabling us to meet our
national targets. I assure him that councils in many parts of the country still receive far less than councils in his area.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): When the House rose for the recess, a local shopkeeper in my constituency, Asad Shah, was tragically killed. He was a much loved, gentle and friendly man, and he will be sorely missed by many in the Southside of Glasgow. He was also a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and the police have identified that there was religious aggravation behind the killing. May we have a debate on the persecution that the Ahmadiyya community faces in this country and around the world, and what the Government are doing to tackle this cancerous form of sectarianism?

Chris Grayling: First, let me say how deeply shocked we all were by that terrible murder and we were even more shocked by the motivation behind it. I know the Ahmadiyya Muslim community well. I have met His Holiness and members of the community, and I know the good work they do in our country, the positive role that they play in our communities and how they want to bridge gaps between different communities in this country. The fact that shortly before his death Mr Shah had published a message of goodwill to Christians is a sign of what a valuable part of our community the Ahmadis are. The hon. Gentleman is right. As you will know, Mr Speaker, they are persecuted around the world. We should always be willing to be their defenders.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that we have just had Women and Equalities questions. I hope he is also aware that the Minister for Women and Equalities informed my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) that she is happy to have topical questions of weeks ago and I understand the nature of the challenge. We would always be receptive to looking at ways of improving the system and am waiting for the Committee to report so that we can have the discussion.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My question is one that I would have liked to ask as a topical question to the Women and Equalities team. This year, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted to maintain the ban on abortion even in cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormality. Women accessing an abortion in those circumstances face a sentence of life imprisonment. In the light of the criminalisation in the last month of a vulnerable young woman who elsewhere in the UK and Europe would have received help from healthcare professionals and not faced imprisonment, and as it is the responsibility of this House to uphold the human rights of women in Northern Ireland, may we have a debate on this issue, as I think that many hon. Members would like to contribute?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand the hon. Lady’s concern. I am not personally in favour of women who seek an abortion being punished for doing so, but, of course, this is a devolved matter. We have taken a conscious decision to pass that matter into the hands of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am afraid that we cannot easily have it both ways. We cannot say that it is the Assembly’s decision, but that if we do not like that decision we will start to debate the issue ourselves. I agree with the hon. Lady, and I think we should make the sort of statements that she and I have just made, but ultimately this is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House consider having a statement or debate in Government time on the future of supported and specialist housing provision? It was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) a few moments ago and in PMQs yesterday. We had a debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday at which a number of Opposition Members were in attendance. It is an important issue. It is important for the victims of domestic violence, for veterans, for elderly people, for people with learning disabilities and for people with mental health issues. There is a huge question mark hanging over the viability of specialist and supported housing, so if the Minister could make a statement or we could have a debate it would be very helpful.

Chris Grayling: I understand the importance of such housing. I visited a refuge in Gloucestershire a couple of weeks ago and I understand the nature of the challenge. We listened carefully to the representations made when the issue was debated in the House a few weeks ago, but I will make sure that the relevant Ministers are aware of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raises. As we have extensive opportunities over the next month to debate such issues, perhaps he might like to have a discussion with the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and ask that Committee to table a debate on the subject.
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is now two years since the abduction of more than 200 young schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and I am sure everyone in this House sends our sympathies to their parents. We can only imagine what that must be like. I would welcome a statement about what kind of support, if any, we are giving from this country to try to recover those girls.

Chris Grayling: I endorse what the hon. Lady says. It was a shocking incident and it remains a matter of deep concern to the international community. I can reassure her that we have been seeking to provide as much assistance as we sensibly can to the Nigerian Government to identify what may have happened and to help them identify ways of freeing the girls, and we will continue to do that. I can assure the hon. Lady that it is a matter of great concern for the Foreign Office. Of course, first and foremost it is a matter for the Nigerian Government, but we stand four square with them as a fellow Commonwealth country to try to address a challenge that remains an international blight that must be resolved.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): During the recess I spoke at the Gwent St John Ambulance conference in Cwmbran in my constituency and saw the wonderful work that volunteers of that organisation do. May I add my support to the calls for a debate on the role of volunteering, including the incredible 191 million hours that volunteers contribute annually to the Welsh economy?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to that work around the country, not just in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Those volunteers turn up at events all over the country, week in, week out, year in, year out, and we are immensely grateful to them for what they do. Fortunately, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is still in his place and will have heard that representation.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): In Women and Equalities questions the Minister for Skills indicated that he would welcome a debate in this Chamber on maternity discrimination. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on that subject in Government time?

Chris Grayling: There are a number of ways in which the hon. Lady can bring an important issue to the Chamber. I have just described one way; another is the Adjournment debate system. If she feels strongly, I encourage her to request such a debate and you, Mr Speaker, or the Backbench Business Committee might select the topic for debate.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The one exam board that offers GCSE and A-level exams in Gujarati and other so-called minority languages has confirmed its intention to stop doing so in the summer of 2018, despite Ministers’ promises last year that those exams would continue. May we have a debate on what action we as the House of Commons can take to stop the language of Mahatma Gandhi, of Prime Minister Modi and, crucially, of many of my constituents being downgraded?

Chris Grayling: I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises. The Secretary of State for Education will be here on Monday week and he will have the opportunity to raise that issue then. We want to make sure that we have a good range of international languages—given the ties that we are building, have built and will continue to build with India, that is important—but we also want to make sure that the quality of education across the piece is right for those in migrant communities as they meet the employment challenges of adult life in this country.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Brexiteers suggest that because the UK has a negative balance of payments with the European Union, we should be seeking to leave. With that in mind, may we have a debate about the UK’s place in the world? Given that we have a global trade deficit, perhaps we should be seeking to leave it, too.

Chris Grayling: We currently have a trade deficit with the European Union and a trade surplus with the rest of the world. It is the Government’s strategy to try to improve our trade ties around the world, both inside Europe and elsewhere.
Points of Order

11.29 am

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I feel really frustrated that I stand here and ask questions of the Leader of the House about what I am supposed to do to get Government support for a commission to look into the root causes of serious youth violence, and about how they will respond to it. I know that many Members ask questions and do not get answers, but this is a really important issue. I have taken all the advice I have received, such as seeking a Back-Bench business debate on setting up the commission. How do I ensure that I get answers to these important questions?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I did say to the hon. Lady that I would arrange a meeting between her and the relevant Home Office Minister in order to help her.

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House anticipates me, because he will be pleased to know that my short-term memory suffices for me to recall that that was the advice that he proffered to the hon. Lady, or rather the offer that he made to her. My suggestion is that in the first instance the hon. Lady could usefully take up that offer, because I think that it would be worth while meeting Ministers and seeing where she gets. If, after that, she remains dissatisfied, she is welcome to consult me and I will try to advise her on how, through parliamentary routes, she can most time-efficiently— I emphasise time-efficiently— expedite the matter. Let us leave it there for today, but I absolutely understand the sincerity with which she speaks and the sense of urgency that impels her to raise the matter.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there a means by which I can correct the Leader of the House, because he suggested earlier that I was in favour of keeping vellum? A Business Minister tells me that we need to keep vellum because we have been printing statute law on it for 1,000 years. Well, we certainly have not been putting it on vellum for 1,000 years. We have not had statute law for 1,000 years, and we certainly have not been printing anything for 1,000 years. I do not support keeping vellum.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. In my experience—I have known him for well-nigh 15 years—he almost invariably holds an opinion on every matter that comes before the House, and he usually feels a very intense desire to share that opinion, both with the House and with the wider world. In that objective, he has today undoubtedly succeeded.

Backbench Business

Iraq Inquiry Report

11.32 am

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to conclude the National Security checking of the Iraq Inquiry report as soon as possible in order to allow publication of that report as soon as possible after 18 April 2016, and no later than two weeks after that date, in line with the undertaking on time taken for such checking by the Prime Minister in his letter to Sir John Chilcot of 29 October 2015.

As an aside, Mr Speaker, I never cease to be impressed by your short-term memory.

The second Iraq war was started to liberate the Iraqi people. Instead, it shattered their country. It was intended to stabilise the middle east. Instead, it destabilised the middle east. It was intended to remove a threat of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist. Instead, it exacerbated and massively increased a threat of terrorism that does exist. It was supposedly fought in defence of our values, but it has led to the erosion of civil liberties at home and the use of torture abroad. Because we were misled on the matter, Parliament voted for the war by 412 to 149. So there were very good reasons for setting up the inquiry in the first place.

The war led to the deaths of 4,800 allied soldiers, 179 of them British. The lowest estimate of Iraqi civilian casualties was 134,000, but plausible estimates put the number up to four times higher. The war immediately created 3.4 million refugees, and half of them fled the country. It cost the British taxpayer £9.6 billion, and it cost the American taxpayer $1,100 billion. It has done untold damage to the reputation of the west throughout the middle east and, indeed, among Muslim populations at home and abroad. Initiated to protect the west from terrorism, it has, in fact, destroyed the integrity of the Iraqi state and triggered a persistent civil war that has created the conditions for perhaps the worst terrorist threat yet to the west: ISIL or ISIS. The war has done huge harm to the self-confidence and unity of the west, in effect neutering our foreign policy. The war was, with hindsight, the greatest foreign policy failure of this generation, and I say that as someone who was misled into voting for it.

It has been more than six and a half years since Gordon Brown launched the Iraq inquiry and more than five years since it heard its last evidence. It has been more than a year since this House, in a similar debate, called for the Government to publish the Iraq inquiry report as soon as possible, and yet that report has still not been published. It is no surprise that one of the most pre-eminent politicians of our era, the highly respected and very civilised ex-Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, branded the delays a scandal. He is right. They are a disgrace.

In 2009, the then Leader of the Opposition, who is now Prime Minister, was scornful about the suggestion that the report would not be published before the 2010 election. In 2009, Sir John Chilcot told families that he would complete the inquiry in a year if he could, but that it would definitely not take more than two years. In
Mr David Davis

We know that finally, after all that, the Iraq inquiry is now due to submit its report to the Government next week. The next stage will be security clearance before publication. The Prime Minister stated last October that he fully expected security clearance to take less than two weeks, the time taken by the equally enormous Saville inquiry. Let us remember that the Saville inquiry took decades to come to its conclusion, but it was cleared in two weeks. I cannot believe that clearance will take any longer than that, given, as we already know, that every single piece of this report has already been negotiated with Whitehall, presumably on the basis of security considerations.

Given that, and the Prime Minister’s declaration that he is as exasperated as anyone by the delays to publication, the public ought to expect the report to be published in the first week of May. That should be the reasonable conclusion, but that is not the case. There are now reports that the publication of the report will be postponed until after the EU referendum at the end of June. This is frankly outrageous. It is for this reason that I, together with right hon. and hon. Members from all parties in this House, have called for this debate. We demand that the Government publish the report as soon as security clearance is complete, and certainly no more than two weeks after its receipt. While this inquiry has lumbered on, there have been at least three significant foreign policy decisions that could have been dramatically different had we had the benefit of the Iraq inquiry’s findings. The decision to intervene in Libya was intended to prevent a massacre, but since then, partly because we changed the aim to regime change, the country has descended into civil war and miserable, fractured chaos. On the question of regime change, when the Prime Minister first asked this House to support military action against the Assad regime in Syria in 2013, the House turned him down. Had the House not blocked military intervention, we could have ended up as military supporters of our now sworn enemies, IS. In Iraq, the UK is of course involved in the ongoing civil war that has raged since the invasion in 2003.

There are lessons to learn from the Iraq war about our foreign policy, our political decisions to go to war and our military operations. The longer we leave it, the less useful these lessons will be, and the more likely it is that we will make the same mistakes. When decisions such as those that were made in Libya, Syria and Iraq are made without knowledge of the facts, mistakes are made and sometimes people die as a result. Therefore, it is not hyperbole to say that the delay to the Iraq inquiry could cost lives because bad decisions may be made. I would go further and say that it probably has cost lives because bad decisions were made. Indeed, many of the revelations in the report will come too late to be useful in relation to decisions that have already been taken. This is the irrecoverable harm that has been caused by the delays—the unconscionable delays—in this inquiry.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the Iraq war was the most appalling miscalculation and the most idiotic way of conducting foreign policy in living memory. As he is looking to the future, does he accept that the fracture within Islam that the war exacerbated and the Pandora’s box that was then opened of violence and
extremism within Islam, both in the middle east and internationally, are sadly the gift of the Iraq war that will keep on giving, and that there may be decades’ worth of interventions from extreme Islamic elements across the globe.

Mr Davis: I do not think it is a question of “may be”;
I think there will be the continued disruption of international affairs and the continued threat of terrorism. Europol’s assessment that there are 5,000 jihadists in Europe implies an arrival rate of 1,000 a year, and the rate is going up, not down. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

That brings us to a significant point. When the individual Prime Ministers involved in each of the decisions I mentioned made their decision, I am sure that in their own mind they were doing the right thing—they were trying to save lives, to save a civilisation or to intervene to prevent further terrorism. The trouble is that every single one of them made simplistic decisions, without detailed understanding. The complexity of the issues they were reaching into was beyond their knowledge. It is correcting, enhancing and improving that knowledge that the inquiry report is all about.

I am no pacifist, but I find myself horrified at the thoughtless, aggressive and unnecessary interventions by the west in areas that it does not understand. I did not like the Gaddafi regime; I did not like the Saddam Hussein regime; I do not particularly like the Bashar Assad regime, but ripping them out has led to something even worse. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) is therefore absolutely right in his analysis, which demonstrates why this report and its speed of preparation are so important.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an immensely compelling point. Does he agree that when the report is published, which, I like him, hope will be as soon as possible, although the tendency in the British media will be to use it as a trial of the former Prime Minister—Blair guilty or innocent—the great gain of the report will be in showing how the whole mechanism of government worked in the run-up to the decision to go to war? A Prime Minister is not Dr Strangelove; this is about how the whole machine in Whitehall works.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not follow him down his comparison between Dr Strangelove and past Prime Ministers, but he is right in one respect: the most important element of this is what we learn from our mistakes. However, there are also issues of accountability and closure, which I will return to in a moment.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am reluctant to interrupt, because I am very much enjoying the powerful case that the right hon. Gentleman is making, but I invite him to ignore the representations of his colleague, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), because this war is bound up with one key individual: Tony Blair. For ever and a day, he will be associated with this particular war. It was personalised around the personality of that Prime Minister. As far as I am concerned, he could have a tattoo across his forehead reading “Iraq”, such is his legacy. This will be a comment and a statement about his day. I was in this House when we voted to go to war, as was the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and I had to listen to the nonsense and drivel that was that former Prime Minister’s case for war. Please let us make sure that where blame is to be apportioned, it is apportioned rightly.

Mr Davis: I will come back to this issue in the latter part of my speech. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and I have a very dear common friend who thinks that Mr Blair should be at The Hague, so there is a range of opinion on this, but to come to that conclusion today would be to pre-empt the report. I do not intend to do that, but I do intend to turn to the issue of accountability in a minute.

Mr Graham Allen: Just to get the balance correct, if we go back to the time of the vote, a majority of the non-payroll vote in the Labour party—122 Members, and I was proud to be one of the organisers—actually rebelled against their own Government. Had the Conservative party supported us we would not have gone to war. Those are historical matters, but it is important to place on the record that the biggest ever parliamentary rebellion within a governing party was by the Labour party on the issue of taking us to war. Many of us at the time realised that it would be a disaster, but none of us realised what an appalling disaster it would be—one that would carry on for decades and influence us domestically as well as in the middle east.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman has made his point well, but one of the issues that the report will face up to, one hopes, is the veracity of what was told to the House that day. That will be one of the key issues, which is why the argument between Sir John Chilcot and Whitehall is very important. Reading between the lines of his letters, that argument was very much about what decisions were taken before the House made its decision and after—what was told to the House, whether it was accurate, whether it was based on impartial briefings and whether, indeed, the politics of the issue coloured the views of important components of the state. I am not going to attempt to answer those questions today, but I would be incredibly disappointed if the commission’s report did not actually answer them in plain English. That is why I would not be drawn by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, who is a very great friend of mine. The report has to answer those questions; what the tabloid and other press do with the report the day after publication is not for me.

I will press on, briefly, with the lessons to learn not just about the war but about how we should conduct these inquiries. The Government now intend to review the Maxwellisation process, in which those who have been criticised in a report are given the chance to respond. That is to be welcomed, as Maxwellisation has been responsible for half the delays here. It is clear that strict time controls are needed for future inquiries. It cannot be right that those who are to be criticised can delay publication for their own interests, so I hope that strict time controls will arise as a result.

There is no reason for further delay. It has been suggested that the delay between the report being security cleared and its publication is because it needs to be proof-read and typeset. That would be unacceptable if
true. The report is already in electronic format. It has already been repeatedly checked for accuracy, and will be checked again by the security services. It will have been read by more people than some newspapers. The fact is that the report has been pored over by many people for five years. We are in the 21st century, not the era of hot lead typesetting. Someone said to me this morning that I might have summarised the rather long motion rather more crisply by saying, “This House instructs Sir John Chilcot simply to press ‘send’.”

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that the public at large, and bereaved families in particular, deserve answers, so redactions must be kept to an absolute minimum. Those families should not have to endure any further suggestions of a cover-up.

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, but, to be honest with her, I will be astonished if there are any redactions in the report. I remember that once, when I was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, a report was given to me about the overrun of M15 and M16 on their buildings. It had four chapters: the introduction, the chapter on M16, the chapter on M15 and the conclusion. The chapters on M15 and M16 were virtually identical, except that all the redactions were different. We rang up M15 and said, “M16 has agreed to all these,” then we rang up M16 and said, “M15 has agreed to all these,” and then we removed nearly all the redactions. They were political—they were redactions to preserve the interests of the bureaucracy involved, not the national interest. The simple truth is that the facts in the report have already been cleared. That is what two years of the argument was about. If there is a single redaction, I and others will be looking at it very closely and asking why it was not redacted years ago instead of now. The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the rights of the families in this affair.

There is no doubt that the whole country is fed up with waiting for the final report, but none more so than the families of those 179 British soldiers who died fighting for their country in Iraq. The families have suffered for years as this inquiry has dragged on and on, and it would be disgraceful to make them wait for months longer, just because the Government are worried about political sensitivity or national security. The final report was produced after 17 months. Any argument for delay on grounds of political sensitivity or national security would be far more pressing in Israel, where that is a matter of daily life and death to all its citizens. Because of that, it is also a matter of very high and extremely important politics. If Israel can produce a report in seven and 17 months, we should be able to do it in a lot less than seven years.

Some people will, of course, be held to account in this report; otherwise it will properly be dismissed as a whitewash. That is to be expected and must be right. However, this is principally about learning from mistakes that we made as a nation, and ensuring that we do not make the same mistakes again. It is also about remembering those who have suffered great loss, and giving them some measure of solace in the truth and some degree of closure. This is about doing the honourable thing by those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of their nation, and to delay any further for no good reason would be an insult to those brave soldiers who died in the Iraq war, and a cruel insult to their families who have waited more than six years for a proper answer.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I agree with every word from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and I warmly congratulate him on obtaining this debate. This issue disturbs all of us who were in the House at that time more than any other decision taken this generation. Members who were in that debate and who, in their view now and with hindsight, voted the wrong way, deeply regret that, and regard their parliamentary careers as failures because they allowed themselves to be bribed, bullied and bamboozled into believing a fiction that came from the Front Bench. That was not just the Prime Minister; this was the whole establishment, and three parliamentary Select Committees—the Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Intelligence and Security Committees—and the military supported the idea. The Conservative party was more gung-ho than the Labour party, and we must look at this issue because the repercussions of that decision continue today.

The suffering continues, and the mother of the 200th soldier to die in Afghanistan, Hazel Hunt, has set up a foundation and runs a successful charity. It deals with the suffering of the thousands of soldiers who have been maimed in mind or body as a result of that terrible mistake.

We also need to get the Iraq inquiry over with so we can have another inquiry, another terrible mistake was made in 2006. The decision to go into Helmand province was made in the belief that not a shot would be fired. At that time, we had been in Afghanistan for five years and only six of our soldiers had died in that conflict. As a result of the terrible error of invading Helmand in 2006, 450 of our soldiers died.

The important point is this—and this is not being wise after the event. In March 2003, I sent a letter to Tony Blair saying that going into Iraq in support of
Bush’s war would mean that we would drive a wedge between the Christian western world and the Muslim world. There would be a sense of antagonism and injustice from the Muslims in my local mosque to the Muslims in the far corners of the world. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is right. ISIS is the daughter of our decision to go to Iraq. We must look at that with great seriousness.

At the time, the Public Administration Committee made a number of strong recommendations. Some were followed, but the main one was that the inquiry should not be held in secret. The Committee made another recommendation that the inquiry should have a large parliamentary element to it. In fact, it recommended that there should be two inquiries: one into the reason for going to war and one into the repercussions. Never in our wildest nightmares did anyone believe that the loved ones of those who had fallen would have to suffer a period of seven years of not knowing whether their loved ones were sent to a battle that was based on the vanity of politicians and not on the real interests of our country. The agony goes on.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that with modern printing and publishing techniques it is possible to write a book, email it to the printers and get it back two or three days later. The process is virtually instantaneous. The old system of setting up things in type was immensely laborious and time-consuming. There is no excuse for delaying this any further—not for a single day. The loved ones deserve closure. They have waited far too long. It is only in the political interests of those responsible—the guilty ones—that it continues.

Mr Graham Allen: Does my hon. Friend accept that publication is necessary to purge our own party of the fault line that occurred around the time of the Iraq war and which continues to this day? It also besmirches the reputation of an otherwise very fine Prime Minister, who, until we admit the mistake of going to Iraq and opening this Pandora’s box, will forever be known as the person who took us to war on the coat-tails of George W. Bush against so many of his colleagues in the House at the time. The mistake needs to be corrected. That would be good for all of us on the Labour Benches, if nowhere else.

Paul Flynn: As someone brought up with a religious background, I realise fully the advantage and beneficial nature of confession.

It is absolutely crucial that we understand the mindset that drove us into war. That mindset is one we have heard recently in other debates in relation to going into Libya or Syria. The myth that infects English MPs—rather than Scottish, Welsh or Irish MPs—is the idea that the UK, our country, must punch above its weight militarily. That always means spending beyond our interests and dying beyond our responsibilities.

12.3 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and others on securing this extremely important debate. I agree with my right hon. Friend. When the former Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary, Lord Hurd, described the delay in the publication of the report as a scandal, he was absolutely right. Many of us in this House were absolutely horrified by the way in which Sir John Chilcot buried his head in the sand amidst the criticism that was, I think last year or in 2014, all around. My right hon. Friend set out the timetable according to which we were assured action would be taken and the report published, but we have been strung along, and as has been said, it is the bereaved who are paying the price for delay.

The Conservative party, as the official Opposition in 2007, called for a public inquiry into the reasons for the Iraq war and the conduct thereof. We initiated that debate on 11 June 2007, and I happened to wind up for the Opposition as a shadow Defence Minister. The Labour party opposed it. The then Foreign Secretary described an inquiry as “self-indulgent” retrospection and our debate as “opportunist”. Of course, that changed, because Gordon Brown, in 2009, eventually ordered the Chilcot inquiry, but by then six years had passed.

We were not alone in supporting an inquiry; some in the Labour party also supported it. I cannot remember but I am sure the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) did. The late Michael Meacher certainly did. We gave three reasons why we felt an inquiry was needed. First, there was a lack of any discussion, in the run-up to the conflict, about post-conflict reconstruction. I remember going to Washington at the time. The debate there, in the run-up to the conflict, was all about the post-war period and how it would be done. The fact that it was not delivered is another matter, but we were not even having that debate here. We had a debate on 30 January 2003, initiated by my right hon. Friend. The Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), then shadow Secretary of State for International Development, during which the Government were simply not willing to discuss the aftermath of any conflict.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I do not think we learn anything. Look at the situation in the middle east: Libya—a mess; Egypt—to some extent a dictatorship. We have learned nothing from these interventions, and all because we never planned any post-war reconstruction.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Indeed. I could not possibly disagree. That is entirely right.

Secondly, we felt the inquiry was necessary “to consider how we should adjust our whole military posture to the new type of military operations we face, including at the tactical level: whether our soldiers, sailors and airmen are getting the right training package for that type of warfare; whether... we have the right equipment for the task; whether we have the correct balance of forces, and what needs to be done so that we do not become disproportionately reliant on urgent operational requirements—a kind of panic-buying formula—to make up the shortfall in equipment.”—[Official Report, 11 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 583.]

Thirdly and finally, there had already been several Select Committee inquiries, and there was a real need for a comprehensive inquiry by an independent committee established by the Government. We suggested there was real urgency. In introducing today’s debate, my right hon. Friend mentioned the effect of the time lag. At the time, I said:

“The reason for the relative urgency is that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks”—
now Lord Hague—

“said, while the events are fresh in people’s minds and the e-mails have not been destroyed, we need to learn whatever lessons we can from the background to operations in Iraq so far, and to apply them to Afghanistan before it is too late.”—[Official Report, 11 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 585.]

So there was an imperative, and a great disservice has been done to everybody, in that the inquiry was not established in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war but indeed was six years late. As I said, the bereaved are owed an explanation.

Mr David Davis: My hon. Friend has been a Defence Minister and shadow Defence Minister. What is his opinion of the argument put at the time that, whenever our forces are in the field, we cannot have an inquiry, which seems madness to me? We had a successful inquiry into Norway, for example.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I agree with my right hon. Friend. He mentioned Norway, and indeed there is plenty of precedent. I think that that was an excuse for not holding an inquiry, and I think that it was a mistake.

It is not just the bereaved who are owed an explanation, however. Those of us who were in the House at the time are owed one as well. All of us bore a responsibility for the decisions that we made on whether to vote for the war or not, and those of us who were on the Front Bench bore a special responsibility. However, we had no more information than what we read in the newspapers.

When I voted for the war, I did so for three reasons. First, I had had a meeting in New York with Hans Blix, the United Nations chief weapons inspector, who had said that he had no doubt that Saddam Hussein intended to develop weapons of mass destruction, and that if he could develop them he would use them, but he—Hans Blix—could not, at that point, find them. He said that just a month before the war started, and I thought that it was pretty compelling.

My second reason was, of course, the “45 minutes” claim. I remember this vividly, because it was all over the front page of the Evening Standard. We were told that Saddam Hussein could launch what I think were described as “battlefield biological and chemical weapons” at 45 minutes’ notice, and reach the sovereign British base of Cyprus. I thought, “I have a responsibility. I am a shadow defence Minister.” I could hear Mr John Humphreys, on the “Today” programme, saying, “Well, you knew all about this, Mr Howarth, so why did you not take action at the time?” I felt that that claim had to be taken seriously.

Thirdly, I thought that, as a key ally of the United States, we had a very close relationship with that country, and we had to have a good reason for not supporting our US friends. I realise that that view will not be shared universally in the House.

Paul Flynn: Can the hon. Gentleman, from his very knowledgeable position on this matter, clarify something that has been a great puzzle? While a case might have been made for saying that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, was there any plausible case for saying in what scenario he would ever use them against the west without guaranteeing his own suicide?

Sir Gerald Howarth: That is a good question, but it is a question in retrospect. At the time, not only did the chief weapons inspector tell me, to my face—and tell the other members of the Defence Committee who met him in New York—that he thought that Saddam Hussein was intent on developing weapons of mass destruction, but I was then told by the Government—the British Government, my Government—that there was a possibility that he would be able to launch those lethal weapons at 45 minutes’ notice.

That brings me to my next point, which is, of course, that all this involved Dr David Kelly, and all the tragedy surrounding that poor chap, and the dodgy dossier. I believe that one of the things for which Mr Blair and the rest of the Government will have to account to the nation is what I consider to be the usurpation of the Joint Intelligence Committee by the Prime Minister’s spin doctor, Alastair Campbell. He was the man who was putting pressure on the Committee, led by Sir John Scarlett, to release enough information to produce—to coin a phrase—a “sexed-up” dossier to make the case as convincingly as possible, to us in the House and to the British people, that there was a real threat which we could not ignore and on which we had to take action.

I think that one of the lessons we have to learn now is that the Joint Intelligence Committee must be led by a man or woman with experience in security matters, and must not be subject to political pressure. Its professional view must be respected, and its authority must not be usurped.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. I agree with every word that he has said so far, but one question has confused and really worried me, and I do not think we have had an answer to it yet. If there were no weapons of mass destruction—I am referring particularly to chemical weapons—what was it that killed the Kurds and the marsh Arabs? We have never found those. Where the heck did they go?

Sir Gerald Howarth: My hon. and gallant Friend has raised a very good question. I do not think that it will be the subject of my contribution to the debate, but I hope that he will be able to develop it if he is able to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have set out the position of the Conservative Opposition at the time. We believed that it was imperative and urgent for an inquiry to be held. I have explained why I supported the war, and have described some of the shenanigans that went on in an attempt to persuade the British people that there was a justification for it. I think that the delay in the report’s publication has been wholly unacceptable, and I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. Five years ago, Sir John said that it would take him a few months to prepare the final report; for five years those families have been having to wait, and have been held in limbo.

I agree that the Maxwellisation arrangement must be revisited. We cannot allow an open-ended opportunity for people who have been criticised in a draft report to respond to that criticism. There must be a time limit. As one who was deeply critical of the Saville report, which took 12 years and cost £200 million, I think that the country needs to start looking very carefully at how it conducts inquiries such as this.
Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am afraid not. A great many other Members wish to speak.

Let us compare what has gone on in the last seven years with what went on after the Falklands campaign. Three weeks after the end of that war, the Prime Minister announced an inquiry, and the inquiry team took six months to deliberate and report. There were international ramifications, because the United States was initially tempted to take the side of its South American neighbour. I know that certain sensitivities will apply in this case in connection with the relationship between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush, but there were similar sensitivities in the case of the Falklands campaign. That inquiry cost £81,000, which at today’s prices is about £280,000.

This morning I was advised by a friend that the Chilcot report is likely to run to 2.5 million words and 12 volumes. Whether the interests of better understanding will be served by a report of that length I know not, but what I do know is that we in this House are right to demand that the report be published as quickly as possible.

12.17 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in the debate, but I take no pleasure in doing so. I do not think that we should be having this debate, because the Chilcot report should have been published by now.

Time has been a huge issue since the genesis of the report. We should particularly bear in mind that Sir John Chilcot promised that the report would be delivered by 18 April, or the week commencing 18 April, and I understand that he will honour his word. Also, the Prime Minister promised to have it security-cleared within a fortnight, which would be by the week beginning 2 May. The promise that I seek from the Minister is that the Government will keep their word, and that a fortnight after Sir John Chilcot has delivered his report, we shall see it published.

As many have said, and as was said at the press conference, publishing a report is not a difficult matter these days. It is no longer a matter of “cold lead”. It is, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), a matter of pressing “send” and the thing is published. People have waited far too long for this report, and further delays are only adding to the pain of the families who are looking for closure.

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There are further timelines relating to the Chilcot report. On 29 January last year, there was a debate—also hosted by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden—on a motion calling for the report to be published by 12 February 2015. There was uproar in the House during Prime Minister’s questions and at other times when it was suggested that the report could be delayed beyond the general election of May 2015. We are now in April 2016, and again there is uncertainty about the report.

This report was kicked off in 2009, but there was another timeline before that of impatience for the report. I remind the House of a cross-party debate held here on 31 October 2006, when I was quite a new MP, having been here for about a year and a half. It was led by Adam Price, the then hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinwiddi. It is instructive to go back and look at the words that Adam used at the beginning of his speech. He said:

“It is about accountability. It is about the monumental catastrophe of the Iraq war, which is the worst foreign policy disaster certainly since Suez, and possibly since Munich. It is about the morass in which, regrettably, we still find ourselves. It is also about a breakdown in our system of government—a fault line in our constitutional constitution that only we, as Parliament, can fix. Fix it we must; if there are not to be further mistakes and other Iraqs under other Prime Ministers, in which case we shall only have ourselves to blame.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2006; Vol. 451, c.163.]

Those words still ring true today.

There was another debate, to which Tony Blair refused to come, despite saying a few weeks earlier to a Conservative Member that he would come at “any time” to a debate on Iraq. Part of the defence for that was that soldiers were in the theatre of operation, but that was admirably dealt with by Douglas Hogg, then a Conservative MP and now Lord Hogg. He said during world war two, the debate on the Norway debacle was led by his father, and that took place when troops were in action. The key moment of the Norwegian debate—I am not certain about the name of the inquiry—led to the removal of Chamberlain and the installation of Churchill, which may have been instrumental in changing the course of World War two, because this Chamber had shown that it was not afraid.

Mr David Davis: The House needs to address this idea that we cannot debate or investigate anything when troops are in the field. When I have spoken to our troops in the field, they have said that they want our democracy to work properly. They want to feel that they are fighting for an honourable cause. In future, we should dismiss this idea that we are undermining our troops; we are standing up for something that will ensure that their lives are not wasted in the future.

Mr MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right. People, and especially troops, want to feel that this place is not on auto-pilot. They want to know that it is living, functioning, thinking and reacting to lessons. As was said, to commit troops to a morass and refuse to learn lessons is an absolute abdication of the House’s responsibility.

Mr Graham Allen: To pick up on the point made by my right hon. Friend, if I may call him that, the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), once we have committed troops to action, should not the default position of the House be that there will be an inquiry, either in the midst of the action or once it is concluded? These are very serious matters; people die and there are very serious foreign policy issues involved. Should that not be the case, rather than the Government saying, “Oh, we might take a decision to have an inquiry if we think it is really necessary”? This House—the legislature—should have a default position that there is automatically an inquiry when we have committed people to war.
Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is very right. We expect the military to do its job when we commit it to war. I use the word “we”, but I was not an MP at the time and, like most of the rest of the citizens of the UK and Scotland, I did not support the action in Iraq. When we ask the military as a collective to do a job, we should be prepared to do our job and deliver change if necessary. We should not run away or be scared of such decisions. We must remember that there was a Butler inquiry in 2004, which the Evening Standard branded a whitewash on its front page. When the Government thought that they could get inquiries of a certain type, they were quite willing to have them.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman and other Members have made very important points. Is it not hugely important that we remove this false parliamentary rubric of having no inquiry while troops are in the field? Otherwise, Governments will have a perverse incentive to keep troops in the field in a possibly disintegrating and changing conflict situation, and will be suspected of doing so, in order to avoid an inquiry?

Mr MacNeil: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. He probably knows that I am a great admirer of his thoughts and ideas. He makes a very good point about this perverse incentive that a Government can have to keep a war going to avoid an inquiry. Hopefully, that is not a reality, but given the machinations of politics, we can never know. There may be a desire to get over another couple of weeks or another month, or to kick the can down the road that little bit further. The can was certainly kicked down the road a decade ago. A pivotal thing changed between 2006 and 2009—the Prime Minister of the day changed, from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown. People can draw their own conclusions from that, but I do think that was significant. I will wait for the inquiry to see just how significant it was.

As hon. Members have said, we cannot have this Parliament running away from the reality of what it committed other people to doing. Ultimately, the Iraq war cost 179 UK lives. As the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, that does not take into account those who were wounded in body or mind, or the knock-on effects on families, loved ones, and those dealing with people wounded in body or mind. The war has taken quite a toll on people in the UK, and it has cost the lives of 4,800 allied soldiers. Sadly, those figures, terrible as they are, are dwarfed by those for civilian casualties in Iraq. The lowest estimate is 134,000, but the number is possibly four times higher than that. The war also created 3.5 million refugees. For goodness’ sake, there are lessons that we must learn about what we got ourselves involved in, and what we might do again if we do not have the courage to face up to what was done.

Mr Graham Allen: The hon. Gentleman is very generous to give way again. He talks about the figures when peace was declared; what a disastrous and unprepared peace that was. Will he take into account that there have probably been at least as many casualties again since then, because of the opening up of the rift between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, which allowed opportunities for an internecine warfare that is spreading into international guerrilla warfare? If he includes those numbers, will he not find an absolutely enormous death toll, running into the millions, and to who knows how many in the future?

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I agree with all he said. To that, I add the other fallout from the Iraq war, which, we must remember, was demonstrated against by more than a million people on the streets of the UK. If a million people were demonstrating, we can be sure that many, many more—several factors more—were in support of them. I add to that the creation of Daesh or ISIL in the camps of Iraq. There was a myth at the time that America went into Iraq because al-Qaeda was there; that was part of the myth-making in America around regime change. The reality was that al-Qaeda was not there until the Americans went in, and then the Americans created something far worse in those camps. The responsibility for what was done there—the loss of lives, the costs and the terror created—hangs very darkly over the Iraq war. That is something from which we must learn. We must ensure that we get this report published fairly soon, because time is of the essence. Time is the big factor here. Kicking the can down the road even further is not acceptable.

On 29 October 2015, the Prime Minister seemed to be very unequivocal on clearance taking two weeks, which is the point of this debate today. He said:

“In relation to National Security checking, the Government will aim to complete the process as quickly as possible. As you know, National Security checking for the Savile Inquiry took two weeks to complete. It would certainly be our plan and expectation to take no longer than this, and we will look to complete the process more quickly.”

We need to do that for the families who are expecting closure. This inquiry should have started many years earlier.

In the debate of 31 October 2006, to which I referred, there was already frustration that it had taken so long to get the matter in front of this House of Commons. We used an Opposition day debate, but in those times, Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru Opposition day debates were few and far between. Thankfully, it is not like that today. This was before the creation of the Backbench Business Committee, which we should thank today.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Has my hon. Friend considered the reputational damage done to the United Kingdom by the series of earlier delays? If it is the EU referendum that is causing the current delay, does he agree that the reputational damage to the UK is in danger of becoming ridiculous?

Mr MacNeil: I am grateful for that intervention. As was said earlier, the UK risks becoming an international laughing-stock because of this infinite, eternal delay with this report. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the delay is annoying many people. It is certainly not to the satisfaction of the families, many of whom would concur with what he said about the EU referendum. Roger Bacon, whose son Matthew Bacon was killed in Basra in 2005, said:

“To allow the referendum to get in the way of it seems to me to be completely wrong and smacks of political manoeuvrings that should not be taking place really.”
Interestingly, the former member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and former Labour Member representing Thurrock, Andrew Mackinlay, called for the publication of Chilcot not to get lost in the case of the European referendum. He said:

“It would suit the security and intelligence services and some people in high places for it to be ‘lost’ in the flurry…of final days of the referendum campaign”,

so let us have it soon at the beginning of May. That is when this report should be out, on the Government’s word. We are looking for the Government to keep their promise and for John Chilcot to keep his. The families certainly deserve that.

Mark Durkan: Some of us know John Chilcot and have worked with him, because of our backgrounds and roles. When he was appointed to carry out this inquiry, I was accused of being uncharitable in saying that although he had many attributes, I did not think he would be found in the “Yellow Pages” under I for independent or C for challenging. Perhaps he will prove otherwise. He conducted the review after the Castlereagh raid, and what he did then was what my party and I predicted he would do—come up with an outcome that would entirely suit the security services and be more about their interests. That shows that this man is well attuned and sensitive to the interests, demands and requirements of the security services. The idea that he has written a report that will suit the security services and be more about their interests. The idea that he has written a report that will need serious national security checking is somewhat preposterous.

Mr MacNeil: Those are interesting words from the hon. Gentleman. That brings us back to the Prime Minister’s statement that the national security checking for the Saville inquiry took two weeks, and that the expectation was for the Chilcot inquiry to take no longer than that. I expect—and it is the expectation of this Chamber—that the report will be published in the week commencing 2 May. We cannot have anything other than that.

The failure to publish this report has, I think, left us uninformed about other engagements that took place subsequently to Iraq. The UK’s military action since Iraq has, it can be argued, been a chaotic mess. That certainly seems to have been the case in Libya, where we led a bombing campaign costing 13 times more than the amount spent on the rebuilding of Iraq. Had Chilcot been published, we might have had some hard lessons set out in black and white to guide any Government planning any military adventures or interventions in the future to plan for the peace afterwards, not to leave a vacuum and not to leave an opportunity for terrorists to move in and destabilise a state. We were selling ourselves short and other countries particularly short when the launch of the report was delayed, and we are doing so now through the interminable delay to its publication.

Let me conclude with the words of a woman I greatly admire—Rose Gentle from Glasgow, the mother of the Royal Highland Fusilier Gordon Gentle, who was killed 12 years ago in Basra at the age of 19. She said that she was “disappointed” by the latest news from the inquiry, and added:

“We thought it should be out a lot sooner than this. I thought it would be out by the end of the year, because they have everything there. It’s another let-down. It’s another few months to wait and suffer again.”

That was said on 29 October 2015, nine years after the initial debate on Iraq in this place. Bereaved parents such as Rose Gentle should not wait a day beyond the first week of May 2016 for the publication of the Chilcot report.

12.35 pm

Mr Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I completely agree with my right hon.—and gallant—Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) that it is unconscionable to continue to delay the publication of this report. National security checking of the Iraq inquiry is holding up publication of a report that is critical to our national security. Only by understanding how we got involved in this gigantic geo-strategic error of an invasion can we learn the profound lessons for our political class, the military and the diplomatic establishment. Indeed, the question is ultimately about the whole mechanism of government. The sub-text for too many of us in politics and the media is who might be damaged by the contents of the report. We play to the gallery, and love to play the man and not the wrecking ball that shattered security assumptions and the balance of power in the middle east.

Is not the real question the substance of the report and the answers it might give to how we managed to get embroiled in Iraq, perhaps providing pointers to the sister conflict in Afghanistan, our well-intentioned but disastrous intervention in Libya and our clueless response to the rise of so-called Islamic State? Six hundred and thirty-four British troops and at least 150,000 civilian lives were lost in them, and as a consequence we face a far greater strategic threat from theo-fascism than we faced at 9/11.

When the report is published we might hope that, through Sir John’s access and witnesses, we can start the necessary self-examination of how we got ourselves into these wars. I believe that our ongoing failure is caused by a lack of effective political and military leadership.

From what I have seen on the ground since I became an MP in 2005—in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and last week in Syria with my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden—I believe that the full panoply of the Government machine has become dysfunctional in four overlapping parts. First, we have suffered from having a narrowly focused class of professional politicians who understand politics, not leadership, and who have almost no understanding of the complexities or realities on the ground. Secondly, we have ambitious civil servants who know that careers advance by staying close to what the rest of the group think. Thirdly, we have military officers with a civil service mindset who have also learned that the right answer is “we can do it” rather than “we can’t do it without...”. Finally, we have experts who are ignored or marginalised.

No experts were present at President Bush’s Prairie Chapel ranch when Prime Minister Blair agreed to support a US-led invasion of Iraq. Of course, Prime Minister Blair was determined to uphold the US-UK alliance, but he does not seem to have made even the slightest attempt to stop his friend President Bush from driving us drunk into Iraq. Back home, we needed to find reasons to go into Iraq, and we created the infamous
dossier in a sort of late-night essay crisis. So late into the night did they work in Downing Street that they managed to read the bit from the top-secret, single-source report about missiles but failed to read the “analyst’s comment” section of the CX. They failed to see the comment that there was no way in which the missiles referred to could still be in the hands of Saddam Hussein.

Most of the public, as well as many people in Parliament, were in good faith convinced by the Prime Minister. Later, we convinced ourselves that we were in Afghanistan to “fight them over there” so that we did not have to “fight them over here”. Several years ago, after I had given a presentation to an immensely senior person in a previous Government, he asked me, “Adam, are you really saying that the Taliban are not a threat to the UK?” That revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between the Taliban and al-Qaeda; it almost beggared belief. That difference between a local xenophobic tribal traditional movement and a death cult was not, and is still not, understood.

We cannot be too unfair on the politicians, however, because they are sometimes not very well served by their civil servants. Throughout these wars there has been a tendency to push what I call a “good news only” culture—what General Petraeus described as “putting lipstick on pigs”. We have all heard the mantras, have we not? “We are where we are. We’re making progress. We ignored other experts who could have helped us. A Secretary of State for Defence was in a briefing at Basra air station that a friend of mine attended. Apparently, the Minister banged the table and said words to the effect of “Why have you not been telling me the truth? I had no idea things were quite so bad.” The Minister denies this.

Another friend was astonished accidentally to find himself in a briefing in Basra at which all those assembled were told what they should and should not tell Prime Minister Gordon Brown. At a briefing in Helmand, the Defence Committee—on which I then sat—was told, as usual, how brilliantly things were going, but when I was on a private trip to Kabul a few weeks later the official in question bounded up to me in a bar and said, “Adam, I’m really sorry about that briefing I gave you the other day in Helmand. The trouble is, we just don’t get promoted for telling the truth.”

Paul Flynn: I am very much enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s authoritative speech. Will he confirm what he has just said, because it is a matter of some importance? I was expelled from the House for saying the same thing some years ago. Will he confirm that the story that those young people going to Afghanistan were actually stopping terrorism on the streets of Britain was an untruth; that those people were deluded into going there in the belief that they were defending their families here; and that the only reason the Taliban were killing our soldiers in Afghanistan was that we were there and that as soon as we came out they lost interest? Does he think that there was a continuing deception of our soldiers, many of whom lost their lives?

Mr Holloway: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman in the sense that the original invasion of Afghanistan was highly effective and that the Afghan people essentially removed al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but unfortunately it was the disastrous NATO deployment to Afghanistan that whipped up the insurgency. I shall come on to that point in a minute if I may.

As I was saying, people do not get promoted for telling the truth. I sent my first draft of this speech to a friend who is a well-known and courageous BBC foreign correspondent. He emailed me, saying, “Reminds me of being attacked for negative coverage that I put out in Iraq and Afghanistan by officials who later admitted, either privately or in memoirs, that things were actually worse than I was saying in my news reports.”

With some hugely honourable exceptions, the same is true of senior military officers. After a recce of Helmand in 2004, a military officer reported back to his boss, a general at Permanent Joint Headquarters. The general asked him, “So, what’s the insurgency like in Helmand?” The officer replied, “Well, there isn’t one, but I can give you one if you want one.” At the time, the mission statement at PJHQ actually stated that the military were to give “politically aware” advice. The top brass volunteered the UK for Helmand and, as in Iraq, assured Ministers that it was double with the original force numbers.

We experienced exactly the same with the lack of equipment. Military people in Afghanistan constantly reminded us that we had enough helicopters to do the job. A few weeks before Colonel Rupert Thorneloe and Trooper Joshua Hammond were killed by an improvised explosive device, Rupert wrote that he and his men were making “unnecessary...road moves” because of the lack of helicopters. He went on to say:

“This increases the IED threat and our exposure to it.”

A senior British general briefed the Defence Committee at ISAF headquarters in Kabul, and basically tore my head off for being a naysayer. When I was back in Kabul a few weeks later, again on a private trip, I went to see him at the end of the day. As I rather nervously walked into his office, I said, “Well, general, are we still winning?” He said, “If we damn well are, I’ll be dead by the time we do.” I was hearing one thing in public and another in private.

As a soldier, I was in Iraq before the war in 1991, and in 2003 I found myself back on the ground. As I have said before, I will never forget driving into Mosul after the regime dissolved and the city collapsing into anarchy before our eyes. It was the first time as a journalist that I had kept a sub-machine gun close to me. There were bodies on the streets. There was chaos, and a really nasty, threatening environment. American jets were coming down low, fast and noisily to intimidate people. I went to a police station to find out where the American troops were in the city. Saddam Hussein lookalikes were standing around, and the police brigadier general told us where the Americans were. Just before we left he said, “When you find the Americans, can you please get them to come up here and give us our instructions?” I hope you will agree that it was pretty astounding that, as their regime was falling, they were taking instructions from the Americans. I found the American colonel, and when I had done my business with him I said, “By the way, the Iraqi police brigadier general up the hill wants his instructions.” The American colonel said, “You can tell him to go **** himself.” It was quite extraordinary.

We ignored other experts who could have helped us. Of all the people who knew anything about Iraq, who
suggested it was a good idea to dismantle Ba’athists like those police officers from the various structures of government? Would any expert have thought that that was a good idea, if asked? I do not know of anyone, apart from General Tim Cross, who thought about our responsibility to the people of Basra after the invasion.

In Afghanistan, too, the experts were consistently ignored. I was there in 1984—for part of my gap year before I went to university—when the mujahedeen were fighting the Russians. No one listened to our officials who had run the training programme for the Afghan resistance. No one listened to the senior ex-mujahedeen commanders living in north London or in the suburbs of Kabul. No one heard the concerns being expressed by the expert contractors to our foreign intelligence services, who knew many of the Taliban leadership personally. No one spoke to the agronomists who had been working for decades in the Pashtun belt.

Mr David Davis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the criticisms he is rightly laying at the door of several different establishments should properly be laid at the top of those establishments? Just before the Iraq war, a regimental colleague of ours serving in the planning section of the Ministry of Defence said to me, “David, I have never known a war in which the British officer class has been less happy”—so somebody was asking questions and not getting any answers.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will give the House one more anecdote on this subject. I had a barbecue in my garden in Gravesend for the officers of a regiment that was about to go to Afghanistan. I asked the officer who would be responsible for engaging with the local community in Helmand province how he would do that. He came up with a pretty unconvincing answer. About 15 minutes later the colonel, the commanding officer who was about to lead his troops on a six-month tour, took me aside and said, “Adam, I’ll tell you the best way to influence the people living in Helmand positively towards us: it’s not to get on the plane in the first place.”

No one listened to the experts. The Pakistanis, for example, know a little bit about Afghanistan and the Taliban, and the Russians certainly do—but of course, as ever, we knew it all. I remember sitting in Kabul with the general who had looked after Helmand province for a couple of years after the Russians had left. I said to him, “ISAF must be consulting you the whole time.” He looked down at his four mobile phones and said, “No one has rung me yet. I am still waiting for them to ring.”

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon.—and gallant—Friend for allowing me to intervene. History teaches us lessons. To maintain the safety and security of civilians, the allies who liberated south-east Asia rather distastefully used the Japanese army. We should have understood that lesson when the war in Iraq was apparently over.

Mr Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting intervention.

To continue my theme of the inexperienced political class ignoring the experts, Britain’s one ambassador who actually understood what was going on and expressed it to politicians now works for HSBC. On Syria, we have not taken advice from officials who have been deployed forward with the Syrian opposition, as was. They argue that ISIS is fundamentally a political and counter-terrorist problem, much less a military problem, and a function of broken politics in the countries concerned and in the wider region. We have again thrown ourselves behind an American-led, largely military strategy that, until recently, threatened to turn the whole of Syria into hell.

Iraq went wrong, and the NATO deployment to Afghanistan cannot be counted as a success, and neither can Libya or Syria. The sanctions being imposed on ordinary people in Syria today cannot be considered a success.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to my hon.—and gallant—Friend for giving way. I agree with much of what he says, and I particularly endorse his comments about military commanders. They do themselves, their country and this House no service by not telling us the truth. They need to speak truth unto power.

I gently suggest to my hon. Friend that we went into Libya because Benghazi was about to be subjected to genocide. Had we not done so, we would have been criticised for allowing thousands of innocent people to be destroyed. We were on the horns of a dilemma. The Prime Minister was in a difficult position, and I do not blame him for his decision. We would be in just as bad a position now had Benghazi fallen.

Mr Holloway: I drove down with my friend Leo to the frontline at Ajdabiya. The armoured vehicles that had been hit on the edge of Benghazi were still warm. I completely agree that if the vehicles had got into town it would have been enormously serious, but to proceed with regime change, when some of our officials did not accept that there were tribal issues in Libya, was a big mistake, for which the people of Libya are paying the price.

Our overall approach since 9/11 has left our country facing much greater dangers. Neither Saddam nor the Talibani threw so much as a petrol bomb at the west, yet the images of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria on the websites of global jihad will have terrible consequences for our people.

After the chemical outrages in Damascus, Parliament was asked to vote to bomb the Assad regime. Three years later, we were again asked to vote to bomb, but this time it was to bomb the forces opposing Assad. I wonder how many of us here voted to bomb both the Syria Government and their opponents. It is little wonder, especially after Iraq and Afghanistan, that the public do not have much confidence when Ministers tell them that they deserve their backing in such endeavours.

When the Chilcot report eventually is published, we will need to scour its content in the hope that it might lead us to take more seriously the security of our people and move us away from the dreadful career politics that have infected us. Chilcot may point to dysfunction rather bigger than just Iraq and rather closer to this Chamber. We must learn from our mistakes, and we owe that to our people and to those in countries where we have contributed to unimaginable insecurity.

12.54 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I thank the Members who managed to secure this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and
gallant Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway). If he had had the opportunity to give evidence to the Chilcot inquiry, I am sure that the final read might have been much more interesting than the one that we are anticipating.

There is a completely understandable sense of anger and frustration, some of which we have seen in the Chamber today and in the wider public over recent years, at the Chilcot report not yet being published. My constituents share that anger and frustration and find the situation totally unacceptable—six years on and still no report. I want to focus on the entirely predictable “keep calm and carry on” British attitude. I am sure that the Government see that as a virtue, but to heap unacceptable delay on unacceptable delay is not the way forward. Informing us that the final report may be heavily redacted only adds insult to injury, particularly for the families who lost loved ones in Iraq. It is a dreadful situation to endure.

The conclusion of the Chilcot inquiry should be a chance for the Government to draw a line under the Iraq adventure—perhaps I should say “misadventure”. It is an opportunity to understand where it went wrong, why we fell down this particular rabbit hole and why the UK’s strategy in the middle east was so reckless. The Blair-Brown Government felt that they had no choice but to follow the United States down that rabbit hole. Instead, we have this situation. Chilcot has become something of a “corpse in a cupboard” as the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) so memorably put it in the House this time last year. We must face up to Chilcot and learn the lessons that it may offer. We need to get on with understanding what the UK wants and what our strategic aims are. Otherwise, we will be condemned to continue living with that corpse in the cupboard and, worse still, an ineffective foreign policy.

It is that reality that led the great journal Foreign Affairs to write that Britain “is at risk of slipping into irrelevance...its foreign policy is widely derided for both its passivity and short-term outlook”

and has led American commentators to talk about the UK resigning as a global power. Last month, when we were discussing the Syrian ceasefire, the Foreign Secretary was asked whether he had contacted his counterpart in Russia to find out more about the ceasefire’s implications. He replied that no contact had been made. We criticise Russia for being isolationist, but we should not fall into that same trap ourselves and become equally afflicted.

The Defence Committee recently undertook an investigation into Russia, and it has become increasingly clear over the course of the inquiry that the symptoms of British strategic impotence exist there, too. It is almost as if the end of the cold war made us stop thinking about Russia, just as we stopped thinking about the middle east. Instead of thinking seriously about the role that we can play in the world, a series of Governments have decided to sub-contract that role to a host of allies, who do not always share our values or have our best interests at heart. Let us break the habit of a lifetime. British make do and mend will not do any longer. I ask the Prime Minister to release the Chilcot report now and bury the corpse that is in the cupboard. Let us learn the lessons of Iraq and get serious about Britain’s role in the world.

I was in Baghdad several weeks ago and Iraq is in a complete mess—it is a shambles. I assure the House that it is far from being mission accomplished—if anything, it is quite the opposite.

After 134,000 Iraqi civilians deaths and 179 UK soldiers killed in action, with another 6,000 seriously wounded, who every day have to live with the consequences of their injuries, we see that we took part in a war that destabilised that country, that caused ongoing civil war in neighbouring states and that paved the way for brutal terrorist attacks across Europe. It was a war with no real endgame in sight and no endgame planned for. All those actions have huge repercussions for our foreign policy, national security and the way in which decisions to go to war are taken. This has eroded public trust in democracy itself. We all remember the demonstrations that took place against the war in Iraq—some of us took part in them. The people knew that our involvement in Iraq was wrong, but the Government of the day failed to listen to those protests and to how the people of this country wanted us to proceed. The current Prime Minister can take a different route—he can listen. I say to him again: this report does not have to be written on vellum and it does not have to wait for the EU referendum, so publish the Chilcot findings in full and publish them now.

1.1 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I did not intend to speak, but I rise to do so because my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) has asked me to speak anecdotally, as he knows very well some of my experiences. My theme for the next couple of minutes is why I believe our senior military officers have become too politicised.

In April 1993, I took soldiers into the village of Ahmici in central Bosnia. I identified a massacre where at least 100 people had been killed and I decided that I had to inform the world—it was my duty under Geneva conventions. I decided that I would have a press conference where I would identify the people I thought were responsible—special forces of the Bosnian Croat army. Then I informed the Ministry of Defence. Of course, by my action I was kissing goodbye to a glorious military career—

Sir Gerald Howarth: Opening up a new one.

Bob Stewart: Not for a while. When I returned to my base, I received a blistering telegram demanding to know how I had the authority to make such a statement. It said I was meant to be neutral and I was not to get involved in the war. I was later told that I had ordered my men to open fire in defence of themselves, that I was way out of line and that I very much risked being sacked immediately. That was rather depressing for me. However, as a result of that press conference, front pages in this country carried the story—it was in the news, on the television and on the radio—and the reaction from the public and from politicians, both Back-Bench Members of this House and Ministers, was unanimously supportive. The generals who had given me that severe wigging then sent another signal, totally
ignoring the first one, saying that I had acted in the highest traditions of the British Army and I was to be congratulated. It was at this time that I thought perhaps our senior officers are too politically correct. Since then I have decided, as people who look at the Daily Mail and The Sun today will know, that political correctness is something I do not necessarily particularly agree with.

1.4 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I think we will all be going off to see what is in The Sun as soon as this debate is over. May I thank the hon. Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and for Gravesh암 (Mr Holloway) for providing us with some personal experiences that relate to the debate, and the right hon. Member for Halmeprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for securing it?

Today is perhaps not the day to go back over what happened as long ago as 2003 in relation to the Iraq war, but I will take the opportunity to remind people that when Charles Kennedy was leader of the Liberal Democrats we unanimously voted against the Iraq war in the Lobby—there were no exceptions—doing so on the basis that we thought the weapons inspectors should be given more time and that there was no UN backing for the action. The Iraq war still took place and many Members have cited statistics about it: the 179 British service personnel killed in Operation Telic; and the 4,000 to 5,000 UK casualties. There is a huge range of Iraqi casualties, with figures varying from 150,000 up to as high as 1 million. Clearly, we will never know the true figure.

The Chilcot inquiry was eventually set up to look into the detail and discuss this issue. In an intervention, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is no longer in his place, said that he was given less and less of a clear picture. As a number of Members followed, we might get a much snappier report. I think that has been taken advantage of to extend the process, but we simply do not know.

Roger Mullin: On the point about Maxwellisation, people such as myself who, in other lives, have written reports in academia and the like are at times puzzled by this process. It is one thing to get people to comment on the accuracy of facts, but it is entirely another thing to give people the opportunity to comment on the interpretation of those facts. The big concern that many people, including me, have is how this report from Chilcot can be truly independent if he allows people to challenge his interpretations.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that sound intervention, and perhaps in future inquiries what he has suggested, which is an ability to respond to the facts, will be what is required, rather than a response to the interpretation put on them. If that process was followed, we might get a much snappier report. I think we would all welcome that. As a number of Members have highlighted, the difficulty is that the longer this goes on, the weaker people’s memories are. The information that is available tends to disappear and as each month goes by we get less and less of a clear picture of what happened, as opposed to a clearer and clearer picture.

Some have suggested that the Leveson model of inquiry might have been more appropriate. If we consider how long Leveson took to report—it started in July 2011, and the first report was published on 29 November 2012, so it took 18 months to produce a 2,000-page
document—we can see that it was certainly a snappier inquiry, I know that today’s debate is not on the subject of the Leveson inquiry, but I would like to take the opportunity to suggest that the Minister conveys to the Prime Minister in the strongest possible terms that we still expect the recommendations of the Leveson inquiry to be implemented, as we do Leveson part 2, and that that has not been forgotten and will not be allowed to go away.

Perhaps the Leveson model provides an answer in relation to Chilcot, but my final point is that, as others have indicated, we are now seven years on and are still waiting to know the full facts about Iraq. The families of service personnel, and particularly the 179 families affected by the deaths of our personnel there, need closure and will not get it until everything is in the public domain. As others have said, I hope that given the length of time and the Maxwellisation process, any redactions, if there are any, will be extremely limited, as it has already been through a significant sifting process that does not require any further deletions. Any further slippage in the deadline for publishing Chilcot will add insult to injury, which is why we need to know that the two-week period that has been mentioned is one that the Government will hold to, and nothing should be used as an excuse to hold it up further. I cannot fathom the suggestion that the EU referendum has some sort of bearing on this. I cannot see in what way it would affect this.

It is time that the Chilcot inquiry was published and it is time that people got the truth.

1.15 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing the debate, as well as those who signed the motion.

I signal my wholehearted support for the aspirations of the motion; namely that security checking of the Iraq inquiry report should be completed as soon as possible and that no later than two weeks after the report is submitted to the Government next Monday, 18 April, it should be published. We want to see that. This week, I attempted to table a question for Defence questions next Monday on the timing of the Chilcot inquiry. I was told by the Table Office that it was not appropriate—as the inquiry was independent of Government, that was not an acceptable question to ask the Government. Yet here we are debating the issue today, because of the Government’s apparent intention to delay publication of the report until 24 June, the day after the referendum.

I would respectfully submit that the Government cannot have it both ways: the publication of this report is urgently to be delayed beyond the time necessary for appropriate security checking, if it is going to be delayed, for entirely political reasons. That is wholly unacceptable, and the Government need fundamentally to rethink it, if that is their intention, for several reasons that I will cover in my contribution today.

When making a statement announcing the establishment of the Iraq inquiry on 15 June 2009, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown said:

“The inquiry is essential because it will ensure that, by learning lessons, we strengthen the health of our democracy, our diplomacy and our military.

The inquiry will, I stress, be fully independent of Government.”—[Official Report, 15 June 2009; Vol. 494, c. 23.]

If the inquiry was essential in June 2009 for those reasons, then the logical conclusion we must draw is that the as the report has still not been published, these lessons have still not been learned and our democracy, diplomacy and military are still not strengthened in the way envisaged by Gordon Brown. The inquiry is plainly not “fully independent of Government” if the timing of its release is controlled by the Government, and is intended to be used—if it is the case that that release will be delayed until after the European referendum—in such a plainly and blatantly political way.

No one has mentioned purdah today, although I know that it was mentioned in last year’s debate. The puerdah period before an election might be an argument used to say that the report should not be published, but that is not an argument I would accept. Indeed, last year the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden made the point extremely well, saying:

“Purdah periods exist for a reason: to prevent Governments from using their power to publish information that would give them electoral advantage. They are not to prevent impartial information from being put in the public domain”—[Official Report, 29 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 1038-1039.]

I could not have put that better myself, and I entirely agree.

That brings me to security checks. I accept that there is a need to ensure the report does not disclose information that is detrimental to our national security, and that there are other Committees of this House that can scrutinise sensitive matters and provide political oversight without national security-sensitive information being released publicly. That is the way it should be. However, as the motion quite correctly states, none other than the Prime Minister wrote to the inquiry chairman Sir John Chilcot last October about national security checking, expressing his wish to see the process completed faster than the two weeks required to complete the process for the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday. I hope that nobody intends today to suggest that all of a sudden the national security checking will require precisely nine weeks and one day to complete rather than the two weeks imagined in October.

The second Iraq war caused the deaths of at least 134,000 Iraqi civilians and claimed the lives of 179 British soldiers. More broadly, according to Casualty Monitor, there were 5,970 UK military injuries throughout the period of the war in Iraq. This is a war which destabilised Iraq, precipitated an ongoing civil war and has left a fertile breeding ground for vicious terrorist fanatics. It is a war which has shattered the credibility of western countries in the region and invites seemingly endless military interventions.

The continuing delays in publishing this report are an insult to the families of those service personnel killed in the Iraq conflict, who have been made to wait almost seven years for a report anticipated to take one year.

Those responsible for leading us into that illegal war have never been held accountable, and the essential lessons have not been learned. It is high time they were learned, because this episode is indeed an “international
embarrassment”. I commend the motion, and call on the Government to publish the report at the earliest opportunity.

1.20 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken so far, including the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) who led the debate, teasing out the issues. He will be aware that on a number of occasions since I was elected to this place last May, I have raised the issue of delays to the publication of the Chilcot inquiry.

In my maiden speech I said that I was here to give a voice to the voiceless, because too often cynics view this place as somewhere where peoples’ voices are not heard. Today I express not only my view, but the view of my constituent, Mrs Rose Gentle, who lost her son Gordon in the Iraq war in 2004. Gordon Gentle was 19 years of age—19. Mrs Gentle and her family, like many military families, want answers to basic questions. Were those serving in our forces in Iraq provided with the proper equipment? If not, why not, and who is responsible? Have documents been hidden, and why have they been hidden? Why were our forces there in the first place?

For those military families like Rose Gentle and her family, this delay is like reliving an inquest. In Gordon Gentle’s case the inquest was cancelled on three occasions and concluded in 2009. Last year military families wrote to Sir John Chilcot to say that they wished to see the report published by the end of 2015, and if not, they would consider their legal options. In response, Sir John Chilcot threatened them with legal costs if they took him to court. What a disgraceful and insensitive thing to say to military families who have lost loved ones. What kind of behaviour is it that threatens those who have lost loved ones? What kind of behaviour is it that threatens those who have waited over a decade to find out what actually took place, and whether the military should have been there in the first place?

Rose Gentle’s reaction to the unnecessary delays is simple—disgust. Delays have been caused by so-called Maxwellisation. Delays are now caused, we are told, because of national security. Military families’ view is that all delays are now not trusted.

Bob Stewart: What the military families feel could be summed up by saying that the longer the process takes, the more jiggery-pokery they think is going on with the results of the inquiry. If we continue like this, there will be a total loss of faith in what it produces.

Chris Stephens: Indeed, and I am sure the military families watching these proceedings will agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The length of time that this inquiry has taken has put undue pressure on military families, who want the truth. Those families are proud of their loved ones who served, but are disgusted with the Government and the Government process. That is the view of military families like Rose Gentle and her family. They feel that the military covenant has not been just broken, but shattered. They feel that their loved ones have been buried twice—once after their death, and twice by bureaucracy and evasion.

The Prime Minister wrote to Chilcot asking for clear deadlines and publication. The Government cannot and should not allow themselves to be seen to be backtracking on the Prime Minister’s strong words. Further delays are not acceptable. Rose Gentle is an inspiration to many. She has done a lot of work to assist charities such as Soldiers Off the Street, a charity with an office in my constituency which looks after soldiers who have returned from the frontline and struggle to adjust to civilian life. Rose Gentle and her family have a simple request: it is time for justice for the military families who lost their loved ones serving in Iraq. The Chilcot report must be published in the first week of May 2016.

1.24 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am delighted to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party. Before I do so, I commend those who secured the debate—crucially, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil), and the hon. Members for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

Many of the Members on the SNP Benches, as the numbers indicate, see this as an important issue. If not in all constituencies in the United Kingdom, it is so in Scotland, and for a specific reason. It was a real issue on the doorstep at the last election. I am mindful of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) who, in a hustings with her predecessor last year, asked the question, “Why did you vote for the Iraq war?” The answer was, “I didnae.” My hon. Friend took out an iPad and looked up Hansard. The rest is on YouTube to watch. It is embarrassing that that situation arose, when a Member of this House could not even remember whether they voted to go to war or not. It was a disgrace. Needless to say, that Member no longer sits in this House. Iraq has been a critical issue in Scottish politics over the past decade.

I declare an interest. My brother is a reservist and had a tour of duty in Iraq and two tours of duty in Afghanistan. When I used to write to him on the frontline, I knew day in, day out that I might never get a reply, so I share the concerns of many Members and those who represent military families of both officers and personnel. The report needs to be published, as promised. Families such as Rose Gentle and her family need answers.

Who, in any western democracy, would have believed that a four-letter word would have such a far-reaching and profound effect on domestic affairs and be so detrimental to our relations with other countries, as well as paralysing any hope of moving on and learning from past mistakes? It is a word deeply embedded in our psyche and conscience and it continues to overshadow our work in an increasingly unstable and fractured world. That word, of course, is “Iraq”.

In February 2003, together with more than 100,000 others, I marched through the great city of Glasgow, joined by another 1 million across the communities of these islands, to protest against an invasion of the sovereign nation of Iraq. I would never have imagined that I would be standing here to reiterate the same belief that led me to march then—a belief
shared by Scottish National party members, predominantly those who elected us, that that invasion was the wrong choice and an immoral one.

Now, 13 years after our armed forces were led into that illegal invasion, and seven years after the establishment of the inquiry into the UK’s role, this Parliament and the communities of these islands are still waiting to learn of the true events of that catastrophic war which, as I said, has had profound consequences on our international relations and, critically, on the lives of our armed forces and on millions of lives across the globe.

During the debate I was looking up at the Public Gallery and I could see young and old, people of every generation and of every race and creed, and I thought to myself, “The consequences of that decision to go to war, on what I perceive as an illegal basis and a lie, will have profound consequences not just on those in the Public Gallery, but on the children being born now and the lives that they will lead in the future.”

Much has been made of using the Chilcot report, as stated in previous debates, as a mirror to reflect on the events leading up to the invasion and on the war itself. More importantly, the real opportunity is for the British Government to change what they are doing. In a speech on the Floor of the House last year, as has been mentioned, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) stated that this is our Vietnam. I would go even further back, because this is another knot in the history of failed diplomatic choices by this political state. I consider Iraq to be a modern-day Khartoum, so we could go back even further and look at the situation we have faced in Sudan and Egypt over the many decades since. Iraq laid the ground for considerable misadventure in the years that lay ahead. I believe that we would be misguided to look at this report from the classic imperialistic viewpoint; the one that led us into Iraq in the first place.

Since being established, the Chilcot inquiry has had a stranglehold on British diplomatic and military policy, with everything being placed in limbo until the report is released. The longer we wait, the more unstable our position becomes. That has led successive British Governments to continue with the same failed philosophy without ever learning from their mistakes or looking at a different set of responses to the situation in which we now find ourselves. It would also be inexcusable for the British Government, led by the Conservative and Unionist party, to use its internal European war to delay publication. Frankly, it would be immoral.

Sadly, there does not seem to have been any willingness or vision from successive British Governments to change their knee-jerk and reactive diplomacy, according to which a situation requiring attention almost always ends up with a bombing campaign, which only adds fuel to an already inflammatory setting. In reality, we now have an inability to confront threats in a progressive manner due to the fear oozing from Chilcot. The Government are unable to learn their military and diplomatic limits, and that is undermining the UK’s diplomatic capabilities and reducing its ability to defend its economic and social interests.

The UK’s senior diplomats, as the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border mentioned last year, are reduced to a rump, often moved on very quickly in their tenure and often unable to communicate in local languages. Time and again in debates about Chilcot on the Floor of the House, the point is made that the policy of having a mass diplomatic service with ever dwindling expertise and reliance on local information undermines the idea that this place knows what is going on, and not only in Bagdad, but in Washington, as we clearly saw when a British Labour Prime Minister, and his Government, walked hand-in-hand with a Republican President of the United States and led our armed forces into war.

I am not often for quoting things, but I thought I would go back a wee bit and see if there was any expertise on how to use information in “The Art of War”, an ancient Chinese publication. The General notes that there are two goals for intelligence activities—I will quote only the first, Members will be glad to hear. He states:

“The first goal is to obtain accurate, timely information about the objectives, resources and activities of competitors.”

We failed in that basic military process because we relied on the services of others, while our other closest NATO allies in Europe looked to their own services and came to the discerned opinion that an invasion of Iraq would be wrong, with regard both to ability and to inability to extract ourselves from it. From that perspective, it looks like our diplomatic policy is based on Google Translate, due to the limited numbers of senior diplomats with second languages relevant to their placement and over-reliance on local translators and locally based staff.

From the Scottish National party Benches at least, the idea of “mission accomplished”, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), is both a fallacy and a myth perpetuated by successive British Governments hell bent on rewriting history. The maxim that victors write history cannot be applied here, because the war is not over.

Further to the point about the UK’s diplomatic efforts, failure to publish the Chilcot report would reduce the UK’s military leadership. With this House’s decision on Syria, for instance, it abdicates responsibility for bombing a country into submission, rather than dealing with the reality we now face: Assad, still ensconced. We knew that would happen, yet the Government have pursued a military programme that places in a perilous position not only the armed forces, but civilians. This policy failure is the price that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is paying for Iraq, and it is one for which the communities of these islands will pay for years to come. It is unforgivable.

Yet even when published, as surely it must be in the timeframe set out by the Prime Minister, the Chilcot report will not reflect the entire story. I am grateful that the hon. and gallant Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) rose to address the House today, because they reflected some element of the lived experience of the military service personnel on the frontline. But Chilcot is more than just an examination of Government policy and the impact on international relations; it is a very real and personal goal for the families of those service personnel who lost their lives during the war. Those families have lived the Iraq war every day since the bombs were dropped, and every day that the evidence of the inquiry was gathered. We want closure.
I will bring my comments to an end, because I am conscious of the time. We, as parliamentarians and representatives of the communities that have sent us to this place, have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that decisions made about war and peace are open and transparent. We recognise that armed services personnel know that they might not come back, because that is the danger of being in the armed services—that is not the point. The point is that we do not wish them to go to war that is illegal or a bad diplomatic choice for the country. How can we carry out this process if we are being denied the opportunity to read a report on a war that continues to impact on the security of this political state?

The Prime Minister must stay true to his word on a two-week clearance period so that the report can be published in the week beginning 2 May 2016. Any further delay will not be acceptable to those on the Scottish National party Benches or our constituents, and I am sure, as we have heard from hon. Members across the House today, that it will not be acceptable to them and to Parliament itself. Critically, it will not be acceptable to those who served the Crown abroad and to the families of those who lost their lives.

1.37 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Let me say at the outset that we certainly welcome this debate, and our thanks should be recorded to those Members from different political parties who put their names to the motion. We have had a good debate. This is a serious issue that exercises the minds of not only Members of this House, but many people across the country. The concerns of so many people in our country have today been well expressed, articulately and in different ways.

As has been said, it was Labour that set up the inquiry in July 2009, when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister. I have heard what Members have said about how such an inquiry should be conducted, but as was made clear at the time, it was genuinely thought that the inquiry should begin only once all British combat troops had left Iraq. I remain convinced that that was the right course of action to take at the time.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition took a rather different view, and voted in favour of our motion, but the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen), who was in the Chamber earlier, took the Government line, even though he has been a critic of the decision since then?

Wayne David: I willingly acknowledge that this issue is open to discussion and judgment, but at the time that was our judgment, and I think that it was probably the correct one. The important thing, I would stress, is that the Labour party did not at the time expect that the report, thorough as it was going to be from the start, would take seven years to complete. That is completely unacceptable and very difficult to justify or, indeed, understand. The Labour party wants the report to be published in full as soon as is practicable. At the same time, we must acknowledge that if the report is to have integrity, it needs to be recognised as independent. It would be wrong, therefore, for the Government or individual politicians to try to influence the contents of what I hope and am sure will be an objective report and assessment.

The fact that the report is taking so long is cause for concern, however. The latest delay, we are told, is caused by the need for security checking. We understand that there needs to be security checking. Sir John Chilcot explained clearly in his letter to the Prime Minister, dated 28 October, why that should be:

“National security checking is distinct from the process of declassifying material for disclosure in the inquiry’s report. Its purpose is to ensure that the government’s obligations under article two of the ECHR and for the protection of national security will not be inadvertently breached by publication of the inquiry’s report as a whole.”

That makes a great deal of sense, and I do not think that many people would object to that. It is noteworthy that the Prime Minister said the following in his letter to Sir John dated 29 October, which he willingly consented to publish:

“In relation to National Security checking, the Government will aim to complete the process as quickly as possible. As you know, National Security checking for the Savile Inquiry took two weeks to complete. It would certainly be our plan and expectation to take no longer than this, and we will look to complete the process more quickly.”

It is worth bearing in mind what the Prime Minister said, and was more than happy to make public. I am concerned that we are where we are today. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response to the debate, and to my specific question: what is the date for publication?

I conclude by reiterating what several Members have said: it is important to have the report published soon, for two essential reasons. The first is so that we can, collectively, learn the lessons of Iraq. Lessons have to be learned about what happened in the run-up to the war, during the war and, crucially, once the war concluded. I remember going to Washington and having a meeting in the Pentagon before the war commenced, and I pointedly asked a five-star general what the United States’ plan for reconstruction and rehabilitation after the war was. He said, “That is not our concern. Our job is to kick ass and get out.” That was crudely put, but unfortunately that was the attitude that informed the actions of the American-led coalition. In my discussions with military personnel in this country, the attitude was quite different, but, to be blunt, Britain was a very junior partner. That kind of mentality and mindset among the Americans made what has happened since almost inevitable. Lessons have to be learned from the situation that unfolded.

The second reason is that we need openness and closure for the families of all the British soldiers who so gallantly gave their lives for the country. We have a debt to them, and it is important that a clear message goes out from the House that we want the report to see the light of day, and to be published, examined and debated as soon as is practicable.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I start by joining the chorus of thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, to my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and to the many other hon. Members from
all parts of the House—some of them have personal experience of serving our country in the armed forces—who contributed to the debate.

This issue could not be more serious or important. As colleagues from all parts of the House have said, this is about how and whether we take the country to war, and whether we have done that in the right way in the past. Even for those, like me, who were not here when the debate and votes were held, there could be no more important or serious issue for us to address. There is a thirst, not only in the Chamber but more widely across the country, for accountability, for closure, and for lessons to be learned.

I will not try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, by going over the history of the war, but I will try to address the questions raised in the debate about what will happen to get the report out as soon as we reasonably can.

Tom Brake: Can the Minister give us an undertaking that the Government will implement any recommendations that come out of Chilcot to improve the transparency of the decision making involved before we commit the country to going to war?

John Penrose: It would be premature for any of us to prejudge the results of Sir John Chilcot’s inquiry, but I am certain that everyone—Members on both sides of the House and others more broadly—will look extremely carefully at the conclusions. I am sure that there will be a great many lessons to be learned.

In line with the timetable set out by Sir John Chilcot in his letter to the Prime Minister last October, to which a number of colleagues from all parts of the House have referred, we expect the inquiry’s report to be ready for national security checking in the week beginning 18 April—that is, some time next week. Once Sir John indicates that that is the case, the work will begin. As the Prime Minister promised, it will take no longer than two weeks.

Once that is done, the inquiry team will prepare the report for printing and publication. I should make it clear that at that stage, even when the national security checking process is complete, the report will still be in Sir John Chilcot’s hands and will not be released to the Government until everything is ready. The inquiry team has said that it will complete the remaining work as swiftly as possible, and Sir John Chilcot indicated in his letter to the Prime Minister last October that he expects publication in June or July this year.

I would like to reassure colleagues by providing a little more detail on what national security checking involves, because a number of concerns have been raised about what might or might not happen in that process. National security checking is a legal obligation and a well-established standard process for inquiries that consider sensitive material. It has been used in extremely sensitive reports, including those of the inquiries into Finucane, Bloody Sunday, Billy Wright and Rosemary Nelson, to name but a few. I am sure everyone will agree that the report must not compromise national security or breach article 2 of the European convention on human rights by putting the safety of individuals at risk. It is a limited process with a narrowly defined remit focused solely on ensuring that the inquiry’s report does not put lives at risk.

By making those extremely narrow and clear terms of reference public, I want to reassure everybody in Parliament and elsewhere, that the process will not and cannot be used to redact or censor material that does not need to be secret, or that might prove embarrassing to Ministers or officials from the time covered by the inquiry. I am also pleased to inform the House that I understand that the inquiry team expects to announce a firmer publication date soon after the national security checking process is complete. That may answer some of the concerns raised by Members from all parts of the House.

Sir John made it clear in his letter to the Prime Minister that he needs to complete several further steps after security checking before he can hand the final version to the Government for publishing. As the House will be aware, the report is very large, with over two million words—about three or four times the size of “War and Peace”—and it will be accompanied by many hundreds of documents. I am told that, because of its size, it will take a number of weeks to prepare it for publication. That matter is under Sir John’s control. Sir John and his team have promised that they will complete the work as swiftly as possible.

I should also reassure the House that I have checked with senior officials in the Cabinet Office and been assured that nothing in the rules of purdah for the EU referendum could provide a reason to delay the publication of Sir John’s report once he delivers it to the Government. We will therefore publish the report as soon as it is delivered to us in its final form by the inquiry team, whenever that may be.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his assistance on this matter. The problem is whether Sir John Chilcot will push that through. Has the work that needs to be done to create such a large piece of work been done? In other words, will the only delay be to allow the Prime Minister to examine the report, or will there be further delays?

John Penrose: I am trying to make it clear that the Prime Minister made a pledge that the Government’s contribution—the national security checking—will be done in two weeks or less, and we will deliver on our pledge. At that point, we will not have control of the report; it will still be in Sir John’s hands. He will need to complete the work. I am sure he will have listened to the tone and tenor of this debate, and he will understand the thirst to see the results of his work, given the frustration at its taking so long. However, we are in his hands—the report, quite rightly, is an independent one, and it needs to be objective and independent of Government—as to the work that remains to be done. From the Government’s point of view, I can say that we promised to get the security checking done within two weeks, and we will.

I want to provide reassurance to many colleagues on both sides of the House who I know have concerns about the interests of the families of service personnel killed or injured in the war. We will discuss these issues with the inquiry once national security checking is completed, but I understand that the inquiry will make suitable arrangements for families around the date of publication.
In conclusion, I am grateful to all right hon. Members, hon. Members and gallant Members who have contributed to this debate. I think we agree on the need for the report to be published as soon as possible. I am also sure that we all appreciate the wish of the families involved to understand why and how certain decisions were taken, and for us to learn any lessons that need to be learned. This inquiry has looked at complex events, over a nine-year period, that evoke strong feelings on all sides of the political debate. I am sure we all agree that it is vital that the inquiry completes its work to the timetable Sir John Chilcot laid out in his letter to the Prime Minister last October. We will then, at last, have the fully independent, heavyweight, evidence-based report that events of such importance demand. Parliament, the families of service personnel killed and injured in the war, and the country as a whole deserve nothing less.

1.53 pm

Mr David Davis: This has been a very good debate. Every speech has been impressive, well-informed and passionate. There are three reasons why Chilcot matters: one is learning lessons; one is holding people to account; and one is giving closure to those who have suffered the loss of their nearest and dearest. From the point of view of the last of those reasons, I want to say through the Minister to Sir John Chilcot that publication in June or July is incomprehensible and unacceptable. In the Gallery is Peter Brierley, whose son Shaun died 13 years ago in the service of his country. In my mind, he represents the 179 families who have lost sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, loved ones, wives and, in some cases, mothers and fathers. We owe them a debt. We call ourselves right hon. and hon.—and sometimes gallant—Members, and this is a matter of honour: let us give those families closure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to conclude the National Security checking of the Iraq Inquiry report as soon as possible in order to allow publication of that report as soon as possible after 18 April 2016, and no later than two weeks after that date, in line with the undertaking on time taken for such checking by the Prime Minister in his letter to Sir John Chilcot of 29 October 2015.
some progress, there is a north-south divide in England. There is still some way to go, particularly on the representation of the depth and range of voices across the north of this country.

Diversity is an issue across the whole media sector, not just in broadcasting and certainly not just within the BBC. From Fleet Street to Hollywood, there are clearly many more rivers to cross. City University’s latest survey, conducted just last month, found that British journalism as a whole is 94% white, and that there was not a single BAME face among the entire list of nominees for the 2016 Oscars. In 2006, representation of BAME people in the creative media industries stood at 7.4%; yet in 2012, the figure fell to 5.4%, and in television it fell from 9.9% to 7.5%, so it is going in the wrong direction.

Directors UK has said that the number of BAME directors working in UK TV is “critically low”. A sample of 55,000 episodes drawn from 546 titles found that only 1.29% of programmes were made by black, Asian and minority ethnic directors. In some areas—period dramas, talk shows, panel shows and sketch shows—not a single episode had been made by a black, Asian or minority ethnic director. This is just not good enough in 2016.

We are privileged in this country to enjoy so much public broadcasting. That goes beyond the BBC: ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, S4C, STV and UTV have a public service broadcasting remit, meaning that they operate for the public benefit rather than purely for commercial purposes. Taken together, those channels account for 70% of all TV watched in the UK.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The statistic the right hon. Gentleman read out about programmes produced by black and ethnic minority people is shocking. I would support his argument by pointing out that when a population of 60,000—I am talking about the Gaelic speakers of Scotland—is given the opportunity, tremendous talent comes forward and great programmes are made. I think the point he is making is that if that opportunity was available to others, the same would happen. I support him in that.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have gone beyond the point where we say, “The talent is not there. Can we do some training?” The talent exists. Can we now bring it forward and get the change that is required?

One of the central statutory responsibilities of public service broadcasters, as outlined in the Communications Act 2003, is to ensure that the diversity of the UK is reflected in their output. They must broadcast “programmes that reflect the lives and concerns of different communities...within the United Kingdom”.

Ofcom has made it clear that all public sector broadcasters must do more on diversity and the portrayal of under-represented groups. Its latest research found that 26% of black viewers saw people from black ethnic groups on TV daily. Over half of black viewers feel both under-represented and unfairly portrayed across our public service broadcasts. Some 55% of viewers from a black ethnic group felt there were “too few people from black ethnic groups on TV” and 51% felt that black, Asian and minority ethnic people were shown negatively on TV.

Since its inception at Alexandra Palace in Haringey, my home borough, the BBC has time and again proved its worth as a national broadcaster in the quality, depth and breadth of its output. Its great programmes bring the nation together, its outstanding journalism brings stories to life, and its online offering has seen the Beeb continue to flourish and serve its audience in the digital age.

Over the years, the BBC has made significant strides in reflecting Britain’s increasing diversity. In 1964, it made the groundbreaking documentary “The Colony”, about West Indian immigrants living in Birmingham. In 1967 “Rainbow City” was the first drama series that saw a black man in a leading role. There was not a huge number of black actors on television when I was growing up, but Benny in “Grange Hill” was one of them and I was grateful for him. I remember Moira Stuart reading the news, beginning in 1981; the Tavernier family arriving on the set of “EastEnders”; and Diane-Louise Jordan presenting “Blue Peter” for the first time, as I made my way to university—not to mention great shows such as “Black Britain”, “The Lenny Henry Show”, “The Real McCoy” and “Goodness Gracious Me”.

Seeing black faces on the BBC, the national broadcaster, has helped show Britain’s black community that they belong and that they are part of the nation’s social fabric. The BBC is the cornerstone of public service broadcasting in our country and our most important cultural institution. Most of all, it is the recipient of huge amounts of money, receiving £3.7 billion from the licence fee. Tony Hall, the director-general, has admitted that although this is “a truly cross-industry challenge”, “the BBC must take the lead because of our unique funding and responsibility to licence fee payers”, which comes with that funding.

Let me state categorically that I am a friend of the BBC; I love its output. Today, my remarks are strong because I think my friend is in trouble. Too many people from ethnic minority backgrounds who work in the organisation have contacted my office over the past few weeks to say that they cannot speak up because they do not want to be labelled a troublemaker. Well, I have no problem with being called a troublemaker. That is why I and so many colleagues are in this House to speak up on their behalf.

Between 1999 and the inquiry of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport into the future of the BBC in 2014—within 15 years—the BBC ran 29 initiatives aimed at black and ethnic minorities, but the situation is still not improving. In September 1999, it published a statement of promises, pledging better to reflect the UK’s diversity. In 2000, it published a cultural diversity action plan, promising that the corporation would “reflect the UK’s diversity in our programmes, our services and workforce”.

It set up a new recruitment agency to reach out to “different communities”, a mentoring programme and a development scheme to enable “minority ethnic staff to compete for senior positions within the BBC”.

In 2011, the BBC published “Everyone has a story: The BBC’s Diversity Strategy 2011-15”, which outlined its “determination to visibly increase our diversity on and off air”.
and five separate

“strategic equality and diversity objectives”.

Diversity was outsourced to various divisions, which were told to create divisional diversity action plans and diversity action groups.

In 2014, Tony Hall unveiled yet another action plan to tackle on and off-air representation, stating “we need to do more”.

He announced a senior leadership development programme, under which six talented people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds would come forward, and a diversity creative talent fund.

We heard last year, and we are hearing it again, that at the end of this month the BBC will publish an equality and diversity report. Yet another one is coming very shortly, and it is all going to be fixed—£3.7 billion! It will be another strategy to get our teeth sunk into, and we will fix this challenge. If the BBC is genuinely a universal broadcaster, we have to ask these questions. This can no longer be about skills training. The skills are there. This is about the institution and the change that is now required. That is why we brought this debate forward.

I am growing tired of strategies, new approaches, action plans, initiatives and press releases. The net result of all these strategies and initiatives is, sadly, very little. Despite the good intentions, the rhetoric has not been matched by real progress. In 2011, the proportion of the BBC’s workforce that was from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background was 12.2%. Tracked against the progress of its 2011-15 strategy, we see modest rises to 12.3% in 2012, 12.4% in 2013, 12.6% in 2014 and 13.1% in 2015. In four years, we have seen a 0.9 increase. In 2003, BAME employment was 10%, so in 12 years, it has increased the proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic staff by just 2.2 percentage points.

That is still not reflected by an increase in management roles in the organisation. We can all go into Broadcasting House and see black staff in security and at the junior end, but when we walk into that newsroom and think about the editorial decisions that are being made, we must ask ourselves, “Is this really representative of our country as a whole?”

Everyone I have spoken to recognises that over the past two to three years, on-screen representation has improved significantly. There are areas of the BBC’s output that, frankly, are fantastic. I have young children, and children’s television is one of the areas that is really diverse. Anyone here who has teenagers or slightly older children who watch BBC Three’s output will know that it is really diverse. Documentary-making is another strong area. Last year, my constituency was portrayed in a documentary called “This Is Tottenham”, which showed the lives of people in that part of north London. However, in many areas, there is still a huge amount of work to be done.

Let us take the headlines around the BBC’s new drama “Undercover”, which people can see on BBC iPlayer at the moment. It is a great drama, but it was announced with great fanfare as “The first time we’ve had a drama with two black leads.” In 2016? That was not news in the 20th century, let alone in this century.

We must also ask questions about current affairs. I love sitting next to Andrew Neil on a Thursday night, when I occasionally stand in for my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). Andrew Marr is a great guy, as are John Humphrys and David Dimbleby—when they allow me on the show, which they have not for almost five years. But they are white, patrician men. What does that communicate about our country—that there cannot be a voice that is not a southern one? That there cannot be a woman? That there cannot be someone from a diverse background? Those men are the arbiters of current affairs in this country. We have to be brave and hold our public broadcaster to account. It cannot just appoint the same old faces from the same old schools to the same old jobs. That is not acceptable from a public broadcaster that takes licence fee money from all our constituents. We must hold it to account and say that yes, those individuals are brilliant, but more needs to be done to get that diversity across the spectrum.

A lot of this comes back to senior management, and with systemic change what really matters is who the decision makers are. As I have said, there has been a lot of focus on training schemes and apprenticeships to open up the industry, but we need to change the culture and practices that stop black, Asian and minority ethnic people rising to the top; it should not just be that new schemes are set up to encourage more people to get in from the bottom. Only one of the BBC Trust’s 16 trustees is from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. The executive directors are really important, as they are the controllers—the people who really govern the decisions on the executive board. Of the BBC’s eight executive directors, none is from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background, and only two are women.

My question to the BBC is simple: what will it take to see a black, Asian or minority ethnic channel controller? When will we get there, I wonder? What have we got to do to see a black commissioner in an important area—current affairs, or drama—in the BBC? Is our public broadcaster really saying that across the population of this great country there are no individuals from a BAME background who could take up those posts today? That is what it has to explain to us over the coming weeks as it heads towards its diversity strategy.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the lack of diversity at the very top of the BBC, on its board, is it not now time to think about having a radical reorganisation of the BBC’s top management, potentially with elected directors for the board?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is good at radical ideas—he is known for them—and that is certainly one. I am not going to stake my name today on what the change should be, but clearly we have come to a point—perhaps that is why the issue is on the Floor of the House for the first time—where we want step change. Change cannot be incremental any longer. I say that because if we treasure our public service broadcaster and the universality that it represents, I am afraid that in a multi-platform world, where people can turn to other services, that broadcaster is going to be in deep trouble if it does not step up pretty quickly.

In 2015, 9.2% of the BBC’s senior leadership were black, Asian and minority ethnic. Looking beneath the surface, in TV the percentage drops to 7.1%; in news,
the figure for senior leaders who are BAME drops to 5.8%. The lack of diversity at management and senior levels creates a dangerous vicious circle. If those decision makers are not from diverse backgrounds, content and programming will lack fresh narratives and insight, and will not speak to the breadth of this country. When we have all the same people at the top, hiring people in their own image, the circle simply stays closed.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I really commend the right hon. Gentleman on his speech, which has highlighted the issue to me and educated me. I hope very much that, because of the brilliance of his speech and the force with which it is being given, the BBC board will insist on change.

Mr Lammy: Well, I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, but I am only halfway through—just hold fire.

Let us look at targets. The BBC has set itself a target of increasing representation in its workforce to 14.2% and increasing onscreen portrayal to 15%. As I have outlined, the track record does not fill me with absolute confidence that those targets will be met. The targets also fall short of those set by other broadcasters. Take Sky, for example. It has said that all new TV shows in Sky Entertainment will have people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in at least 20% of significant onscreen roles. All original Sky Entertainment productions will have someone from a BAME background in at least one senior role, either producer, series producer, executive producer, director or head of production—my God, that is tall. It has also said that 20% of writers on all team-written shows across all Sky Entertainment productions will be from a BAME background. Looking at the statistics from January and February 2016, Sky has also made progress in current affairs and news: on “Sky News” 15% of interviewees were BAME; on “Murnaghan”, the figure was 17%; on “Sunrise” it was 22%; and it was 17% on “Ian King Live”.

Let us look at Channel 4’s targets in its “360° Diversity Charter”. One is that by 2020 20% of all Channel 4 staff will be BAME, a 33% increase from the 15% figure in 2015. Another is that of the top 120 people in the Channel 4 organisation—executive teams, heads of department and senior commissioning executives—15% will be from a BAME background, a big increase on the current figure of 8%.

Instead of being behind the curve, the BBC should be setting the gold standard. This issue does not affect only in-house teams. Broadcasters commission a lot of their work from independent production companies. The relationship between the BBC and those third-party suppliers is growing in importance, because the BBC is moving towards a new, more fluid production model, whereby BBC Studios will operate in the market and produce programmes for other broadcasters, and the BBC will allow independents to compete for more of the corporation’s commissioning spend.

If we look at the BBC’s editorial guidelines, which apply to all content made by a third party working for the BBC, we will see 19 separate subsections and eight appendices, but not one is specifically related to diversity and representation. Nudity, violence, the watershed, the right of reply, privacy, religion, editorial integrity and conflicts of interest are all covered specifically and in great detail, but there is not a single section on diversity.

In a 228-page document, there is not even a mention of the 14.2% target that the BBC is setting for itself internally. In section 4, on impartiality, production companies sign up to providing a breadth and diversity of opinion, but they do not sign up to any diversity in terms of equality and representation.

The BBC’s latest equality and diversity report, published in 2015, made this promise: “We will be clear with our suppliers about our diversity requirements so that they are able to deliver on them.”

To find out just how clear the BBC is with its suppliers about diversity, I submitted a freedom of information request asking to see the agreements that BBC makes with its supplier for one show, “Question Time”. I was told that the information would not be supplied to me because it is “held for the purposes of journalism, art or literature”.

Although the BBC is promising to be clear with its suppliers about diversity requirements, it is altogether less clear with its audience and those who pay the licence fee about what exactly those diversity requirements are. I therefore ask the Minister to look at the freedom of information rules that are enabling the BBC to be less than wholly transparent on these issues. I am sure that he, and all Members here today, would agree that a publicly funded body must adhere to the highest standards of openness. Over 50% of the FOI requests put to that organisation are denied. That cannot be right.

Mr MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman’s point about transparency and openness is very important. The Liberal Democrats used to be in the position that the Scottish National party is in now, and I have asked “Question Time” and “Any Questions” for an impression of what the Liberal Democrat representation on those programmes was like compared with the representation of the SNP at the moment. An answer was not forthcoming.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman makes his case.

By comparison, Channel 4’s diversity commissioning guidelines cover on-screen and off-screen diversity, and all commissions must adhere to one guideline in each section. For example, at least one lead character must be black or minority ethnic, disabled or LGBT. At least one senior off-screen role—executive producer, director, series editor, or executive producer—for all factual and scripted programmes must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability, and at least 15% of the entire production team or crew of a factual or scripted programme must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability. Channel 4’s expectations seem altogether much clearer, which means that production companies know exactly what is expected of them.

Last month, Trevor Phillips presented research to the Oxford Media Convention that showed that in 2015 BBC 1 had a 21.9% audience share, but only 13.3% of BAME audience share. BBC 2 had a 5.7% share of the total audience, which falls to 3.3% for the BAME audience. Because the BBC is failing in its duty to reflect modern Britain, ethnic minorities are well within...
their rights to ask why they should continue to pay their licence fee at all, given that it is used to fund a service that does not serve them.

The BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky have come together to create a diversity monitoring scheme to provide detailed, consistent and comparative data on diversity, and that will go live imminently. Project DIAMOND is a groundbreaking project that will shine a light on the industry, and provide independent data to show where we are with diversity in broadcasting so that we can make comparisons. Its monitoring and transparency will be clear, which I welcome, and I am sure the Minister will say more about that.

The current BBC charter runs to the end of this year, so renewal provides a vital opportunity to drive real change if the BBC wants to be serious about being a leader in delivering diversity. I believe that diversity requirements should be stated clearly in the new charter as one of the BBC’s public purposes, and a core value at the heart of what the BBC does. We need something stronger, more ambitious and—importantly—more tangible than the current requirement for it to represent the UK, its nations and communities, which is frankly too woolly. I call on the Minister to assure the House that diversity will be front and centre of new ongoing debates about the BBC charter.

A new public purpose should be written into the BBC charter, including a specific commitment accurately to reflect the diversity of the UK in its on-screen and off-screen workforce, and in its programming, including, but not limited to, promoting equal opportunities irrespective of age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or gender reassignment. It is time to update the BBC’s founding mission for the 21st century so that it becomes “to inform, educate, entertain and reflect”. Writing diversity into the heart of the charter would be a bold first step. If we are to have another strategy at the end of this month and more initiatives, the BBC must propose specific actions to secure progress each year, together with details of how that progress will be measured objectively. To be taken seriously, we need answers to the questions of “how?” and “when?”

Money talks, and money alone will drive real change. We have hard evidence of what works when it comes to addressing under-representation. The BBC had a problem when it came to representing the nations and regions, so it did something about that which involved a dedicated pot of money. It did not rely on mentorship or apprenticeship schemes — there was structural change, and the move to Salford was part of that. Since 2003, there has been a 400% increase in the number of network programmes produced in the English regions. As of this year, half the network spend will be outside the M25, and the amount of spend in Scotland and Wales has matched or exceeded the size of the population since 2014. I absolutely agree with that direction. I was a Culture Minister at that time, and there were real concerns in Scotland because it paid 9% of the licence fee and had none of the programming. That has changed in recent times, although I am sure there is more to do.

The BBC’s core purpose is to represent the UK’s nations, regions and communities. It seems to have got there or beyond for the first two, but what about BAME communities? I am sure that moving production spend out of London has not led to more employment for people of Chinese heritage in Liverpool, of Somalian heritage in Cardiff, or of Pakistani heritage in Glasgow. A focus on improving the representation of nations and regions has also seen areas with high concentrations of BAME people—such as Birmingham and London—lose out. We need something similar to act as a counterbalance, and if that is not in this next strategy, it will have failed. The holistic approach has not worked. After 15 years of focusing on people, skills and mentoring, it has not delivered the step change that we need in the institution.

This is a seminal moment for the BBC and its position as our national broadcaster, and it must rise to the challenge. It is not enough for the director general to make the right noises. The will is clearly there, but the institution is big and it will take more than good intentions to turn such a huge tanker around. We cannot rely on individuals pushing the agenda; we need systemic change.

Charter renewal is around the corner. We have reached a point of fragmentation in the TV industry where more content is available than ever before and viewers are consuming it online, and watching it on demand and through Netflix and Amazon Prime. They are challenging the BBC’s position at the centre of our national conversation. That national conversation is hugely important, especially when things go wrong and we see something awful. I was culture Minister in 2005 when there were those terrible bombs in London, and we looked to the BBC for that national conversation.

Let us get it right. We cannot have people from BAME backgrounds turning to mother-tongue cable stations because they do not see themselves represented on the BBC. Take the Chinese community in this country. My God, it has been here for more than 100 years — talk about invisible! That community is not just invisible in this House — I recognise that the Government have made some progress on their Benches — but it is totally invisible among our broadcasters. I secured this debate because it is time for change, and I welcome the leadership shown by the Minister, and the fact that so many people have gathered across the House to debate these issues this afternoon.

2.27 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): In December 2014 the Royal Television Society produced a video called, “Behind the Scenes at Newsnight”. It was an information film for young people about the TV industry and ran for 11 minutes, yet not a single person from a BME background was included—by BME I am referring to people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds

Seven months ago in September 2015, the controller of Radio 5 Live gave a 16-minute presentation about his ambitions for the station. In it he made no reference to the BME audience and included no BME voices. The video that went with the presentation showed no BME staff or any other BME people on screen. The embarrassment continues anecdotally, with many public figures commenting on the lack of diversity at the BBC. When he was BBC director general, Greg Dyke described his organisation as “hideously white”, and the current director general, Tony Hall, has said that it needs “to do better”.

I expect that colleagues will cite other shortcomings in the BBC’s diversity record, and yes, there is much more to be done and it needs to do better. However, I
have also seen it show leadership and create positive change in several areas in recent years. For example, as a result of Barbara Slater’s vision as head of sport at the BBC, and her close work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, a step-change was achieved in the media coverage of women’s sport in the UK. Sky and BT Sport played their part, but the BBC was an essential part of the mix, and that should not be taken away from it. To my mind, if the BBC can tackle gender diversity in sport—not easy—then why not racial diversity within its own organisation?

Perhaps we are starting to see some encouraging signs. In 2014, the BBC launched a plan, with targets and a budget, to address some of the issues I have raised. Eighteen months later, some progress has been made in the recruitment and commissioning of BME writers. Sky and Channel 4 have their plans, too, with even more ambitious targets and budgets. A word of caution to all, however. The metrics are important for measuring and monitoring, but they can sometimes be driven by short-term thinking and quick wins. That will not achieve sustainable change. For real change, the dinosaurs really do have to go, with the body corporate rewired and an organisation created with diversity running through its veins; an organisation where people can be recruited and promoted, can feel comfortable and part of the place, and are able to succeed at every single level not for the sake of tokenism and targets, but because they have the right skills and reflect the world in which we live.

Mr Gareth Thomas: Does the hon. Lady share my view that there will not be real change on a whole series of accountability questions until ordinary licence fee payers have the opportunity to have a direct say in who runs the BBC at the very top? BME licence fee payers are not really going to be able to hold the BBC to account on diversity at the BBC until they have the opportunity to directly elect at least one or two BBC directors.

Mrs Grant: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I note the radical ideas expressed by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). To get this right, we need to have unusual ideas put into the mix, and they need to be discussed. In some ways, people talk with their purse. At the end of the day, if the British people are not happy with representation in BBC programming they will not pay the licence fee. In a way they do have a direct say, because they will not spend their money. However, I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says. I think it is interesting.

A nation’s diversity is something to be celebrated and broadcast far and wide, especially in places where racism and discrimination abound. The BBC could and should be leading the way on this, with 23 million viewers every week worldwide in 33 different languages. Just before Armistice Day last year, the BBC ran some programmes about soldiers and spies who made a big difference during the war. One featured a Sikh man and another featured a Muslim man, both of whom fought very bravely to defend our country and made incredible sacrifices. This coverage at a time of great national pride illustrated the very positive link between Britishness and multi-culture. I am in no doubt that the stories will have changed some perceptions and some behaviour, but we need the BBC to make more programmes like this: programmes that attract a diverse audience while still entertaining the wider population. If such programmes were commonplace, then so too would be the demand for production teams, writers and actors from a BME background. The Lenny Henry plan for ring-fenced budgets could greatly assist this much-needed step-change.

It would seem that younger graduates tend to have difficulty in finding work at the BBC. Yvonne Thompson, from the European Federation of Black Women Business Owners, remarked rather sarcastically that perhaps applicants should use English-sounding names such as Camilla Winterbottom or Jonty and see if they get a call-back then. A similar point was made by our Prime Minister at party conference last year, not specifically in relation to the BBC but in relation to discrimination in recruitment generally. Since then, the Government have announced that companies and organisations that together employ more than 1.8 million people will recruit on a name-blind basis. To its credit, the BBC is a participant, but it could go even further. It could disclose, on a voluntary basis, detailed BME data on recruitment, retention, promotion and pay. This type of transparency not only helps to focus the mind, but sets a great example for others to follow. Some BME data were published in one of the annexes to the BBC’s 2015 diversity report, but the tables were not user-friendly. They were very hard to read—I spent several hours on them. There was no real narrative that drew conclusions and no real analysis, so we remain pretty blind to the facts in an area where greater transparency is desperately needed, and where lessons could and should be learned.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that there would be some benefit in redacting not just the names of people on applications but the school and university they attended, in particular independent schools, have on people gaining employment? Recent research by the Sutton Trust shows that in the fields of law and journalism and so on, the school and university that people have gone to have a massive impact on applications.

Mrs Grant: That is a very interesting idea. We have to do everything we can to make sure we attract the most diverse talent, especially in the BBC and on other stations. The more diverse the talent, the better the programmes and the higher the ratings. The business case is made. I think this is a moving target. Let us see how the name-blind goes, but we have to look at everything.

The Government have a significant role to play, too. I want to take this opportunity to mention the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). His personal commitment and personal determination to shine a light on the need for diversity in the creative arts and media is absolutely commendable. I know it is very close to his heart. I hope all Ministers across all Government Departments take a note of his fine example as they strive, over the next four years, to achieve the Prime Minister’s 2020 vision for equality and diversity.

Charter renewal is an ideal opportunity for the Government. During the process, they could really help to drive change and position the BBC as a world leader...
in delivering diversity. I would like to see the remit of the public person strengthened, too. Diversity commitments should be secured and diversity targets set to run over the lifetime of the next charter. Governance must be tightened, too, to truly represent the UK—its nations, regions and communities. The BBC’s governing body, the Trust, must itself better reflect diversity in the UK. In the 2015 BBC diversity report, of 23 senior people employed by the Trust, none was from a BME background. Currently, only one of the 12 trustees is non-white.

Culture change is never an easy process, but it is the only way to achieve real change. Channel 4 is managing it and is doing it really well. It has done it because of three key factors: commitment, leadership and money. The BBC needs to embrace this issue honestly and from the very top. It has done the surveys, set the targets, and has its plans and its budget. It knows exactly what the problems are. It just needs to get on now and do it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Just before I call the next speaker, we have more or less the right amount of time for every single Member to get in with about 10 to 12 minutes, but not much more than that if we want to start the wind-ups at 4.30 pm. With that in mind, I call Julie Elliott.

2.38 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing, with help from the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), this interesting and important debate. The British public’s love of, interest in, and concern about the BBC is an issue that crosses party lines.

Since joining the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport in October last year, I have spent much of my time reading written submissions from the BBC and attending oral evidence sessions on BBC charter renewal. I am therefore pleased to have this opportunity to speak on an issue I feel strongly about: regional diversity and fair funding at the BBC. I acknowledge all the issues raised about the diversity agenda, and I am sure I will agree with other such issues raised in the course of the debate. That is one of the points about this debate: it is so wide-ranging. It is not a narrow area of diversity we are concerned about but a very broad one.

I pay tribute to the BBC. It is not perfect—I will shortly make some constructive criticisms about things it is not getting right and some suggested improvements—but it is worth reiterating that I and many of my constituents feel a deep well of affection for the BBC and its unique position in British society. Arts Council England was right when it described the BBC as “an invaluable cultural asset to the UK; it is an internationally recognised example of what British creativity and commitment can achieve”.

The BBC charter, which runs until the end of the year, is clear in stating the BBC’s public purposes, which include representing the nations, regions and communities of the UK. At present, it is falling short on this commitment. There are two central issues at stake: one is financial, and the other—more intangible but no less important—is reflecting diverse experiences. I will start with the financials. At £873 million, the north of England’s contribution to the BBC licence fee is the second highest in the country, yet the north contributes well under 10% to the BBC’s spending per region, with just £48 million. This compares with £150 million for Wales and £2.5 billion for London.

The migration of BBC services, production and output to Salford has been successful in somewhat rebalancing the concentration of BBC services away from London, but just as London is not the UK, so Salford is not the north—or rather it is not where the north ends. The north extends all the way to Sunderland and beyond. It is a misplaced belief that if the BBC places staff and commissioning services in Salford, it can tick off the north from its checklist; that is not the case. There is certainly no lack of talent outside London and Salford. The University of Sunderland, in my constituency, has one of the best journalism courses in the country in its outstanding faculty of art, design and media. The BBC has a role in working with these types of young, talented, enthusiastic people to support them in building their careers.

As a major player, the BBC has enormous spending power and provides a major stream of capital to the UK’s creative industries. In 2013, the BBC spent £2.4 billion across television, radio and online, making it the single largest source of funding for original content, excluding sport. For every pound of the licence fee the BBC spends, it generates £2 of economic activity. By failing to spend money in all areas of the country, the BBC is denying regions such as the north-east the economic benefits that licence fee spending can bring.

The BBC has been making progress. The north of England accounts for just under a quarter of the UK’s population, and programming spending has increased from just over 10% in 2007 to over 17% in 2013. This improvement is welcome, but clearly there is further to go. I understand that the BBC is under pressure to reduce costs and that there is a danger of it spreading investment too thinly, but it must be possible for a national broadcaster at least to have commissioning bases in all the major regional centres, and to develop a fair commissioning and business strategy that encourages production across all parts of the country.

My second point is about the representation of regions such as the north-east on BBC television, radio and online. Perhaps the greatest strength of the BBC is that it is a truly national organisation, engendering shared experiences and making our imagined community a little more real, but this will begin to break down if people do not feel that their experiences are being reflected in the BBC’s output. Figures from the BBC Trust in 2014 showed that only 52% of UK adults believed that the BBC performed well in representing their nation or region.

We must not underestimate the impact on a young child’s life and development when they see and hear someone on the television, be it in drama or newsrooms, who looks and sounds like them. It gives them the reassurance that their life experience is not a lonely one, and that people like them are going through many of the same issues. In children’s television, my region has a history of success, with programmes such as “Byker Grove”, “The Story of Tracy Beaker” and “The Dumping Ground”. I think also of Byker Grove’s very own Ant and Dec, probably two of the most successful people in...
television today. [HON. MEMBERS: “They’re from Newcastle!”] I’ll let them off being from Newcastle. There is diverse talent, reflecting different experiences, geographies, cultures, cuisines and accents.

We expect a lot from the BBC, both as licence fee payers and as viewers. We expect BBC output to be high quality, original, innovative, challenging, engaging and trustworthy; to reflect the diverse British experience; and to be widely available. Every region and country has the right to see itself represented by the national broadcaster. At present, the BBC falls short on this commitment, and I look forward to working with it, as a constituency MP and a member of the Select Committee, to ensure that this commitment is met, and to help make the BBC even better.

I would like specifically to consider diversity of opinion on the BBC. Britain has always been proud to have a broadcaster free from advertisements and Government interference, but I cannot be proud of a supposedly impartial public service that, time after time, takes the opportunity to promote political opinions. This relentless promotion of opinion is not right, mainly because impartiality is supposed to be at the core of the BBC’s commitment to its audience. Impartiality should ensure that its output can be trusted by people of all political opinions in the UK’s cities, towns and villages, but I believe that that trust is increasingly being lost.

Last December, the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I am a member, took evidence from Rona Fairhead and Richard Ayre of the BBC Trust. During the sessions, it became clear that the BBC’s impartiality relied on three safeguards: the editorial judgment of programme makers using the editorial guidelines, the impartiality reviews, and the feedback from “50 million viewers and listeners”.

First, there are the trust’s editorial guidelines, which are intended to help editors and producers to produce work that meets the highest ethical and editorial standards. They include a chapter on impartiality, because the royal charter requires impartial coverage. However, the chapter is only a framework enabling editors and producers to interpret the impartiality requirements. In an organisation as large as the BBC, that is simply not sufficient as a primary safeguard. Furthermore, it has been shown that minor editorial decisions build up to form a larger pattern that, cumulatively, creates unintentional bias.

Secondly, there are the trust’s regular impartiality reviews, which are intended to serve as studies to establish how content evolves over a significant period, and are also said to produce objective and in-depth analysis. The Bridcut report of 2007 is quite a good example of how an impartiality review should not be conducted. Almost 70% of the committee that produced the report consisted of BBC staff and trustees. Its members did not aim to look for systematic bias, so, unsurprisingly, they did not find it.

Then there was the Prebble review of 2012, which was intended to be a “Review of the Breadth of Opinion... in the BBC’s Output”.

In other words, the authors of that report were also not directly looking for systematic bias. News-watch, the public service monitor, has found that problems were ignored by the researchers. For instance, the report failed to explain a 50% drop in the number of UK Independence party appearances during the five years between 2007 and the time leading up to the report. Instead, it suggested that the UKIP’s views were represented by the Conservative party. I am quite sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister would disagree robustly with that conclusion.

The final safeguard is supposedly the complaints procedure, with feedback received from those “millions of views and listeners”. However, the complaints procedure is patronising, complicated and inefficient. In fact, News-watch went so far as to say that the procedure’s automatic response was to discourage and dismiss complainants.

The next issue that I wish to raise involves programme content. The BBC is not allowed to express opinions on current affairs. Can it be right that, as the Daily Mail tells us, Jonathan Dimbleby urged his audience to write to their MPs to save the BBC from further cuts? The alleged incident took place just a week after the Culture, Media and Sport Committee published a critical report about the BBC. Dimbley’s call to arms was made at the end of “Any Questions?”, in front of the Hereford audience.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Let me first congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) really believe that the Daily Mail is the best arbiter of the impartiality or otherwise of a great institution like the BBC?

Mr Turner: I was not requiring it to do that. I was requiring it to quote what Mr Dimbleby said, and what he said was a fact, quoted by the Daily Mail. What he said was never broadcast by the BBC, because that would have been a massive breach of its agreement.

There are still many people who believe in the BBC’s strong ethos of impartiality, and believe that editors’ judgment is enough to protect it. The impartiality of the BBC is ingrained in our national psyche. However, we see the BBC fail in that regard over and over again. Earlier this year, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) resigned from his post as a shadow Foreign Office Minister live on “Daily Politics”. The programme was criticised for the decision to broadcast the Minister’s resignation. The BBC defended itself, saying that it was supposed to break news stories, but an output editor on “Daily Politics”, Andrew Alexander, revealed in a blog that BBC News political editor Laura Kuenssberg had made a deal with the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth on his resignation before the show was filmed. The fact that the blog post was later
deleted suggests that the BBC was not breaking the news, but planning to create a central bit of the news story; that is the difference.

For most television, viewings and awards determine the right to exist. Programme makers follow the sensational path to attract an audience, and that is understandable, but the BBC does not need to create sensation, as its existence is protected through the royal charter and the accompanying agreement; on the contrary, the BBC is charged with reflecting the UK’s diversity, being independent and upholding impartiality.

Robert Mosey, a former editorial director and the director of London 2012 at the BBC, gave his view on 25 February in the *New Statesman*:

“I do not believe that there is systemic bias. The BBC will be meticulous in allocating airtime for contributors and its journalists will display their characteristic professionalism – but they will also need to have some empathy with the opposing camps.”

That is correct. Mosey unintentionally demonstrates a point. Systemic bias is difficult to detect, and it is especially difficult to detect when it is a minor decision that leads to a larger pattern of systemic bias. It is obvious that the employees of a company will determine the tone of the output, and that is what is fundamentally wrong with the BBC. It is the inability of staff to be objective about the overall output. What has the BBC done to rectify those issues when they have been voiced? It has done nothing other than discourage and dismiss them. The BBC’s bias is a big issue, but it is not the thing that worries me most; it is its unwillingness to examine itself and its output critically that worries me. If the BBC’s own complaints procedure lacks independence and the organisation rejects criticism, something must be fundamentally wrong.

Finally, this is not a criticism of the majority of staff and editors working for the BBC. They cannot be expected to solve a problem that has been created by the system in which they work. The answer must be stronger and more efficient safeguards; consideration of the cumulative output of the BBC, rather than of individual programmes; and a new willingness to look self-critically to ensure that it continues to deserve its unique and privileged position. All of that can come only from the trustees.

2.57 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) on securing this important debate.

I wish to talk about two things: optics and solutions. The optics of what we do are very important, both in this place and in the BBC. There is the saying, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” Sometimes, I like to change that to, “You can be what you can see”, which means that we need to see more diversity in the BBC. I accompany that with a short story.

A friend of mine—an actor—and I were talking many years ago. He said he could not find any jobs in the UK, although he had been on “Absolutely Fabulous”, and he was going to America. We had a big debate on whether that was a good idea. I was sad to see him leave, but he did very well—his name is Idris Elba, and he is now a household name. It is a shame that we could not keep his talent in-house in the first place.

Black people get very excited when they see other black people on TV. I remember the days of T-Mobile, when the phone would ring after 7 o’clock—the calls were free then—and someone would ask, “Did you see that black person on this TV station?” It was the talk of the community. Optics are just so important.

Mr Umunna: I am loving my hon. Friend’s speech; she is so right. When she talks about programmes, I think of “Desmond’s” and the legendary “The Real McCoy”. She illustrates the fact that it is not just who is in front of the camera that matters; commissioning editors and producers are equally important if our different communities are to be accurately portrayed on the BBC, rather than the stereotyping of different communities that, unfortunately, we have seen year after year after year.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point, and I shall return to it later in my speech.

I do not watch the BBC that often, but I remember watching “EastEnders” in my younger days and thinking how strange it was, given that I am from the east end, that there were hardly any black people in the programme. When a black person did appear, they were totally unrepresentative of any black person I had ever known. It was rather shocking, and that point applies to commissioners and the way in which programmes are made. It is so important to get this right, but if we do not understand the culture or what it means to be, say, a disabled person, a black person or a woman, we will get it wrong.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham mentioned a new BBC drama, “Undercover”. When I saw the trailers, I immediately put the programme on my record settings. I have not watched it yet, but I recorded it only because there were two black lead actors, and I got excited again—also, Adrian Lester is recorded it only because there were two black lead actors, and I got excited again—also, Adrian Lester is quite hot! [Laughter.] You have come in at the right time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Shonda Rhimes, a producer, director and writer of amazing shows such as “How to Get Away with Murder” and “Scandal” was once asked how she felt about the diversity she brings to TV. She responded that what she is actually doing is “normalising” what we watch on TV. I hope the Minister will take that on board and demand that the BBC be normalised in this way.

The Olympics provide another example. Black people are extensively seen on the field and some are very well known in sport, yet during the coverage of the Olympics we rarely saw any black presenters. That made me wonder how that could happen. I am not sure whether a report was produced at the end of the Olympics coverage in 2012.

According to Directors UK, only 1.5% of programmes are directed by black, Asian or minority ethnic people. That is the fundamental root of many of the problems we face with programmes and programming. The number of BAME people working on TV fell dramatically when BBC and Channel 4 moved their productions outside London. Why was that problem not considered when they were thinking about the move? Why did they not think of retaining at least the BAME people they had, if not building on their number?
The BBC has a problem with recruitment; it always recruits internally first, which means it will recruit only from the people currently employed. If they are already “hideously white”, only white people will be recruited and promoted. The BBC’s recruitment process therefore needs to change. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) mentioned the industry professionals, and it is difficult for them to see and understand the beauty and diversity of written or other materials if they do not understand them. The only way to address the problem is to change some of the industry’s professionals. It is incumbent on the Minister to ensure that the BBC does that—and does it quickly.

Mr Andrew Turner: I am thinking about the people who are concerned about the number of outs, as opposed to the number of remain, who are employed by the BBC. I bet it is rather little.

Dawn Butler: I am not quite sure that I follow the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I thought it was linked to the EU.

Mr Turner: It was.

Dawn Butler: It has already been said that anything and everything the Government think is important is written into the BBC charter. There is no excuse for that not to happen. The charter already takes into consideration how many current affairs programmes and children’s programmes should be made, as well as the number of programmes that should be made in Scotland and Wales and so on. If the BBC and the Government are serious about diversity, this should be written into the charter with the threat of the BBC losing money if it does not fulfil its obligations. I hope that the Minister will tell us that that will be the case.

Ofcom oversees the television industry but not the BBC. I hope that will change. In my opinion, and according to many of the people who were asked, the BBC board needs to be completely independent. Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English audience panels represent the interests of their regions to Ofcom, but there is no BAME audience panel. Money has gone into the parts that are represented by audience panels, so it stands to reason that establishing such a panel is the way to go if we want to see more money go into the black, Asian and minority ethnic area.

Mr Andrew Turner: A few seconds ago my hon. Friend said she thought the BBC board ought to be completely independent and, presumably, free from Government interference over its appointments. Would she be willing to consider elections to the board as a way of achieving true independence?

Dawn Butler: True to form, my hon. Friend offers a radical solution. Yes, I agree that there should be elections. They would produce interesting results, and that is what we need.

Ofcom should ensure that the black, Asian and minority ethnic population has a systematic process to allow the industry to hear its views and concerns by setting up an advisory board. I cannot stress strongly enough to the Minister how important such a solution is. We often talk about problems in this place, without talking about the solutions. I hope that the Minister will take this on board.

Mr Umunna: Where we see the hard end, where things go wrong if we do not have appropriate diversity, is in the representation of our Muslim communities. The rise in Islamophobia is due in no small part to certain broadcasters—this applies to the BBC and to others—putting up so-called community leaders who purport to speak for their community but have no mandate whatever to do so. Having a panel of the kind that my hon. Friend describes would increase the chances of the BBC and others getting this right and properly representing the Muslim community in particular.

Dawn Butler: Absolutely. This is an important solution to the problem. We would not have to rely on people thinking they knew who to go to. It would open and widen the field to members of the community who actually knew who to go to.

The advisory board would be based on the same model as the advisory committees in each nation that provide Ofcom with detailed expert insight into the challenges facing citizens and consumers in different parts of the UK.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic interests would be served through representation on Ofcom’s content board and the Communications Consumer Panel. The UK’s BAME community currently represents a larger proportion of the population than any specific nation apart from England, yet often makes up less than 12% of any advisory board, meaning that its voice is not heard as clearly as those of the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Minister has a chance to put that right and, with his enthusiasm and commitment to the cause, I am sure he will.

Mr MacNeil: I want to help the hon. Lady by saying that I hope her ambition is greater than just matching the voice of people from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I hope that the ethnic minority voice will be stronger than ours, which we sometimes feel is not strong at all. I wish her well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have an informal 10-minute limit, and the Members who are intervening were hoping to be next on the list. I would not like to have to put them down the list.

Dawn Butler: I am coming to the end of my speech, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. My ambitions for my community are always as big as possible and know no bounds.

My next plea relates to the “The Real McCoy”. There has been a long-standing campaign for the BBC to bring the show back, but one of the reasons that has not happened is that the archive has apparently been lost. If so, that says to me that the BBC felt—[Interruption.] An hon. Member in a sedentary position just kissed his teeth, which I am sure Hansard would not be able to print, but it basically means that what happened was very bad. [Laughter.] Will the Minister please investigate...
whether the archive has been lost? If it has, it is a shame and it shows that the BBC had little regard for such a funny, legendary programme.

Finally, the BBC is under threat from the internet. Many groups and communities run their own programmes online because their voices are not being heard. I was part of Star Media and had a show to connect with the Somali community. It will be a shame if the BBC does not grasp the nettle and run with our suggestions.

3.12 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Like others who have spoken, I am a BBC enthusiast, yet I find myself sharing the essential analysis of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who demanded not yet more good intentions from the BBC on diversity but serious structural and systemic change. I will use my few words to advocate one aspect of what that change might look like.

Much of my constituency does not feel properly represented in the BBC’s output. I cannot think of any programme that positively portrays a leading figure from the Tamil community. I have large Pakistani and Gujarati communities, and the way in which they are portrayed, if at all, is often far from positive. Somali and Chinese constituents will also wonder whether the BBC properly represents their communities. There will be greater chance of the BBC offering a more diverse output, with more opportunities for black and minority ethnic staff and actors, and of more resource being generated from the UK’s regions—a point made strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott)—if the BBC’s governance is significantly changed. There has always been a consensus in the House—sometimes somewhat reluctant and sometimes somewhat disguised—whereby Ministers, of whichever party, believed that overall control of the BBC Trust should be in their hands and that they should appoint to the BBC Trust or the board the great and good with whom they felt comfortable. The Government’s proposals for change reflect that ongoing consensus, albeit perhaps with less enthusiasm for the BBC than previous Conservative Governments have shown. I do not think a 13-strong unitary board, which I understand is currently envisaged—all appointed in one shape or form—is likely to achieve the governance needed to ensure the more diverse and representative BBC output that many of us want.

I therefore wonder whether it is now time to have a serious debate about converting the BBC’s governance at the top into a more mutual form, whereby licence fee payers elect all, or even just some, of the board’s directors. I commend the imagination of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—he is not in the House today—who joined me in a letter to The Times urging the BBC and the Government to contemplate converting the BBC into a mutual. Elections, although they will probably not be held immediately, will lead to a more diverse board. An elected board is more likely to have the output they deliver; the commissioning decisions they take; the pay of senior executives; or any other key decision they care to make. Our nominal ownership is a long way from real ownership. In practical terms, as licence fee payers we have outsourced responsibilities as licence fee payers have been outsourced to Ministers and to the great and good they choose to put in place. The BBC has an ownership deficit and an accountability gap. In practice, the current BBC Trust is accountable to no one beyond Ministers. Merging the Trust and the management board, with its members again largely chosen by Ministers, albeit perhaps with a little more external regulation, will still fail to address either that ownership deficit or that accountability gap.

The BBC operates in a highly competitive marketplace, as the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said. The days when 20 million people would sit down at the same time to watch “EastEnders”, an important programme though it still is, are all but gone. The companies and organisations that are succeeding are more likely to be the ones moving beyond a merely transactional relationship with their customers—and indeed their workforce—and building a real connection and relationship with them. The chance to vote every Sunday on who is axed from “Strictly Come Dancing” is not enough; a more radical and strategic involvement in shaping the decisions of the BBC should be available to our constituents, the licence fee payers.

The Co-operative party, which I am privileged to chair, has for some time been running a people’s BBC petition calling for the BBC to be mutualised, allowing licence fee payers to become members and owners, solving the ownership deficit and accountability gap at the same time. There are a number of ways in which such membership and ownership rights could be exercised, but the key is the right of members to choose representatives to sit on the board. That would require the Government to give up the bulk of their powers to appoint the BBC board and would achieve the independence my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) rightly cherishes so much.

Thorny issues such as executive remuneration or accountability on diversity, and tough decisions about how to prioritise resources, could be debated and decided at an AGM, open to all to attend in person or online. That would increase the accountability of those at the top of the BBC as they go about exercising their responsibilities. It would begin to deal with the accountability gap and would be an important line of defence against political interference.

Many organisations across the public and private sectors already have similar mutual structures. They include employee-owned businesses that are national treasures, such as John Lewis, whose board directors are elected. The National Trust, which is responsible for crucial assets that we all value, elects a members council from which its board is drawn. Nationwide gives all its customers a vote on the composition of the board. Foundation hospitals give patients a chance to influence who sits on key decision-making bodies. Many private sector companies across Europe, including big companies such as Deutsche Bank and EDF in France, ensure that at least one board member is directly elected by their employees. If mutual structures can work in other parts of the private and public sectors, surely it is time now to
think about whether they can solve some of the challenges that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and others have rightly pointed out, still exist in the BBC.

3.22 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh. I hope that I can add another layer of diversity, and something else that we can think about, to this excellent debate, led by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I congratulate him on bringing it to the Floor of the House.

Diversity is very important. It is certainly very important for somewhere like the BBC. I believe that a broadcaster should be a mirror to the society it seeks to serve when giving impressions of that country. The days are long past when we had the 1950s cut-glass accent as the only voice of our broadcaster. If other voices exist, they should be reflected on television—it should not just be received pronunciation accents, such as my own Hebridean accent, of course. The BBC must serve more widely; it must serve from the wind for the coming days. A recent example, on which it should be congratulated, is the tremendous Icelandic drama suspense series “Trapped”, set in Seydisfjördur in Iceland, which managed to get the whole Faroese ferry as a background prop. That, coming out of a nation with a population of 300,000, is quite something. It is something we should acknowledge and that I hope to develop later.

When the message is the UK and the vehicle that is being carried is the UK, the family of nations that are still in the UK and the people within those nations, in all their diversity, should be included in them. That is why I strongly support the right hon. Gentleman’s words. One of the first issues I had with the BBC when I was elected to this House in 2005 was that it had, in its infinite wisdom, decided to change the weather map. It changed the angle of the map, which meant that Scotland was hardly seen at all. That had important knock-on effects for many in my constituency who relied on the BBC’s isobar chart as their most important way of looking at the wind for the coming days. The BBC, with a bit of pressure, moved the weather map to a better angle to represent Scotland, but Scotland still does not have a proper geographical representation on BBC weather maps, and, of course, it is not getting the accurate forecasts that it deserves, although those who work there do a good job with that policy. In the meantime, other providers, such as XCWeather online, have replaced some of the services that the BBC was relied on to provide. I hope that even a decade later the BBC can revisit the policy of not having a map that is geographically representative, which I always thought was the purpose of maps.

I long since heard the line, “Life imitates art”—I think it was back in 1992 in New York. It is a powerful line. People should see themselves portrayed accurately, fairly and without stereotypes. That has to be true of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Liverpool, Sunderland, Tottenham or wherever. It has to be true also of women and ethnic minorities. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well in his quest again to be on “Question Time”. Happily, I have not been pestered to go into that bear pit myself, but I will certainly watch if he is on, and I wish him well.

The BBC has to reflect the languages of these islands, especially the older languages of Britain that pre-date the migration of English into Britain. I refer to Welsh and Gaelic, both Scottish and Irish Gaelic, as well as Cornish. I hope Cornish is being heard on the nation’s airwaves.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On the languages of the nations of the UK, does my hon. Friend agree that not only was it wrong of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to cut £1 million, which was 100% of the budget for BBC Alba, but it was particularly insensitive at a time when the Department was announcing £150 million for museums in London—although there is nothing wrong with supporting museums?

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I wonder if he is telepathic, as he guesses what I am about to say. It was very disappointing to see in the autumn statement that £1 million was to be cut by the Westminster Government from the Gaelic service of BBC Alba. That was virtually all the funding that the Westminster Government provided. It cannot be argued that that was part of the wider voodoo economics that is the Chancellor’s austerity cult, because as my hon. Friend said, it was at the time of the autumn statement, when an extra £150 million was found for museums in London. I understand the frustration of the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who feels that the north of England is being penalised, to the benefit of the south-east of England.

We look for diversity in broadcasting, and we look to the Government to maintain a little diversity in the funding of broadcasting across the UK. We have to ask ourselves what exactly is being funded. To me as a consumer of Gaelic TV and radio, it is a fantastic addition to life in Scotland. A recent series on Radio nan Gàidheal was outstanding, containing testimonies from old recordings of world war one veterans.

Listening to that, it struck me that a whole history of the UK—a whole history of global conflict, perhaps—was closed to many people who did not speak the language and did not understand the testimony of soldiers, their poems and songs from world war one, many composed in the trenches. But at least that material was being broadcast and brought to life, and was understood by those who spoke the language. In conversations afterwards I was able to make others aware, as I hope I am doing today, of that resource. I was left with the impression that my inability to speak Welsh means that another aspect of life in the UK—these islands in the north-west of Europe—and other experiences from world war one or world war two are closed to me. The job of broadcasters is to reflect the diversity of the languages as well as the ethnicities in the UK.

Radio nan Gàidheal does not just broadcast fantastic historical programmes. One of the programmes that I enjoy most, which gives me a laugh every night when I listen to it, is “Siubhal gu Seachd”. The pre-seven o’clock light entertainment programme with an old friend of mine, Derek “Pluto” Moirreach, is excellent. I hope and pray that he is never spotted and poached by English broadcasting. I hope he would not take the shilling and would stay with Radio nan Gàidheal.
On television, “Bannan” has been a greatly acclaimed drama series. Perhaps it could be exported to Iceland. If I have any criticism of BBC Alba, it is that it could import programmes more widely from other parts of the world and use Gaelic subtitles, not just English subtitles. I hope those at BBC Alba will listen to that friendly idea. Certainly, BBC Alba has opened up the Gaelic language to a wider audience in Scotland, with many who do not speak Gaelic tuning in regularly to listen to BBC Alba. The news programme “An Lá”, shows that the Gaelic side of the BBC in Scotland—at least BBC Alba—can deal with the world, whereas the English side at Pacific Quay navel-gazes or seems not to have the full confidence of its bosses. I think that is changing—I certainly hope it is—because it certainly has my confidence, and that of my party, to be as good at producing flagship news programmes as broadcasters in Copenhagen, Dublin, Reykjavik, and maybe even London. To be honest, I actually think that it would be better than London, because it would be more relevant to life in Scotland.

I flag that up in order to support the opening remarks from the right hon. Member. Member for Toxteth— and to hon. Members of Cabinet— because if a language pool of 68,000 is producing that fantastic television and radio, I have no doubt that a larger talent pool of ethnic minorities can produce absolutely fantastic programming. Furthermore, they will bring new and different perspectives that will enhance our lives as viewers and consumers. I wish him and his colleagues well in achieving exactly that. Some of us might even have our lives further enriched by learning phrases of Urdu, Punjabi or some of the African languages, which I hope are still thriving within the UK’s immigrant communities. After all, “Nation shall speak unto nation” was meant to be a two-way process.

I also note the comment from the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) that on a weekly basis 34 languages are broadcast by the BBC internationally across the World Service, which is a great resource and an almost unique selling point for the UK. It is a crown jewel and an access point. We have not lost international appeal towards influencing thinking at high levels of the BBC for the public. I certainly hope that it will go some way to getting 10 stitches in my forehead after playing shinty, I certainly hope it was an afterthought is not an unreasonable illustration of the BBC’s links to the centre of political power in the UK. Throughout the 20th century, to

shall speak unto nations. There is TG Ceathair in Ireland, and a number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland would like to get over the border and open the closed door that is the Irish Gaelic language, and more exposure to it would help us. Likewise, perhaps the Irish Republic might benefit from the tremendous programmes of BBC Alba. There is probably an opportunity for cross-fertilization there.

I again congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, which hopefully is useful for the public. I certainly hope that it will go some way towards influencing thinking at high levels of the BBC about the range of ideas and the diversity present in this debate.

3.33 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I will start by commenting on why the view of the BBC from this particular corner of London might be, as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said, quite different from the view from other parts of the UK. The clock and bell that form part of this parliamentary complex are among the most iconic symbols used by the BBC, and they can be read as symbolic of two significant characteristics of the BBC. The first is its close identification with London, from Alexandra Palace to Broadcasting House and Television Centre. They were not just bases for commissioning, recording and broadcasting programmes; they also often contributed to the identity of some programmes.

The period from the 1930s to the arrival of ITV in the 1950s was clearly a halcyon era for the BBC. At the time it genuinely provided part of the glue for the fabric of the UK, as people across the diverse nations and regions listened to and watched the same programmes. Despite the increase in self-directed programming, the majority of us still consume broadcasting live. What makes it to the schedule, at what time, and who appears on screen or behind the microphone help set the cultural context of us still consume broadcasting live. What makes it to the schedule, at what time, and who appears on screen or behind the microphone help set the cultural context for people right across the UK. The views and values that determine the content of entertainment, news and current affairs programmes have an impact on listeners’ and viewers’ perception of society around them.

Looking backwards, despite having had a Scot, John Reith, as its chief for the first 16 years of its existence, the BBC, particularly in respect of television, has been undeniably dominated by London. After leaving the BBC, Reith was briefly a member of this House before being transferred along the corridor to another place. He spoke seldom in his time there, but he briefly intervened on the subject of broadcasting, making a telling comment about the BBC:

“To-day…British broadcasting commands the respect and admiration of the whole world; an institution of which England—yes, and Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland—can be proud…”

That is an interesting formulation for someone from Stonehaven who was so closely associated with the corporation. Tackling the other nations of the UK on as an afterthought is not an unreasonable illustration of how the BBC works. That has certainly been the case when it comes to dividing up the budget.

The second issue that is flagged up by the use of these symbols is the BBC’s links to the centre of political power in the UK. Throughout the 20th century, to
become a BBC governor, it seemed obligatory to be a Member of, or to secure elevation to, their lordships’ House. Of the 65 people who served as BBC governors, more than 50 were Members of the House of Lords when they were appointed or became Members after their appointment. I found only one governor who was known to have refused an honour when it was offered. Nine of the 65 governors were born into the aristocracy or into well established political families, and 90% of governors had a degree, more than half from Oxbridge. My point is that those who directed BBC strategy for much of its life made no effort to make it look like us, in all our diversity.

My constituency is one of the most diverse in Scotland, and we are the richer for that. My children are proud to have both Scottish and Indian heritage. Our society is made up of people with different backgrounds, different lives and different perspectives, and our public broadcasting system should, surely, reflect and portray us all accurately and without stereotype. We need producers, writers, technicians and artists from all sorts of different backgrounds, with different genders, races, sexual orientations, disabilities and religions. We need that as a matter of course, not as an add-on. However, the BBC seems to find it difficult to accept that there are disparate voices that are entitled to be heard, and that those people are entitled to see their lives and experiences reflected by the broadcaster that they help to fund.

None of that is to suggest that the technical or artistic quality of what the BBC produces is not high. In very many instances, it quite clearly is. Because the BBC is free from many of the commercial pressures that bear down on private media companies, we should, surely, expect it to make the investment that is needed to build relationships with its audiences. If it had done so effectively, we might not be having this debate.

The BBC seems to find it difficult to get its position right when it tries to address the drain that it places on Scotland’s licence fees to sustain its London operation. I have to say to Tony Hall that the BBC’s approach to meeting Scotland’s expenditure quota is just not good enough. Rebadging an established programme such as “Question Time” as a Glasgow production is not an adequate response. “Question Time” is produced by a Welsh company that moves around the UK every week. The show was recently broadcast from somewhere that was labelled as Dundee; as someone who is originally from Dundee, it seemed to me to be closer tobrigadoon. That short-term fix is no substitute for grown-up commissioning, located in Scotland and with a budget that recognises the scale of Scotland’s licence fee contribution.

There are so many great productions coming from Scotland that would make for fantastic television. I would have liked to see the award-winning play “Black Watch” adapted for the screen. That play had five service personnel in America on their feet at its portrayal of the reality of the war in Iraq. If the play had been adapted, perhaps some of the creative Scots who had to move to London to break into media might have found it possible to stay.

It is long past time that Auntie BBC in London let go of her purse strings. Continued resistance to the demands of large sections of the audience, whether they be in the nations, the regions or in sections of the black, minority ethnic and other communities, will diminish support for licence-fee funded public service broadcasting. Of course, that might serve the purposes of some Members of this House and their friends in the private sector. Continued stalling by the BBC will certainly fuel demands from Scotland for control of broadcasting to pass to Holyrood. For my part and that of my hon. Friends, we would certainly be happy for that to happen.

These sentiments are not just mine; they are also reflected in the fact that Scots rate the BBC less positively than other parts of the UK. I was interested to hear of a debate in Edinburgh last night on the future of public sector broadcasting, and to hear David Puttnam’s endorsement of the view that what we have at present is too London-centric. He is right to identify the need to address how Scotland connects to the new governance structures being put in place as part of charter renewal. John McCormick, a former controller of BBC Scotland, made the telling point that the BBC has yet to catch up with devolution: it has the same structure now as it did before the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999. I look forward to seeing how that issue is addressed in the Puttnam report. It is clear that the disconnect extends to many within the BBC. When grand schemes are announced and then are not delivered, people’s motivation drops. Lenny Henry identified 29 diversity initiatives over 15 years, which is clearly a problem. I look forward to hearing him report on the result of his work into that.

As someone with a background in managing change and having responsibility for making sure diversity was taken seriously as an issue, embedded and made core to the business, I was keen to look for evidence that diversity is taken seriously by those in charge of the BBC. An essential requirement of such a change is commitment from those at the top not just to use fine words, but to walk the walk. Unless that happens, change will not be effected.

As Members will be aware, after a very long transition period, the BBC has moved away from having governors to having a board of trustees. I was pleased that the trustees are a more diverse group than their predecessors, but there is still an overreliance on certain key sectors. This time, the key sector is not politics, but financial services. However, I pay tribute to trustee Sonita Alleyne, who came closest to pursuing equalities as one of her personal objectives when she declared she was “passionate about ensuring that all audiences are served by the BBC and see their lives reflected in the programmes they watch and listen to.”

I wish her every success.

The BBC workforce diversity monitoring page is still advertising system changes due to take place in 2013 and referencing 2012 figures, so we must ask how anyone inside the BBC—never mind us outside it—is supposed to know what is going on. That rather stale attitude is reflected in other ways, such as how the BBC deals with audience selection. I have seen a form in which it asks prospective audience members whether they “suffered” from a disability. I know that words are just words, but such an attitude to disability is most unhelpful and not what we expect from our public service broadcaster. Interestingly, the TV workforce are considerably less likely than the working population to declare themselves as having a disability.
I will finish by touching on the issue of gender equality at the BBC. As with many large organisations, the BBC demonstrates a failure to attract, nurture and develop female talent. The corporation shows an all too common step down in the proportion of women among the higher grades of staff. With it now on its 18th director general, every one of them male, it is worth asking what a woman has to do to get appointed to the top job. If those at the BBC get cold feet at the prospect of appointing a woman to such a job, I have two words for them—Stella Rimington. If the boys who wanted to be Bond can stand having a woman in charge, I am sure the BBC can cope. If the BBC can take the risk of putting someone in the top job who does not fit the mould, that may be the biggest signal the corporation can send that the change it needs is under way. I pass that challenge to the BBC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission for them to address before the next vacancy is upon us.

3.43 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am from a generation in which the cathode ray tube ruled supreme. Many moments of my life have been mediated through the idiot box—sometimes it has been in the foreground, forcing me to sit up and take notice; sometimes it has been in the background, flickering like a fireplace.

When I first went to school, we were probably the only family on the block, in the hood or whatever we call it—I was dragged up—to have a black and white set. Among my early memories of TV is watching “The Black and White Minstrel Show” on a monochrome set. Even at my tender age, it was baffling to me. For those too young to remember that light entertainment show—is that what we would call it?—it ran for 20 years, from 1958 to 1978. It had white actors and singers blacked up to imitate American minstrels of the 19th century. At best, that can be described as bad taste, and there are many other words—unparliamentary language—that we could use to describe the programme. Even in the ’70s when I was tuning in, the accusation could have been made that the BBC was not representative of the population in modern Britain.

I welcome this debate and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Lammy) on bringing this subject to the House. There are parallels with this place. Ethnic minority representation both on TV and in politics is a case of “could do better”.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady’s speech, but I have sat through 45 minutes of this debate—I apologise that I was not here at the beginning. Mr Deputy Speaker—and must point out that this is an issue across the media. I suggest to the hon. Lady that the situation in this House, though sad, is considerably better than that across a large portion of the print media. I am surprised that journalism and political journalists have not been brought up. This is a broader problem, not just one at the BBC, and it is a much more acute problem at newspapers, magazines and across the print media.

Dr Huq: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that at The Guardian newspaper, they have all been to one of the two greatest—sorry, oldest—universities in this nation. I went to one of them myself, so perhaps I should not say that—pot calling kettle and all that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Indeed, I was. The Guardian is the only newspaper that consistently misspells my name. I just wanted to get that out.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): On that basis, we will want to know when it improves.

Dr Huq: That is a hazard for people with a name like mine or the hon. Gentleman’s. The sooner we take steps to acknowledge and address this situation, as we are doing today, the better. He is right that this is a sector-wide issue across the media.

It goes without saying that the nation’s front rooms should be illuminated by more than just white people, and clichéd representatives of white people at that. The late sociologist Stuart Hall used to talk about representations and reality. There is a circuit between them and they feed off each other.

Sadly, “The Black and White Minstrel Show” was not a complete one-off. As my viewing habits progressed, there was ITV’s “Love Thy Neighbour”, which ran from 1972 to 1976—a situation comedy in which the situation was having a black family next door. It seems absurd now. Astonishingly, the TV Times trailed the programme with the line:

“You can choose your friends but you can’t choose your neighbours”.

Also on ITV, there was “Mixed Blessings”, which the British Film Institute describes thus:

“Christopher and Muriel are in love. But since he is white and she is black, their marriage raises tensions among their respective families.”

The BFI—this programme is now a BFI classic—says that it “understandably reflects the confused racial attitudes of the time”.

Confused.com! The racist ranter Alf Garnett in “Till Death Do Us Part” was on the BBC. We can excuse the other two because they were on a commercial broadcaster. All of these things are now excused. It is like Jimmy Savile’s crimes. These things were acceptable in the ’70s, which was a pre-politically correct time.

We can cite examples of where we have not really moved forward. Sorry, I missed another programme—“It Ain’t Half Hot Mum”. There is a bit of a pattern in these things, because they all demonstrate an inferiority. In that show, it was with Asians. There are academic theories that show that things like slavery are based on the inferiority of another race. These programmes, to some extent, had that sort of attitude at their core.

A current programme I would cite, which has been going since 2012, is “Citizen Khan”. If I did not know what the year was—I do not know if people know that programme. It is the everyday tale of a Birmingham family of Muslims, but they are really quite backward. Again, it relates to the point about Islamophobia made by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who is no longer in his place. There is a
beardy-weirdy chap. They are not quite cutting off people’s hands, but I could imagine that being in a future episode.

**Mrs Helen Grant:** I just want to give a contrast to the terrible programmes the hon. Lady has recalled, which I remember too. I want to mention one positive and diverse story that I saw this morning on “BBC Breakfast”. It was about the 276 girls from Chibok in Nigeria who were abducted by Boko Haram. It was a brilliant story that was well done and well produced. It was the BBC at its best. It has also allowed me to say a little in this Chamber to highlight the fact that today is the second anniversary of the abduction of those girls. It is two years on and the vast majority are still not back. It is important that these girls are remembered. We must not forget them and must do everything we can to campaign for their safe return.

**Dr Huq:** The hon. Lady’s excellent point anticipates a later part of my speech, which is about the difference between black and Asian people over there, compared with the ones here.

I do not want to bash the BBC. I am a former employee of the corporation. Ealing and Acton are very BBC places—the wage slips we used to get were issued from Villiers House in Ealing Broadway. Ealing Studios is in my seat, as is the wig and prop department in Acton, where there are various warehouses. It is a very BBC area, on the whole. I have had 361 separate communications from people begging me to argue that the charter renewal should go through and that the Reithian principles—to educate, inform and entertain—should be preserved in the new settlement.

I do not want to attack the BBC, and the point has been correctly made that the examples that have been chosen are selective. People see the BBC as a world standard. My cousins in Bangladesh always say that when they want to know the truth they turn on the BBC to hear what is going on, which chimes with the hon. Lady’s point. But with power comes responsibility—it is an old phrase—and the mainstream media have enormous power. They do not have simply to reinforce; they can also challenge. If there is any broadcaster that does not run only on supply-oriented lines, it is the BBC.

As many Members have said, diversity does not just stop at ethnic diversity. There was the case of the “Countryfile” presenter Miriam O’Reilly, a woman in her 50s who was discriminated against just for reaching her half century. We could do a Venn diagram of all these things: gender, ethnicity—I would fit into quite a few of them—sexuality, regional diversity and class representation, because we want to see the people downstairs as well as those upstairs. We also need to know what is going off screen as well as on; it is all very well having a pretty person who can read the autocue, but we need to know what is happening at board level.

To go back to my couch potato days, Michael Buerk’s reporting on Ethiopia in the 1980s put the issues underlying what became LiveAid and BandAid on the agenda, but there is a worry that sometimes factual broadcasting can resort to clichés, showing gangs, or Muslims who are repressed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham mentioned the character of Benny in “Grange Hill”; at the same time, all the Asian people in the programme were victims of the bully, Gripper. That gave me, as an Asian person, a very negative portrayal.

I did not want to make my speech about statistics, because other Members can do that better than me, but there is progress. For example, I am encouraged that Aaqil Ahmed—I do not know him personally, but that is definitely not a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant name—is the commissioning editor for religious broadcasting at the BBC. John Pienaar got the amazing interview with my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) when it came out that she had been mistaken in the lift for a cleaner—sadly, many of us have had similar experiences, although not perhaps as extreme as that. I have just heard today that he has been promoted to deputy political editor at the BBC.

That perhaps reflects progress in this House, with the new Serjeant at Arms, who is British-Moroccan, and the chaplain Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who also represents progress. Again, however, we need to look at things like hyphenated identities, because the Serjeant at Arms is British-Moroccan. Old slogans like “Black, white, unite” make it sound as if people can be only one category, but mixed race is predicted to be the biggest demographic segment in global megacities such as ours before long. We need to represent that. We should also think about Chinese people and Jewish people; there are Irish stereotypes on “Mrs Brown’s Boys”—all of those things. [Interruption.] Okay. I need a killer conclusion.

Many people have referred to “hideously white”, the famous slogan of Greg Dyke when he was director-general. Sometimes it feels as though progress is painfully slow.

3.54 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am not sure that I can really follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), but I will give it a go. I thank her for that trip down memory lane. I was also dragged up on those television programmes, and fortunately things have improved slightly since then.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate, and the hon. Members for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) on their contributions. As a Greater Manchester MP, I am proud that the BBC is now based in MediaCityUK in Salford; that has opened up great new job opportunities in my area. We had a jobs fair in Rochdale a while ago, and it was fantastic to see the BBC opening up great opportunities for working-class kids that were not previously available to them. We are proud to have the BBC in Salford in Greater Manchester. It is also fantastic to switch on Radio 4 or Radio 5 Live and hear northern accents. That is really refreshing, and it is great that the BBC is doing that, now that it is based in Manchester.

Last July I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on diversity in public sector broadcasting, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah)—she is now the shadow Minister and will be winding up this debate. That was not long ago, but we should ask what progress has been made on increasing diversity in the BBC on television and radio and, importantly, behind the scenes.
During this debate I have been looking at #bbcdiversity, and I was struck by one comment:

"There is not enough diversity in the BBC, by which I mean British Born Chinese."

I thought that deserved a mention. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham highlighted in his opening speech the appalling under-representation of Chinese people. The BBC needs to address that, so I thank that tweeter for giving me that line. It will stay with me.

The White Paper from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport made it clear that

"Public-funded culture should reflect the diversity of our country."

and that

"The government expects the cultural sectors to represent our diverse society in their artistic talent, workforce and audiences."

Public sector broadcasting, especially the BBC, is rightly held in high regard in this country, and it must be protected and properly funded. Lord Reith summarised the BBC’s purpose in three words—inform, educate, entertain—and that remains part of the organisation’s mission statement to this day. However, public sector broadcasting must also address other duties, such as inclusivity, diversity, equality, fairness and representation.

Let me slightly change the direction of the debate and talk about the representation of disabled people, because there are simply not enough disabled people on television. The BBC announced plans to quadruple the number of people with disabilities that it puts on television by 2017, and for disabled people that was a welcome initiative. However, the plans sound slightly more impressive than they are. Just 1.2% of people on BBC television are disabled, and quadrupling that figure will only take it to 5%. Disabled people make up about 18% of the population, so even 5% is too few. For BBC television to represent the disabled community fairly and reflect British society accurately, the percentage of disabled people that it shows must be multiplied by not four, but 15. As I said, the disabled community make up 18% of Britain’s population, but I would never have known that from watching British TV, and neither would any young person growing up with a disability, or any able-bodied person who has never considered the substantial role that disabled people play in British life.

I have just been to a meeting, organised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, in which a disabled actor said that disabled people were portrayed as either scroungers or superhuman. How true that is. On television, disabled people are a minority. In reality, disabled people are a large and important section of society. They are a cross-section of society. Too. There are disabled people of every age, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and political inclination. People with disabilities are frequently robbed of self-representation. In film, disabled characters are too often portrayed by able-bodied people. I am glad that the BBC has created the position of disability correspondent, but for disabled people to be integrated properly into television, they need to appear constantly in programming that is not wholly about disability. It would be good if the BBC met its targets for increasing the number of people with disabilities in scripted entertainment by ensuring that more disabled characters were created, and more disabled actors employed to play them. An equally excellent and important strategy would be to ensure that more disabled actors were cast in roles in which it is immaterial whether the character is disabled or not. A similar principle should apply to factual programming.

The BBC’s new initiative is an admirable first step on a long journey. At present, just over one in every 100 people on BBC television is disabled. For our national broadcaster to reflect our nation, that number needs to be just over one in six. No one could expect the percentage of disabled people on TV to leap from 1.2% to 18% immediately or even soon, but if the BBC is serious about a long-term commitment to equality for people with disabilities, it could publicly set that figure as its long-term target.

I want to talk briefly about the representation of women. Watching or listening to a news broadcast might give the impression that there are plenty of women involved in news and current affairs broadcasting. On the surface, women appear to be well represented. However, a closer look at the statistics shows that, despite making up more than half the population and a larger proportion of the TV and radio audience, women are severely under-represented, on and off air, in news and current affairs broadcasting. The House of Lords Communications Committee’s report on women in news and current affairs, published last year, highlighted concerns about the representation of women in news and current affairs broadcasting because of the genre’s wide reach and role in shaping public perceptions about society. It is well documented that although women make up a significant share of broadcasters’ workforces, they are under-represented in flagship news. One study showed that there are three male reporters in flagship news programmes for every female reporter.

The House of Lords Communications Committee argued that women are also poorly represented as experts in news and current affairs coverage. It heard evidence that women make up only 26% of the people interviewed as experts or commentators, and 26% of those interviewed as spokespersons. In a typical month, about 72% of the BBC’s “Question Time” contributors, and 84% of reporters and guests on Radio 4’s “Today” programme, are men. The situation for older women is particularly bad. The Lords Committee heard from a number of journalists, including Miriam O’Reilly, who as we know, won an age discrimination case against the BBC. It is extremely important that older women are represented on television as role models for younger women.

I want to finish by talking about Angela Rippon, who, ironically, at the age of 71 is currently appearing in a BBC programme entitled “How to Stay Young”. I heard her being interviewed the other day, and she says that she takes no responsibility for that title. The title was decided by others as one that would pull in viewers. Perhaps a programme entitled “Fitness and Health for the Over-70s”, or even “How to Stay Alive”, would not drag in the same number of viewers. She tells the story of John Birt suggesting to her when she was 50 that she might consider a career change. He actually told her, “You’ve had your day.” That was 20 years ago, but the case of Miriam O’Reilly shows that the BBC has not come a long way since then in its treatment of older women. I hope that that point will be taken on board.

4.4 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on starting the debate with...
a powerful and thoughtful speech. I also congratulate the other speakers, who touched on an incredible range of diversity needs. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) talked about the need for language diversity and for Gaelic to be taken seriously, and I am particularly grateful to him for mentioning Kingussie and shinty.

I was struck by the words of the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) about the important issue of disabled people and their dramatic under-representation. They should be represented much more thoroughly. She mentioned the words “inform”, “educate” and—I have forgotten the other one. [HON. MEMBERS: “Entertain”]. ] Entertain! It is the important one for the theme of my speech, so I should have remembered it. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who raised the issue of women’s representation in the BBC, for mentioning the incredible interest that people have in the BBC and its duty to represent people. She also mentioned Scotland’s contribution to the BBC licence fee and the Scottish people’s rating of the BBC.

Today, a row is erupting between the Scottish professional football league and the BBC that has the potential to stop broadcasts of football in Scotland. The chairman of the SPFL, Ralph Topping, is asking the BBC for a fee and the Scottish people’s rating of the BBC. The chairman of the English premiership, the BBC that has the potential to stop broadcasts of football in Scotland. The chairman of the SPFL, Ralph Topping, is asking the BBC for a fee and the Scottish people’s rating of the BBC.

Mr MacNeil: I am sure I speak for many Scottish MPs when I say that Ralph Topping has our full support. As far as I understand it, not only is it about half Gary Lineker’s salary, but one production of “Match of the Day” costs as much as the BBC puts into Scottish football annually. More power to Ralph Topping’s elbow!

Mr MacNeil: Given that the BBC has made that admission, should it not redress past injustice and inequality, and make good the deficit in its funding for sport in Scotland?

Drew Hendry: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for making that point. There has been a long period of injustice: this is not just about the last couple of years.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for intervening at this point. He is making a compelling speech. However, in respect of the rights and the amounts of money spent on them, I must point out that in many instances—although I am not referring specifically to the one that he has mentioned—the price is market-driven. If it is felt that, in order to secure rights for the English premiership, the BBC must pay £68 million, that is a price that it may have to pay if other bidders in the market are willing to pay up to the same amount.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, because it allows me to highlight once again that Scotland is paying 10% of the licence fee. The BBC is paying what it believes is a market price of £68 million for the premiership and other league rights in England, yet it is unwilling to pay more than £1 million, or so when the marketable value is estimated to be about £10 million. All that is being asked for is between £3 million and £4 million. That is a serious inequity.
Mr MacNeil: It should also be pointed out that the BBC is driving that market. The BBC has actually eclipsed the market, because without the public money coming from television licence fees, in both Scotland and England, that price would not be achieved by football. Licence payers’ money is beating the market to produce that £68 million, and 10% of the money that is spent in England should, as a matter of natural justice, be spent in Scotland.

Drew Hendry: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend has made the point compellingly that this is an injustice that needs to be addressed. The BBC has a right to educate, inform and entertain—

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I will press on and finish my speech, because I have been given the icy stare by the Deputy Speaker.

This is a long-standing injustice, as will be clear to anyone who speaks about football to fans in Scotland. Heaven forfend, by the way, that what has happened to the international game at the top level should also happen to women’s football, and that we should lose it to public broadcasting altogether. However, that is a side issue.

The inequity in Scottish football has been going on for far too long. We have had to put up with coverage that does not encourage people to watch the games, and does not encourage young people to get involved in the sport. Football is a huge source of advertising, and everyone knows how that works around the world. It is about time that the BBC addressed this injustice, and corrected the position for the fans of Scottish football and, indeed, the people of Scotland.

4.14 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me say what a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and, indeed, to listen to this whole debate.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on instigating the debate. He told us he was tired of BBC strategies, and that it was time for ambitious targets. I agree, although I slightly diverge from him when he says that only patrons now appear on Andrew Neil’s programme. I have been on the programme four times in the past 12 months and I am as common as muck, so perhaps there is hope for the rest of us.

Mr Lammy: For the record, I did not say that only patrons appeared on the show. I appear on the show, and I would like to appear on it again.

John Nicolson: The right hon. Gentleman has repeatedly made that very clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) made a passionate call for fairer funding and representation for Gaelic. Alas, as he knows, I am the first member of my family not to speak the language of my island family and bitterly regret it.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) gave us a fascinating tour d’horizon, illustrating the shamefully narrow social background of BBC governors through the ages.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) also walked us down memory lane with “It Ain’t Half Hot Mum”, Alf Garnett and the black and white minstrels. How we all shuddered. I shudder every time I watch Mr Humphries. [Interruption.] I was terrified that that would become a natural part of my growing development as a teenage gay boy.

There has been a remarkable amount of agreement in all parts of the House, which highlights the important role that the BBC plays in our national life and the responsibility it has as a public service broadcaster to ensure diversity on our television screens and, crucially, within the organisation itself.

As the motion recognises and many speakers have reiterated, one of the key public purposes outlined in the BBC’s charter is to represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities. The BBC should mirror the society in which we live. We are not all white, able-bodied, English, heterosexual men, and the BBC should reflect us in all our glorious diversity, but for too long it has not. It is clear, however, that Members of this House want to see greater progress in the representation, both on and off screen, of under-represented groups, such as gay and lesbian people and older women.

The BBC must acknowledge the different needs of the nations of the UK and cater more effectively for them, not least in the provision of news. During this period of BBC charter renewal, there is a perfect opportunity to enshrine further the principles of diversity and ensure that the people of these islands see themselves portrayed accurately, fairly and without stereotypes.

On screen, the BBC has its work cut out to persuade ethnic minority viewers that it reflects them. The BBC Trust’s purpose remit survey found that less than one third of black people believe that the BBC was good at representing them—the worst performance in the public remit survey. Critics of the BBC argue that ethnic representation on screen is often just window dressing. Simon Albury of the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality says:

“On-screen representation which is not matched by off-screen employment is a hollow, deceptive and superficial gesture. Editorial power and influence lie behind the screen not on it.”

He is right. I know. I spent my television career on screen.

Although the BBC’s black, Asian and ethnic minority workforce is at an all-time high, data from the Broadcast Equality and Training Regulator show that only 5% of those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds become executives in the TV industry. Other broadcasters have been significantly bolder in their attempts to diversify. Sky is on target to have people from BME backgrounds in at least 20% of significant on-screen roles, to have 20% of all writers on entertainment shows from BME backgrounds, and for every production to have someone from a BME background in at least one senior role.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Does the hon. Gentleman find it strange that the publicly owned BBC should perform so immeasurably worse on these measures than the private sector represented by Sky?

John Nicolson: Yes, I do.

Sky will announce this July whether it has been on target. I know many Members would like the BBC to emulate Sky’s ambitions, and it has made strides in
placing women in senior executive roles—and should be applauded for it. Some 41.5% of senior managers are now female, but there are still significant areas of weakness on screen. While John Humphrys and David Dimbleby stride manfully through their eighth decade at the helm of BBC flagship shows, anyone would be hard pressed to find a woman over 60, let alone 70, in a prominent role.

When Miriam O’Reilly was booted off “Countryfile”, she had to fight BBC bosses tooth and nail to prove her unfair dismissal on grounds of age. Only after their defeat in an employment tribunal did they apologise and offer to change. It was BBC management arrogance at its worst. Olenka Frenkel, an award-winning BBC correspondent and superb broadcaster, had this to say in her article in The Guardian about her treatment as a woman over 50 at the BBC:

“I could see the guys of my age thriving but the women were gone…No more films were being commissioned from me. It was a struggle to get any assignments. HR had no record of me and my going…No more films were being commissioned from me. It was a

A cause close to my own heart as a gay man is the representation of LGBT people. The creative skillset survey reports that 8% of the television workforce are gay, which is probably a fair representation of the UK population. What is certainly not fair, however, is the on-screen representation. Equity has noted its concern at the scarcity of incidental gay characters in drama—characters whose raison d’être is not their gayness. While we all know much-loved gay TV personalities, they are overwhelmingly in light entertainment and comedy, as they were when I was a child. Gay people are seldom seen on screen in serious authoritative roles.

I can speak from personal experience. I came out as gay when I was presenting “BBC Breakfast” on BBC 1, and play any role in society, not just the stereotypical same-sex couple. Yet in the reaction of some of my bosses was hostile. That was in 2000, and I am not sure that much has changed. In fact, I cannot think of a single BBC 1 news anchor who has openly gay since. Why does it matter? It matters for many reasons, but not least this: gay kids growing up should be able to dream that they can do anything and play any role in society, not just the stereotypical ones.

One television channel that has been a trailblazer for minorities and women is Channel 4. “Channel 4 News” has a higher proportion, at 14%, of BAME viewers than any other public service broadcaster in the UK. The figure for “BBC 1 News” is a lamentable 5%. In 2014, audiences rated Channel 4 as the best public service broadcaster for representing BAME viewers fairly. Channel 4 scored 30%; BBC 1 got 14%. Channel 4 was rated best for reflecting lesbian and gay people, at 28%. The figure for the BBC was 5%. And for people with disabilities Channel 4 again beat the BBC, by 26% to 9%.

Channel 4’s commitment to diversity stems from its statutory remit to appeal to culturally diverse groups, to offer alternative perspectives and to nurture new talent. This is all underpinned by Channel 4’s unique not-for-profit model. How ironic it is, therefore, that as we debate how to advance diversity at the BBC, the UK Government are putting one of our best and most diverse public service broadcasters at risk through a threatened, albeit sleekly planned, privatisation.

Let me turn to Scotland. “Channel 4 News” was one of the few news outlets where viewers felt the Scottish independence referendum was covered fairly. Few thought, by contrast, that the BBC covered itself in glory.

So how could it change? I believe that if the BBC is to reflect properly the UK’s diverse nations and regions, it must decentralise and devolve greater financial and editorial control. News is a particularly good example. In recent months, the BBC “News at Six” has deluged Scottish viewers with stories about the English junior doctors strikes and English schools becoming academies. I do not doubt that Scottish viewers watch the coverage and think, “There but for the grace of God”.

Mr MacNeil: This applies in politics as well. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) has said, in a pithy and telling line:

“UKIP is a party which gets beamed into Scotland courtesy of the BBC”.

That is all due to a lack of local editorial control in Scotland.

John Nicolson: I entirely take my hon. Friend’s point.

The BBC network news agenda is relentlessly, and often unthinkingly, Anglo-centric. The solution, as the BBC now recognises, is a Scottish “News at Six” with national, UK and international stories on the running order, based on news values—a grown-up news programme, rather than the couthie opt-out currently on offer. That is not an especially radical proposal. It already happens on Radio Scotland and the Gaelic medium TV channel BBC Alba.

We on the SNP Benches are unapologetic champions of public service broadcasting. Although we have been trenchant critics of the BBC in recent years, we see it perhaps as a lover who has strayed and whom we want to see return true and honest. Ours is a very different position from many on the Tory Benches, whose hostility towards the BBC speaks more of post-divorce visceral hatred. But the BBC has to change. It has to be more ambitious in the way it reflects its audience. It has to catch up with the needs of post-referendum Scotland. Throughout the UK it has to be less pale and male. It has to join the 21st century in its attitude towards older women and gay people on screen. It has to demonstrate that its fine words of aspiration are translated into action.

4.27 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This has been an excellent and diverse debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it, and
the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) for requesting it. I particularly want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for securing the debate and for being the outspoken champion of diversity and equality that he is. This was made clear by his barnstorming introductory speech.

The Labour party agrees with the 73% of respondents to the charter renewal consultation who support the BBC’s continuing independence. It is as friends—indeed, as fans—of the BBC that we strongly welcome this debate. It is in the interests of the BBC to do better when it comes to diversity. I need to declare a familial interest, in that my brother and sister both worked for the BBC as filmmakers, although they no longer do so. Their experience has informed my views, not always positively. Indeed, on my sister’s first day as a director at the BBC, she was automatically shown to the cleaning room to join the cleaning team, which was not what she expected when she was recruited to direct a series. That was one of the reasons why I called for a debate in Westminster Hall last July on diversity in public service broadcasting. It is good that we are now debating the subject on the Floor of the House and giving it the importance that it deserves.

Our creative industries, of which our public service broadcasters are at the forefront, are worth £84 billion a year, or £9.6 million an hour, to the UK’s economy. As a truly world-class broadcaster, the BBC represents the UK across the globe, and we are proud of that. However, it also has a duty to represent Britain to the public as the vibrant, diverse, complex and sometimes eccentric country that it is. I am sorry to say that the BBC, as we have heard, is failing to do that in certain areas. Last month, for example, BBC 2 attracted 5.7% of Britain’s total audience, but only managed to get 3.3% of black, Asian and minority ethnic viewers to switch on.

The motion refers to BAME diversity, but it is also important to consider, as many hon. Members have, other strands such as gender, disability, LGBT and age. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) put particular emphasis on gender and disability. In my debate last year, I focused on socioeconomic background and region, which still get little coverage and few initiatives. Indeed, the Minister promised them to bring a casting agent to a state school in Newcastle, so that some state pupils can have the opportunities often enjoyed by those at public school, and I look forward to hearing about his progress on that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) said, the BBC needs more working-class people from outside the M25 both on air and deciding what should go on air. It really should not need to be told that.

Diversity matters, not just in terms of principle and fairness, but because it is proven that organisations and industries do better when they make the most of everything that is on offer. Whether on screen, on radio, writing scripts, researching programme guests, operating cameras or in the boardroom, it is only right and fair that all our diverse communities get a fair crack of the whip. There is also an economic and business case. Organisations that do not take advantage of the wide array of creativity and talent on offer in this country are depriving themselves of potential. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), we are losing that creativity—and in some cases the “hotness”—to other countries. Why is it that so many of our BAME actors and writers have to go abroad to get their chance? It is great to have shows such as “Luther” and “Undercover” featuring heavyweight British acting talent, but if a lead black actor wants to feature in a mainstream British show, they seem to need to have their Oscar, BAFTA, Tony or Emmy up their sleeve. White actors do not need that kind of validation. Equally, BAME writers and directors often find it easier to get something green-lit outside the cosy circle of BBC commissioners. Those at the very top of the BBC tell me that they recognise the importance and value of diversity, and I believe them. They do tend to focus on on-air diversity, even though we know that having diverse executives, commissioners, producers and writers is crucial. As we have heard, they also tend to emphasise training and entry-level opportunities, as if no existing BAME talent could take up senior roles.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is delivering an excellent speech from the Opposition Front Bench. Is the issue not also that many from ethnic minorities have left the BBC? Many of us know names that we expected to advance and make it into those roles as controllers and big creators in the organisation, but they leave. What is the point of training people if 10 or 15 years down the line they exit because of the culture?

Chi Onwurah: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. In fact, I have a list of many of the talented BBC producers, directors and others who have left. I considered reading it out, but I thought that might embarrass them and the BBC. Should we be having a similar debate in a year’s time, however, I may feel more tempted to do so.

The BBC acknowledges that it has a problem but, as my right hon. said, it has addressed that with 29 initiatives aimed at increasing BAME representation alone and yet it seems unable to effect real change in its own organisation. Of course it is difficult to change a large organisation, but surely it is not beyond the wit of an organisation as creative and world-leading as the BBC. True determination would mean more resources, and proper targets and incentives, through monitoring and mainstreaming the challenge so that a wide range of executives, commissioners and producers are accountable. We need to see a real push from the top all the way through the BBC’s management.

I, too, wish to pay tribute to Channel 4 and the efforts of Oona King on its “360° Diversity Charter” and its ambitious diversity targets; I know they are working because my friends in the film and television industry are complaining to me about them, which is a sign that they are getting through. As we have heard, Sky has also set ambitious targets, so I would like the BBC to be more ambitious. My right hon. Friend has talked of a dedicated fund, which was something Lenny Henry also suggested last year. That idea deserves serious consideration; where resources are scarce, nothing concentrates people’s minds as much as money.

As I said in my opening remarks, the Labour party and I have long been friends of the BBC. I am an unequivocal champion of the BBC, except in three areas: accountability; diversity; and humility. Although today’s debate may have been more about critique than friendship, we must recognise that those at the top of the BBC may have their minds on issues that are, for them at least, more immediate than the long-standing
challenge of diversity, and Ministers must take responsibility for that. Burdening the BBC with the financing of free TV licences for over-75s has already threatened the future independence and finances of the BBC; that is money that is not available to finance a catalyst fund for diverse commissions, for example. The dragging out of the charter renewal also hampers the BBC’s ability to act more decisively and give this matter the attention it deserves. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has said:

“The Government has already created a cloud of uncertainty over the future of the BBC, damaging the Corporation’s ability to function and plan ahead. To cast further doubt on the BBC’s future by delaying the White Paper and extending the current charter would be a disgraceful failure.”

Ministers have their reasons for doing that. I am sure that the Secretary of State is delighted to be able to exert this level of pressure on the BBC at a time when he would like it to air his views on the European Union referendum more favourably. The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy might agree with me on that, even if he might not feel able to say so.

I hope that the Minister can tell the House what the reasons are for the continued delay on charter renewal, when he expects it to be completed and whether it will be completed this year with no need for short-term renewal. I hope that he can also tell the House what work the Government have been doing in the year since we last debated this issue.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who speaks passionately of the importance of diversity, but he must recognise that we need less talk and more results. I hope that he will hear that, stop threatening the BBC’s treasured independence in future through charter renewal and, instead, support it in reflecting the country that loves and treasures it so.

4.40 pm

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, to have the chance to respond to this important debate. When a Minister is told that he has to spend a Thursday afternoon responding to a debate, particularly on the day of the Tory parliamentary away day, and realises that by being in the Chamber he will miss the company of his colleagues at a luxury country hotel—you can imagine the thoughts that went through my mind. But the cloud was lifted when I saw the subject of the debate. As many Members will know, this is a subject of the importance of diversity, but he must recognise that point is covered.

Before I move on to the issues, I want to pay significant tribute to the right hon. Member for Totton and Eling (Mr Lammy) for his barnstorming speech. It was an absolute tour de force—the great MP at his best, reminding us of his great qualities, lighting up Twitter like a fire and making some points that, in my view, were completely unanswerable. He set the tone of the debate, and the other reason the cloud has lifted is that all hon. Members have made fantastic speeches bringing great passion, emotion and knowledge to the debate. It has been dominated by the issue of BME representation in broadcasting, but I must acknowledge those Members who have stretched the definition of diversity.

Let me briefly acknowledge, although he is no longer in the Chamber, for reasons I cannot fathom, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), who took diversity to mean more coverage of Brexit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that the h G did advise the Chair that he needed to get to Oxford, even if others did not?

Mr Vaizey: I cannot believe, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you have given away the secret location of the parliamentary away day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is the third time it has been in use; I think we are all getting used to it, luxury hotels and all.

Mr Vaizey: Anyway, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight has apparently gone to an undisclosed location, so I apologise for misrepresenting him. If he had been here, he would have heard the Opposition spokesman explain that the Secretary of State has the director-general of the BBC in a small room and is dictating that the BBC covers only Brexit opinion, so that point is covered.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who sits on the Select Committee, rightly brought up the importance of the BBC’s representing the whole nation as regards the regions and as regards its presence throughout the country. I acknowledge what she said both about where the BBC is physically present and about the people who are represented and who work for the corporation. Those points were well made.

My old friend the Member for the Outer Hebrides, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil), representing the top—we had my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) in the Chamber earlier, representing the bottom, as it were—pointed out the importance of language diversity and talked about the huge success of BBC Alba. It was good to hear his colleagues acknowledge the additional funding that the coalition Government pushed towards that—that is, the extra 2 million quid that BBC Alba was not expecting to get, which was fantastic.

The prize has to go to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who took “diversity” to mean more Scottish football on the telly. We all want to see some Scottish clubs playing in the league cup. We would like the English league cup to turn into a league cup where Scottish clubs can play English clubs. That is what viewers want. If anyone wonders about the importance of sport, that simple statement by me will dominate all news coverage.

Mr MacNeil: The ambitions of Scotland are higher. We do not want to play just across this island. We want to dominate in Europe again, as Celtic did so magnificently in 1967, being the first non-Latin team to win the European cup. But the Scottish team will do that only if it gets the funding. The broadcasters have to step up to the mark to make sure that the money is coming in as it should.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): We must be careful not to get into history, which is where Scottish football may take us.
Mr Vaizey: Having said that my remarks might dominate the news, I think the Deputy Speaker has outdone me.

I acknowledge what was said, but I shall continue on the subject of diversity in broadcasting. My former ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), gave a brilliant speech about the importance of culture change and praised Channel 4. The hon. Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) gave fantastic speeches, with some brilliant comments. The hon. Member for Brent Central mentioned “Undercover” in order to let us know that she regards Adrian Lester as “quite hot”. She did not say “quite hot and happily married”, both of which are true, but she made an important point about perception.

I was struck by an article that I read this week on BuzzFeed by Bim Adewunmi. The BBC may make some great points about “Undercover”, but her fundamental point goes to the heart of what we are discussing. “The creator of the show, Peter Moffatt”, she says, “highlighted a peculiar thing in the optics”—that was the word that the hon. Member for Brent Central used—“of one scene.” Peter Moffatt told The Guardian:

“Here was a black family sitting around the dinner table eating pasta. So normal and yet I had never ever, not once, seen that on mainstream TV”.

That is really what we are talking about.

When we speak about BAME representation, it is important to acknowledge as well the representation of people with disabilities, the representation of the lesbian and gay community, mentioned by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), and the representation of women. These are all important issues that have to be addressed. We should make it clear that this is about on-screen representation, as well as representation behind the screen. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the power lies with the commissioning editors and the producers.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) made some valuable points about regional representation. The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) wants to introduce elected members of the BBC—an admirable nod to his addiction to democracy, which I acknowledge. No doubt he will respond to the White Paper.

I have been involved in this issue for some three years. I had a meeting with Lenny Henry, Adrian Lester—I now know who to invite to the next one—and David Harewood. They told me stories which brought the issue alive for me. It is important to acknowledge that. People have only to look at me to know what my background is. If I had been responding to this debate three years ago, I probably would have read out a very well drafted civil service speech, which would have been full of all the right-sounding statistics about the progress that was being made, but it would not have rung true to this audience and it would not have been true. Those actors opened my eyes to the issue and I have become passionate about it because I think we can make a difference.

We have brought the broadcasters in and talked to them about how they can make a difference. There is a league table of broadcasters in this regard, and in my view—a subjective view, I acknowledge—Sky is way at the top. There was a commissioning editor at Sky—I think he might have left—called Stuart Murphy. He uses a lot of Anglo-Saxon words, the meaning of which is effectively, “Let’s just do it.” And he has just done it. He has looked at who is commissioning his programmes and who is appearing in them, and he has just made a difference. The effect has been relatively dramatic, and it keeps coming. In fact, tonight Sky is broadcasting “The Pledge” with June Sarpong, who has been happily retweeting many of the best things said in today’s debate. I think that Sky has done a very good job.

Next I would acknowledge Channel 4. Members have rightly pointed out its 360° work on diversity, and I have worked closely with Oona King on the issue. Channel 4 is slightly bureaucratic, but it has made a difference. It did not want to move for a while because of the legal complications that it felt were brought about by the Equality Act 2010, but we got over that hurdle by commissioning work from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It produced an excellent report last autumn showing in practical terms what broadcasters can do. It busts a hell of a lot of myths, particularly on things like quotas.

Then comes ITV, which I think hides behind the fact that it commissions a lot of independent production companies. I do not get the sense that ITV has the same passion for this issue that Sky and Channel 4 have. I would like to see it do a lot more, and I feel strongly its complete absence from this debate since the initial flurry. We had a debate when we started this issue, and it was suggested that they would have to keep having meetings and talking, and that there would come a time when people said, “Well, that was just a flurry of action and nothing happened.” That is not the case with Sky or Channel 4, but it probably is the case with ITV—at least, that is how it feels. Perhaps it would like to get in touch. Of course, Channel Five, even though it has now been bought by Viacom, appears to have done absolutely nothing in this area, so I wait to hear from it, or maybe I will go and talk to it. Those are the main broadcasters, apart from the BBC, which I will talk about later.

I want to talk briefly about the arts, because when we published our culture White Paper we put diversity front and centre. The Arts Council has made some big moves on diversity and is beginning some proper monitoring. It is pushing its national portfolio organisations to change. Within the arts sector we have seen the Chineke! Orchestra, with Chi-chi Nwanoku of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, who has made a big difference by highlighting not the lack of BAME classical musicians, but their absence from our orchestras. Danny Lee Wynter and Act for Change are pushing for change in the theatre. We can see what happens when we get great leadership. When Rufus Norris came to the National Theatre, he said that he would make a difference, and we have seen a dramatic difference in representation. Change is happening, but it needs to happen much more quickly.

I also want to mention the British Film Institute, which kicked this whole process off with Ben Roberts and his “three ticks” initiative. It was the first really big public organisation to say, “We’re not going to fund you unless you can show us what you are doing in practical terms about diversity.” He has been fantastically well assisted by Deborah Williams, who has become a good friend of mine. She is a fantastically knowledgeable advocate on diversity issues across the board. She has
been a real boon to the BFI, and I know that she will continue to work with it to really encourage the difference that the BFI is beginning to make.

Along the way I have been helped by many people, including Simon Albury, who will have been glowing following the references made by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, Nigel Warner from Creative Access, Floella Benjamin and Jane Bonham Carter. They have all participated and helped move this along.

We are talking about the BBC, and the tone of the debate has been absolutely right. The BBC has, of course, sent me a brief about the incredible work that it is doing, but we want it to move further and faster. If I may pick up on what the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), the Opposition spokesman, has said, I think we need to work with the BBC, if that does not sound too defeatist. I thought at the beginning of the debate that I might just go for the applause lines and give it a good kicking, but I think that it is changing. It is an extraordinarily bureaucratic organisation, but it is changing. We need to acknowledge those changes, because I can imagine that a BBC executive who has made those changes might listen to the debate and think, “Nothing that I am doing seems to be making a difference.”

I must wind up, so I will briefly tell the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, about the pounds, shillings and pence in terms of what the Government are doing. The hon. Member for Brent Central mentioned audience panels. The BBC has an independent diversity board, which the director-general created last year and which holds the BBC to account on those issues. I am also keen to know whether it is effective, and I will work with the hon. Lady on that. I want to find the tapes of “The Real McCoy”, and I will make sure that that happens. I found a trumpet in the Royal College of Art—that is a whole different story—so I am sure I can find those tapes.

Diversity will be prominent in the White Paper, of which I have seen an early draft. We are going to publish it in May, and we will get the charter renewed in time for the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central.

4.56 pm

**Mr Lammy:** This has been a good debate, and I am grateful for the fact that we have had it. I want to thank some of the people and organisations who have made it happen. I am grateful to Simon Albury, Floella Benjamin, Connie St Louis, Bonnie Greer and Kurt Barling; and to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Ofcom, Creative Skillset, the Creative Diversity Network, the Creative Industries Federation, the Media Trust, Act for Change and the TV Collective.

The bottom line is—I think that this is felt across the House—that we have to see a step change. We will see a strategy at the end of the month, and we will all look at it in detail. The overwhelming thrust of the debate has been that we love and treasure the BBC, and we are proud of our public service broadcaster. That is the spirit in which I have secured the debate. But we need to do considerably better, and that cannot just be rhetoric; it needs action. Money is a key part of that action, and we need to see more of that in the coming weeks.

It is important that diversity is centre stage in relation to charter renewal. Until those in charge look like the people of this country—that means women, people with northern voices, black people, brown people, Chinese people and lesbian and gay people who can make it and become the DG of the BBC—we cannot say that we have arrived. We are a long way from that point, and more skills training will not deliver it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Resolved.**

That this House notes the crucial cultural role the BBC plays in modern Britain; welcomes the fact that one of the public purposes outlined in the BBC Charter is to represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities; notes with concern that the last employment census in 2012 showed the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic people working in the UK creative media fell by 30.9 per cent between 2006 and 2012; believes that a BBC target of 14.2 per cent for 2017 is insufficient; further notes that this target falls short of other UK broadcasters; and calls on the Government to recognise these failings when considering the BBC’s charter renewal and make representations to the BBC to ensure that the Corporation is not failing in any of its diversity objectives, including, but not limited to, delivering high quality programming which reflects modern Britain accurately and authentically and that the Corporation must advance equal opportunities to diversify and develop its workforce and senior leaders so that they better reflect audiences.
Homelessness: Edmonton

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

4.58 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to open this debate with a case study of a constituent who came into my office this week, four months after being made homeless. He was evicted at the beginning of the year at short notice. He is in his mid-50s, he has never been in rent arrears, and he had previously received references saying he was a good tenant. He has complex health needs. On eviction, he went to his GP for a copy of his medical report, which showed, among other things, a history of chronic depression, osteoarthritis, spina bifida, a cataract—the list goes on. He approached the council for help, but the council had no record of him. He approached his family, but they had no room. The only help he has managed to receive has been from charity organisations that work with rough sleepers, and those organisations are in huge demand.

My constituent is now, again, sleeping in his car, and he is chronically depressed. He has had his health problems callously acknowledged as “normal for those made homeless”.

To deal with this situation, St Mungo’s has recently launched the “Stop the Scandal” campaign. His case study epitomises the Government’s failure to meet the duty of care that they owe to every individual. He is just one of many who have approached my office after being evicted, most frequently from a private rental property.

5 pm

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

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

Kate Osamor: In this debate, I will discuss homelessness: the rise of rough sleeping, and the rise of hidden homelessness. By hidden homelessness I mean the situation of all those who do not have stable accommodation: those who are placed in temporary accommodation, resort to living with friends or family, or live in hostels because they do not have a home of their own. Its rise, like that of rough sleeping, demonstrates the failure to ensure a sustainable and working housing policy in this country.

This debate is particularly timely, because we are now in the spring. It is a season of buying and selling in the market, and it is consequently the season of evictions. In the last month, my office has dealt with more casework pertaining to housing than to any other single issue. Of the 28 housing cases opened in the past month, 15 are cases of constituents who have been evicted, and five others involve constituents fearing eviction in the future. While some were evicted for being in rent arrears, some have simply lost their home because the landlord wanted to sell the property. They come from across the ages and professions, and many are long-term tenants. One has lived in their rented home for over 23 years. One woman, a former lawyer, was homeless for over six months. She and her disabled adult daughter resorted to squatting, and to sleeping in churches or on night buses. A mother of a young child, who worked as a teaching assistant, was evicted from temporary accommodation and deemed intentionally homeless for complaining about unsanitary conditions, including mice, damp and mould. Tighter regulations must be put in place to ensure that the accommodation rented out to people is suitable for living in.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising very important issues with regard to homelessness and accommodation for families and individuals. As she says, councils must do more to ensure that accommodation is not overcrowded.

Kate Osamor: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will come on to. As I say, tighter regulations must be put in place. We are facing what has rightly been called a housing crisis, and homelessness is the sharp end of this crisis. It has dramatically worsened in the past five years, while rough sleeping has risen dramatically since 2010. Figures collected for the Department for Communities and Local Government indicate that there has been an increase from 415 to 940 in the number of people sleeping rough across London on any one night. The combined homelessness and information network database, which gathers annual data from outreach services, shows a similarly dramatic escalation in rough sleeping across London—from 3,975 rough sleepers in 2010-11 to 7,581 in 2014-15.

The rise recorded in Enfield has been particularly dramatic: the number of rough sleepers has risen from 18 to 174 per year. The borough also has a high level of hidden homelessness. Enfield has the fifth highest level of homeless households residing in temporary accommodation in the country, and the number increased by 29% between 2011-12 and 2014-15. Figures for the first half of 2015-16 show that Enfield, with more than 900, has the third highest number of homeless acceptances in the capital. At present, the number of households living in temporary accommodation in my constituency of Edmonton is 924, as identified in postcodes N9 to N18. That figure represents 34% of households in the area, which is an enormous percentage of people without stable homes.

Although the housing crisis is by no means confined to London, it has touched the capital acutely. With over 1 million private rented dwellings, London has the largest concentration of private renters in the country. Enfield saw a huge increase in its private rented sector between 2001 and 2011. According to a recent report, “The average London renter spends almost 60% of their income (after benefits, but not after tax) on their rent.” That is double the amount that is typically considered to be affordable. Also according to Shelter’s report, “Making renting more affordable for more Londoners”, one in three Londoners in private rented accommodation has “gone into debt in the last year to pay the rent”.

The housing crisis has created a dangerously precarious situation for renters. Private renters live in inherently unstable accommodation, with little protection from eviction or rent increases. Our laws on private renting are some of the worst in Europe. In most countries, tenancies are longer than a year, and rent increases tend to be tied to external indices, such as inflation, rather than landlords being able legally to increase them willy-nilly.
The loss of a private rented home is now the most common way people become homeless in London. It accounts for almost half the capital’s homelessness cases. Although the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors predicts that rents will rise by 20% between now and 2020, the Government’s welfare measures have seen housing benefits fall. Local housing allowance has been frozen; the lower shared accommodation rate has changed, and now applies to those under 35, and not those under 25; and the benefit cap is causing more stress for people, who are already coming to my surgery about it on a daily basis. All that means is that the gap between housing benefit and rent will worsen, pushing more people into rent arrears and, potentially, homelessness.

I, alongside Enfield Council, call on the Government urgently to review the local housing allowance so that it accurately reflects the inequality in the housing market, and to give more assistance to the local authorities that face the greatest challenges in housing the homeless. I also urge the Government to reverse the intended lowering of the benefit cap. The local housing allowance rate and the benefit cap are contributing to the high number of homeless families being placed in the most affordable part of the north London housing allowance region, namely east Enfield. They include homeless families from other London boroughs who are placed in temporary accommodation in the area. That has displaced local households who are renting privately, further restricted the number of properties available for Enfield residents, and increased the pressure on front-line services.

Enfield’s relative affordability has made it a buy-to-let hotspot, and landlords who let to homeless families are seeking to offer their properties on a nightly rate. That drives up the cost of housing provision enormously. Gross expenditure on temporary accommodation in Enfield has doubled between 2011-12 and 2014-15 from £20 million to £40 million. Greater controls must be introduced on how buy-to-let landlords operate so that we move away from this exploitative system.

In an age in which more and more powers are being devolved to local authorities, councils are being stretched beyond their means. Underfunded councils are hugely overworked. The homelessness monitor for 2016 shows that nine out of 10 councils often or sometimes find it difficult to help single homeless people aged between 25 and 34, and that 87% find it difficult to help those aged between 18 and 24. The majority back a change in the law to expand homelessness prevention. I add my voice to theirs.

I echo the demand of homelessness charity St Mungo’s Broadway in calling for the Government to improve homelessness legislation to prevent more rough sleeping with a new universal prevention and relief duty so that anyone threatened with homelessness will get help. At the moment, councils do not have a duty of care until a person finds themselves homeless, meaning families literally have to wait until they have been evicted from their property to get assistance. Implementing a broader duty of care would, I believe, help councils to assist families before they reach a crisis point. That would infinitely improve the situation for families; being served an eviction notice and having to wait for assistance can severely affect people’s mental health.

It is one thing to legislate, however, and another to implement. Without proper investment from central Government, councils are faced with the impossible task of accommodating an ever-increasing number of families in need, without the resources to do so. An increasing number of families are being left in unsuitable temporary accommodation for prolonged periods of time, as alternatives are not available. Councils must be properly funded in their efforts to assist people who find themselves homeless. As a starting point, I call on the Government to review the allocation of the homelessness grant to bring equity to the system.

Most importantly, a sustainable housing policy must be put forward, and genuinely affordable homes must be built. City Hall’s assessment is that London needs to build between 50,000 and 60,000 homes a year to keep up with the increasing need, yet only 20,000 homes were built last year. That is simply not good enough.

The homelessness crisis in Edmonton illustrates how this Government are failing ordinary people. Housing is a human right, and should be treated as such. The Government have a duty of care and must do more to protect tenants. Without regulation, tenants—in particular, those on low incomes—are left in an extremely vulnerable position. At worst, lack of regulation is creating the preconditions for a repeat of the Peter Rachman era. I would welcome a meeting with the Minister to discuss the details, if he wishes to have one. I will continue to monitor the issue and, in six months’ time, will be reviewing what progress has been made.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) for securing this debate on such a critical issue. I know that she shows a great deal of interest in the subject on behalf of her constituents.

The causes of homelessness are diverse and complex. People become homeless for different reasons and have different needs. We should be proud of the homelessness safety net in this country, but one person without a home is one too many. This Government are absolutely committed to doing all we can to prevent and reduce homelessness. We must be able to respond to new and difficult challenges, to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place and to support people with long-term, complicated problems—the type of issues that the hon. Lady cited with which some of her constituents had come to her. We must also enable people to recover from a homelessness crisis and start living independently again.

Since 2010 we have invested over £500 million, enabling local authorities to prevent or relieve over 1 million cases of homelessness. Our initiatives have helped to break the cycle of homelessness and rough sleeping for over 100,000 vulnerable people—for example, through the £8 million of funding for local authorities to work with local partners to prevent single homelessness, or the pioneering StreetLink app and telephone line, which make it easier for members of the public, and Members of this House, to help someone they see rough sleeping by reporting the situation so that the rough sleeper can access the support they need. We have also changed the law so that councils can place families in decent and
affordable private rented homes, to reduce the time they spend in temporary accommodation. We have made significant progress, but I want to see earlier and more effective action at a local level to make sure that we continue to deliver the best for this vulnerable group of people.

Protecting the most vulnerable in society is just as much of a priority as reducing the deficit, and there need be no contradiction between those two aims. Despite the need to take tough decisions on Government spending, we have prioritised investment in this area and increased funding for homelessness programmes to £139 million over this Parliament. We went one step further in the Budget by announcing an additional £100 million of funding for 2,000 new move-on accommodation places for those leaving hostels and refuges.

The hon. Lady’s constituency is in the London Borough of Enfield, which will receive more than £2 million in homelessness prevention funding between 2016-17 and 2019-20 through the local government finance settlement. I reassure her that our allocation of homelessness prevention funding is based on the need in a particular area. Enfield has recently successfully bid for the funding that we announced in December for those local authorities facing the most significant homelessness pressures, particularly in temporary accommodation, which the hon. Lady spoke passionately about. That funding will help to ensure that people are moved from temporary accommodation into suitable homes.

Local authorities are at the heart of efforts to reduce homelessness. That is why we protected their homelessness prevention funding, which will amount to £315 million by 2020. That will help councils to provide quality advice and assistance to everyone who approaches them for help. We have also provided support to make local authorities more effective. For example, we have funded the National Homelessness Advice Service to provide expert training and assistance to frontline staff dealing with homelessness issues. My Department is also exploring options to improve the evidence base regarding what works in tackling homelessness, and to help local areas target their interventions more smartly.

We have a strong homelessness safety net in England, but we want to strengthen it and prevent even more people from experiencing a homelessness crisis in the first place. Supporting local authorities is not just about funding. We also want to work closely with them, homelessness organisations, and other partners to shape a new approach. That means greater innovation, integration of local services, and earlier intervention—all things that the hon. Lady mentioned.

We will put prevention at the heart of everything we do, but ensure those who fall through the safety net quickly get the help they need. We will invest in programmes to break the cycle of homelessness for those with the highest needs, and make sure that people have the support they need to make a secure, long-term recovery from homelessness. To ensure that every Department plays its part in breaking the cycle of homelessness, I have reconvened the ministerial working group to take action to address the underlying causes of homelessness, and I chaired the latest meeting of that group yesterday.

Prevention must be at the heart of everything we do. That means working together to keep pace with new challenges, learning from other jurisdictions that are tackling homelessness innovatively, and considering all options for the future, including legislation—the hon. Lady raised that and a number of other issues, and I will be more than happy to arrange a meeting with her to discuss in more depth the issues that her constituents experience.

Of course, not every case of homelessness and rough sleeping will be prevented, and where it happens we must act quickly. The longer someone spends sleeping rough, the more likely it is that the problems that may have led them to becoming homeless in the first place will get worse. For those who fall through the net and end up sleeping rough, immediate intervention is vital to help them off the streets. We invested £20 million in rolling out the No Second Night Out approach across England to prevent rough sleepers from spending a second night on the streets. We are building on this success with a new £10 million programme to support even more innovative approaches to prevent and reduce rough sleeping.

Many people’s experiences of homelessness and rough sleeping have been years in the making and will take time to solve. Many will have had mental health, alcohol or substance misuse problems. As homelessness Minister I have seen at first hand the fantastic work that frontline homelessness organisations do day-in—and sometimes night-out—to support these vulnerable people. To help to break the cycle of homelessness for those with the most complicated needs, we are investing £10 million in an innovative new national social impact bond. This will help rough sleepers with the most complicated problems to move off the streets and into accommodation and employment. It will build on the learning from the world’s first homelessness social impact bond, which we funded in London. So far, over half of the participants have achieved positive outcomes.

The homelessness safety net gives people protection when they experience a homelessness crisis, but continued support is needed to help them to find settled accommodation. We have already funded Crisis to run a programme to create over 10,000 private tenancies for vulnerable people, 90% of which have been sustained. We are aware, however, that some people still struggle to move on to sustained accommodation. We must reinforce the routes that help people out of homelessness. At the Budget, we announced an additional £100 million investment to help vulnerable people to move on from hostels and refuges, and into independent living. That is on top of our £40 million investment to refurbish hostels and provide low-cost shared accommodation for young people at risk of homelessness. As well as investing in homelessness prevention, the Government are increasing the overall supply of housing and affordable housing with the biggest house building programme for 40 years.

Before I conclude, I would like to address one or two more of the points the hon. Lady mentioned. She mentioned people who are evicted from temporary accommodation and the suitability of temporary accommodation and some rental accommodation. I reassure her that all accommodation must, by law, be suitable to meet the needs of a household. No family with children should be on the streets. They are automatically in priority need if homeless and the local authority must accommodate that family for such a time as allows them to secure their own accommodation.
On suitability of accommodation, the Housing and Planning Bill is currently going through the other place. The Bill will give local authorities powers to crack down on rogue landlords, for example through the ability to levy a £30,000 civil penalty against a rogue landlord for not providing suitable and right accommodation for their tenants. We will also enable local authorities to retain civil penalties, which will give them additional funding to improve and maintain enforcement activity. That will be extremely valuable in helping authorities, such as Enfield, to do more to make sure that we all, together, drive rogue landlords out of business and stop them renting unsuitable accommodation—often to the most vulnerable people.

I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. This is a critical issue on which the Government are absolutely focused. We are a one nation Government. We want everyone to have the opportunity to live happy and fulfilling lives whoever they are, wherever they live and whatever challenges they face in life. Our goal is to keep moving from a low wage, high tax and high welfare economy, to a higher wage, lower tax and lower welfare country. However, we will always support the vulnerable and make sure they have a safe home to live in. I know that that is an aim that can be shared across the House. I look forward to meeting the hon. Lady to take this debate further.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trident

2. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Leader of the House on the timetable for a vote in the House on replacement of the Trident missile submarines.

Michael Fallon: (New Forest East) (Con): It is an open secret that the Ministry of Defence wanted this debate to take place in the spring, so I do not blame the Secretary of State for the fact that it has not happened. However, he is on record as saying that people are worried about the wavering position of the Labour Opposition on this matter. Would it not assist us to restore bipartisanship to the issue if the debate were to be brought forward, at least to before the Labour party's conference, or do the Government—by which I mean No. 10—prefer dissension at a Labour party conference, or do the Government—by which I mean No. 10—prefer dissension at a Labour party conference?

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is an open secret that the Ministry of Defence wanted this debate to take place in the spring, so I do not blame the Secretary of State for the fact that it has not happened. However, he is on record as saying that people are worried about the wavering position of the Labour Opposition on this matter. Would it not assist us to restore bipartisanship to the issue if the debate were to be brought forward, at least to before the Labour party's conference, or do the Government—by which I mean No. 10—prefer dissension at a Labour party conference to bipartisanship on a particularly important issue?

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Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Last Monday, I had the privilege of visiting Rolls-Royce in Derby, which is working on the Successor programme, and meeting members of the unions and the management. The one thing that they all want is certainty on the decision on this programme and on provision for the future. Does the Secretary of State agree that any notion that we would have an easy option to cancel the programme at some point in the future—say, at the next general election—would be disastrous not only for our defence but for the workforces in Derby and other places that are reliant on it?

Michael Fallon: (New Forest East) (Con): It is an open secret that the Ministry of Defence wanted this debate to take place in the spring, so I do not blame the Secretary of State for the fact that it has not happened. However, he is on record as saying that people are worried about the wavering position of the Labour Opposition on this matter. Would it not assist us to restore bipartisanship to the issue if the debate were to be brought forward, at least to before the Labour party's conference, or do the Government—by which I mean No. 10—prefer dissension at a Labour party conference to bipartisanship on a particularly important issue?

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): Our growing defence budget allows us to expand the defence attaché network, including new posts in Finland, Albania and Senegal, also covering the Gambia, Mali and Niger. We are also creating new deputy posts in Qatar, Afghanistan, Latvia, Lithuania and Georgia. The expansion of the DA network will increase our global defensive reach and influence and will strengthen our partnerships around the world, as set out in the 2015 strategic defence and security review.

William Wragg: I thank the Minister for that reply. It is critical that we continue to be vigilant about the security threat coming from Russia. Will he ensure that there are sufficient numbers of defence attachés in the Baltic states, central Europe and, in particular, Ukraine and Poland to provide the analysis and expertise required to understand fully the security and defence dynamics of the region?

Mr Brazier: Indeed. I am sure my hon. Friend welcomed the announcement of the new DA in Finland and the new deputy posts in two of the Baltic states.

On expertise, I should stress that we are expanding not only the number of DAs, but their career path and expertise. For example, we have opened a new defence attaché and loan service centre in Shrivenham and have reviewed and enhanced their terms and conditions of service.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am a big supporter of our DA network, but it is also important that defence attachés are robust in their relationships with their host countries. Will the Minister tell us what representations the defence attaché in Riyadh has made regarding the allegations of civilians being targeted in Yemen following claims that a UK-made PGM 500 missile was located at one of those sites?

Mr Brazier: The Department gets a constant stream of advice from the DA and several other sources on the matter that the hon. Gentleman ingeniously managed to work into his question.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Army 2020 and the creation of regional forces will help to grow future defence attachés and will enable officers to follow a career path that includes a substantial element of foreign service, allowing them to get the skills necessary to be effective defence attachés?

Mr Brazier: My hon. Friend is exactly right on that matter, as he of course knows, having previously done the international brief in the Ministry of Defence. The new approach of having brigades facing particular parts of the world means that expertise and institutional memory on particular regions will grow. Combining that with the greatly improved career prospects for DAs should in the medium term greatly enhance our representation.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I, through the Minister, thank the DA to Tunisia and Libya for the excellent, candid and rigorous briefing he gave the Foreign Affairs Committee on our visit about a month ago? What can the Minister tell the House about any envisaged deployment to the Libyan international assistance mission? What British contribution is being considered?

Mr Brazier: My hon. Friend has shown ingenuity in managing to work that question in as a supplementary. As he knows very well, this matter has not yet been decided, but I am delighted that he has received such typically excellent assistance from the DA who covers Tunisia.

Mr Speaker: The Minister does not have to sound quite so surprised, because, as we have discovered, ingenuity is not an entirely novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.
Defence Spending

4. Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): What estimate he has made of the likely change in the level of defence spending over the course of this Parliament. [904480]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): As from this month, the Ministry of Defence’s budget has risen to more than £35 billion—that is an increase of £800 million on the year just ended. This is the first real-terms increase in six years, reflecting the priority set out by this Government in the 2015 spending review to increase defence spending by 0.5% above inflation every year to 2020-21. This Government have clearly committed this country to meeting the NATO guideline of spending 2% of GDP on defence each and every year of this decade.

Christopher Pincher: I welcome this increased budget. If we were to adopt the position advocated by some and not spend 2%, what would the impact be on the morale of our troops, their equipment and our security?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right to identify that the threats we face are growing in scale, complexity and concurrency, and a failure to meet this commitment would have a significant adverse impact on our ability to deliver the capability we need to face those threats and would send a very wrong message to our adversaries. Our commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defence enables us to deliver one of the most capable armed forces in the world; to spend more than £178 billion on equipment and equipment support over the next decade; and to fund an increase in the number of regular personnel for both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, and of reservists for the British Army.

19. [904497] Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But the Minister cannot pull the wool over our eyes on this one, because we all know that defence spending was set to fall below 2% of GDP, but for the Government including things that had never been included in the NATO analysis before, such as war pensions and the pension contributions of MOD civilian staff. Will he now come clean? Will he have to resort to these sorts of accounting gimmicks to be able to assure NATO that in future we will maintain 2% spending?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman, in characteristic style, is looking for smoke where there is no fire. We use the NATO definition to make the calculation of our proportion of GDP spent on defence, and it assesses the figure and then publishes it. We have done that in the past under previous Administrations and we will do it again under this one.

18. [904496] Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The Government’s defence review set out a £178 billion programme of investment in equipment for our armed forces over the next decade. Will the Minister ignore calls from the other parties to cut defence spending, which would mean smaller, weaker armed forces and the loss of highly skilled jobs in the defence sector?

Mr Dunne: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the chance to rehearse again our commitment to increased spending on defence and security for each and every year of this Parliament—that will be a real-terms increase. We have published our 10-year forward equipment plan, which shows the contribution that defence will be making to the prosperity of the nation—that is another objective we have taken on in the defence review for the first time. That will benefit both the security of our nation and the economy as a whole.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Despite the claims by the Minister’s Department, the reality is that, between 2010 and 2015, the Royal Navy had a 33% decline in carriers and amphibious ships, a 17% decline in submarines and a 17% decline in destroyers and frigates. We are a maritime nation, and yet our Navy is declining. Is it not time that we placed greater investment in our maritime capabilities?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady is very experienced in these matters, and she will know that, in 2010, the then coalition Government inherited a dire financial situation across the public sector, and especially in defence, and some very difficult decisions had to be taken to reduce certain front-line elements, including our aircraft carriers. She is also fully aware that we are in the midst of the largest shipbuilding programme that this country has ever known. Early next year, we expect to see the first of the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers moved out of Rosyth to take up their position with the Royal Navy.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I proposed a private Member’s Bill last year requiring the Government to enshrine in law that we spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. May I welcome today’s announcement and hope that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is wrong and that this really does represent new money? May I also take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on the important work that he has done, under the lead of the Prime Minister, in promoting defence exports, and to welcome the 24 Typhoons that have been sold to Kuwait and hope that that will contribute to the Ministry of Defence’s budget?

Mr Dunne: I thank my hon. Friend who, in a previous role, had responsibility for promoting defence exports. I also wish to say that I have even better news for him: the announcement last week of the sale of Typhoons to Kuwait was for not for 24 aircraft, but for 28.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): What defence spending can the Minister guarantee for the steel industry given that the procurement rules allow for community benefit?

Mr Dunne: This Government have undertaken a new set of procurement guidelines for steel, which we have implemented through the Ministry of Defence through a combination of briefings to the Defence Suppliers Forum undertaken by the Secretary of State. I have also written to the chief executives of the 15 largest contractors. We are cascading that through the supply chain to ensure that, for future defence procurement, there is every opportunity for UK steel manufacturers to bid for tenders.
Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Government Members appear to be insinuating that the Labour party is advocating a reduction in defence spending, which is entirely untrue. It is perhaps unfortunate that the hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) talked about the impact that defence cuts have on the morale of our armed forces, because I have here a letter from the Secretary of State confirming that the MOD agreed to make £500 million of in-year savings after the Budget this year. The Government, of which this Minister is a part, has overseen a 17% cut in those Royal Navy warships and now, for the first time since 1982, have left the Falklands without a Royal Navy frigate protecting it. Can he clarify the record that we have a Government who are cutting defence spending—massively in recent years—and leaving the nation less protected as a result of it?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman really needs to read those letters more carefully. The reduction to which he referred related to the in-year spending of the Department, which ended at the beginning of this month. The defence budget for the current year, and for each future year, is going up, and the question that he and his colleagues need to answer is this: why will his party not commit, as our party has, to the 2% NATO commitment?

Daesh

5. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the progress of the international campaign to defeat ISIS/Daesh. [904481]

11. Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh. [904487]

14. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh. [904491]

15. Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh. [904492]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): My next regular meeting with my counterparts in the coalition is on 4 May. The campaign against Daesh is making progress. With coalition support, Iraqi forces hold Ramadi, are clearing Hit, and have begun preparatory operations for the retaking of Mosul. In Syria, Daesh has been driven from al-Shadadi, cutting a key supply route from Mosul to Raqqa.

Mike Kane: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. With the advent of a new unity Government in Libya, does he believe that they are preparing the ground to request military assistance from the UK, and does he think that, as part of that request, they will require assistance with airstrikes against Daesh targets in Libya?

Michael Fallon: It is early days. The Foreign Secretary visited Tripoli this morning in support of the new Government, and I and fellow European Union Defence Ministers will be meeting in Luxembourg tonight to hear directly from Prime Minister Sarraj as to how he thinks we can best help stabilise that new Government. We urgently need to engage with them, not least to help close down the very dangerous migration route that is seeing so many lives lost in the Mediterranean, and to help that Government tackle the spread of Daesh along the coast.

Dr Lee: Can my right hon. Friend confirm that contrary to its propaganda, Daesh has lost much of the territory that it held a year ago, and that now is the right time to back the Iraqi security forces in taking the fight to Daesh?

Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right. With coalition support, Iraqi security forces have retaken around 40% of the populated areas that Daesh once held in Iraq, including Tikrit, Sinjar and Ramadi, and as I said, Hit is in the process of being cleared. We are continuing to provide vital air support, as well as specialist training and equipment.

Helen Whately: Experience tells us that unless we get civil institutions up and running quickly after a conflict ends, we can end up with a failed state. What steps is my right hon. Friend’s Department taking to make sure that that does not happen in Syria once Daesh has been driven out?

Michael Fallon: Following the Syria conference held in London in February, there is now a stabilisation plan for Syria that we are working to deliver with our international partners. We are already working with existing Syrian institutions to try and restore stability, and we are working with communities on local government and civil defence, but stabilisation in Syria depends on a sustainable peace deal that protects communities from attack either by Daesh or by the regime. We are supporting that peace deal through the International Syria Support Group.

Robert Jenrick: Tomorrow the Mayor of London will unveil in Trafalgar Square a reconstruction of the arch of the temple of Bel from Palmyra, as the symbol of our defiance against Daesh and also of our commitment to protect culture in war zones when it is reasonably possible to do so. In December my right hon. Friend announced that he was commissioning a group within the armed forces of modern-day “monuments men” to lead this agenda and to bring the UK into compliance with The Hague convention, and I hope that will be in the Queen’s Speech shortly. Will he update the House on that?

Michael Fallon: Yes, the Government have announced that they will ratify The Hague convention at the earliest opportunity. That includes the establishment of a military cultural property protection unit, and my Ministry is already engaging with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the stabilisation unit to further develop plans for that capability to help better protect such important monuments in future. It is also important to deny Daesh the revenue that it has earned from selling artefacts and coins from archaeological sites.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State believe that it is possible to stabilise Libya only by having ground forces there? Does he accept that that may include British forces?
Michael Fallon: It is up to the new Government of national accord being established in Libya with our support, led by Prime Minister Sarraj, to make it clear what assistance he needs. A number of countries, including ourselves, have already indicated that we will be part of a Libyan international assistance mission, but it is far too early to speculate about what form that assistance might take, whether it is training, advice from the Ministries, or other support.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Let me begin by sending my sincere best wishes to the Royal Regiment of Scotland, which will celebrate its 10th birthday on Friday with a celebratory service at Canongate kirk. I am sure that the whole House will join me in passing on our congratulations.

Libya is increasingly becoming the focus of a campaign by the international community to defeat Daesh. Given that the UK’s last intervention in Libya was by any measure a catastrophic failure, what plans do the Government have to ensure that we have clear, stated objectives, an exit strategy and a coherent and transparent policy for rebuilding the country afterwards?

Michael Fallon: We have to continue to degrade and eventually defeat Daesh to bring to an end the horrific attacks that we have seen and the persecution of those of other faiths that we have witnessed, particularly the persecution of the Yazidi minority. In the end, Daesh has to be defeated so that we can have a tolerant and comprehensive settlement in Syria that protects all minorities.

Brendan O’Hara: It has been widely speculated that the Government are considering sending ground troops to Libya. Can the Minister give us a cast-iron guarantee that any such deployment would be discussed on the Floor of this House and voted on by this House?

Michael Fallon: First, let me caution the hon. Gentleman in wishing the Royal Regiment of Scotland a very happy 10th birthday and acknowledge the enormous contribution it makes to the military tradition in Scotland. Let me be clear that no decisions in respect of any involvement in Libya have yet been taken. We are waiting to hear from the new Government of national accord what kind of assistance they need. We have a very strong interest in helping them rapidly stabilise the coastline, which is a direct threat to western Europe and to ourselves.

Michael Fallon: We have to ensure that we have clear, stated objectives, an exit strategy and a coherent and transparent policy for rebuilding the country afterwards.

Michael Fallon: First, let me caution the hon. Gentleman against believing everything she reads in the Daily Mail. Secondly, let me make it very clear that we are not currently planning a deployment, as reported in that newspaper. Thirdly, I am always prepared to answer questions in this House, as indeed I am doing at the moment. Fourthly, the written answer published today makes very clear the circumstances in which we would of course come back to Parliament for its approval. However, I should also emphasise that the Prime Minister and I have to take decisions about the deployment of ships, planes and troops, and we do not want, as the House will understand, to be artificially constrained in action that would keep this country safe. We will keep Parliament informed and we will of course seek its approval before deploying British forces in combat roles into a conflict situation.

EU Withdrawal: Effect on National Security

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effects of withdrawal from the EU on UK defence and national security. [904482]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): NATO remains the cornerstone of the United Kingdom’s defence, but the European Union has an important complementary role in addressing and managing international crises, especially where NATO cannot, or chooses not to, act. Our response to the complex security threats we face requires a united, comprehensive approach, including the European Union’s diplomatic, humanitarian and economic levers.

Mr Shuker: Our most important defence allies, including a certain US President, who will visit this week, have recognised that leadership and membership of the EU are vital for Britain’s national security and place in the world. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the implications of leaving the EU for our transatlantic alliance and our national defence?

Michael Fallon: I cannot think of one ally—never mind the United States—that thinks that the world would be safer or that we would be safer if we left the European Union. Let me be clear: our central defence rests on our membership of NATO, but there are things...
that the European Union can add to that—not least, for
example, the recent action taken against Russia after its
annexation of Crimea and its interference in eastern
Ukraine. It was the European Union that was able to
apply economic sanctions—something NATO cannot do.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): President
Obama is indeed visiting the country later this week.
Nobody doubts for a second the total commitment of
the United States to NATO, and nobody claims for a
second that, just because the United States is not in the
EU, it is any less committed to national defence. NATO
or anything else—indeed, it would never surrender a jot
of its sovereignty. The fact is that our security depends
on NATO, not the EU, and if we leave the EU, we will
be just as safe as we are now.

Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend and I, although we
have been friends for many years, differ on this matter.
Let us be clear: the United States, as we do, shares its
sovereignty by its membership of NATO—by being
prepared to come to the aid of other NATO members
under the obligations in article 5. There are many
international ways in which we decide to share our
sovereignty for the common good and for the better
security of our country.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Does the Secretary
of State recognise the enormous value of EU membership
to our defence industry? That was recently reflected in
an ADS survey, which showed that 70% of companies
want Britain to remain in the EU. Does he agree that
access to the European funding—particularly in research
and development—is critical for British defence companies
to maintain a leading edge in the global market?

Michael Fallon: I do agree with much of that. We
heard earlier this afternoon of the success of the Typhoon
sales to Kuwait. That European consortium was put
together with four different European countries and is
now successfully selling aircraft to eight separate nations.
There are projects and programmes of such a scale that
European collaboration is only beneficial.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Should this
country decide to leave the European Union, would my
right hon. Friend undertake to use his best endeavours
to secure as much of the £10 billion a year we would
save to boost the defence budget?

Michael Fallon: I do not anticipate this country actually
taking such a dramatic step. Let me repeat: I do not
know any of my Defence Minister colleagues around
the world who would like this country suddenly to start
leaving the international alliances and partnerships that
it has entered, so I do not think the money my hon.
Friend thinks might be available will be.

Successor Ballistic Missile Submarines

8. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What
assessment he has made of the effects on the UK’s (a)
economy and (b) security of building four Successor
ballistic missile submarines.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip
Dunne): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State
indicated earlier, the nuclear deterrent is at the apex of
the UK’s full spectrum of defence capability. The UK’s
defence nuclear enterprise is gearing up to deliver the
successor to the Vanguard class submarines. Last month
we announced a further £642 million of preparatory
work ahead of the investment decision for this £31 billion
programme. That investment in Successor submarines
will not only help keep Britain safe but support over
30,000 jobs across the UK.

James Cartlidge: With Russia openly menacing our
allies, and with us on the cusp of the centenary of the
greatest sacrifices ever made by our armed forces in
defending this country, would it not be foolish and
totally inappropriate for us no longer to be prepared to
make a relatively small financial sacrifice to maintain
the only asset that can guarantee the freedom of this
country?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As the
Secretary of State indicated in his speech on nuclear
deterrence before Easter, we have both a political and a
moral responsibility to protect our people and allies.
The nuclear deterrent is assigned to NATO, and as a
leading member of NATO we cannot and should not
outsource our commitments to others. There has been
broad political consensus for decades in this House on
the need to maintain the UK’s independent strategic
deterrent. Government Members are clear where we
stand. This remains the official policy of Her Majesty’s
official Opposition, and it is in our view irresponsible
that the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury
(Emily Thornberry) and her leader appear determined
to put the ultimate security of our nation at risk.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Minister and,
indeed, the Secretary of State have referred to the
long-held and well-known views of the Leader of the
Opposition on this issue, but it is the Secretary of State
and the Prime Minister who will put the resolution to
the House. Given that there is overwhelming support
for the renewal from the Ministry of Defence, the
forces, industry, the workforce and the majority of this
House, will the Minister get the message through to
dithering Dave in No. 10 to stop playing party politics
with this issue of national security and to put the vote
to this House?

Mr Dunne: The right hon. Gentleman, who speaks
with some knowledge on these matters, has given a
strong indication to the House that there will be a broad
measure of support, which we thoroughly welcome. I
will offer the Prime Minister his advice.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Two weeks ago I had the
great privilege of visiting Rolls-Royce up the road in
Bristol, where I met apprentices and workers at the
defence aerospace operations and turbine manufacturing
facility. I witnessed the important work that Rolls-Royce
is doing around the country on manufacturing nuclear
engines for servicing naval vessels. Does the Minister
agree that Trident stands to benefit the economy by
virtue of the many jobs it will create?
Mr Dunne: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the fact that that programme will benefit not just those folks working for Rolls-Royce in various plants, particularly around Derby, or those employees of BAE Systems, the prime contractor, but companies in constituencies right across the breadth of this country, including his own.

Armed Forces: Protection from Persistent Legal Claims

9. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect the armed forces from persistent legal claims.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): Although we will always investigate serious allegations of wrongdoing, we are committed to ending the large amount of opportunist litigation brought against our armed forces, which places great stress on them, undermines human rights and corrupts our operations. The Prime Minister chaired a National Security Council meeting on the subject in February, which looked at a range of options we have developed, and tasked the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), who has responsibility for human rights, and me to produce a comprehensive package to address the problem. We expect to make announcements very shortly.

James Cleverly: Two weeks ago Justice Leggatt said that Public Interest Lawyers showed “a serious failure to observe essential ethical standards” when it claimed that British soldiers were responsible for the death of a child. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is simply the latest example of the hounding of our forces—something we committed in our manifesto to clamp down on—and that it must now be investigated by the regulator?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend and it is right that Public Interest Lawyers has been referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. Justice Leggatt criticised them for failing to take action when they discovered inconsistencies between their claimants’ accounts and, worse, for ignoring those inconsistencies when they were pointed out to them and for continuing to advance the case. In his words, “no responsible lawyer…conscious of their duties to their client and the court would have felt able to advance the original allegation.”

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Would it not help to deter future legal cases against our soldiers if the House read the remarkable speech made in this House last Thursday by the hon. Member for Graveshams (Mr Holloway), who said, from his authoritative position as a former soldier and journalist, that many untruths by Ministers, civil servants and the military resulted in grave errors in the war in Afghanistan? When can we start a full inquiry into the reasons we went into Helmand?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that the hon. Gentleman cares passionately about these issues. I point him to a number of investigations that have gone on, both very lengthy investigations by the Ministry of Defence and investigations by Committees of the House into Afghanistan and, in particular, Helmand in 2006. It is important that we learn the lessons from those inquiries. I hope that he will be able to see from operations today, in particular Op Shader, that we are acting on those lessons learned.

NATO Countries: Defence Spending

12. Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other NATO countries on spending 2% of GDP on defence.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): The UK is proud to be one of five NATO countries that meet the commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. Since the defence investment pledge was made at the Wales summit in 2014, progress has been made, with 16 allies increasing defence spending in real terms and 24 allies now spending more of their defence budgets on equipment. As it happens, the leadership role that the UK is given in NATO on this issue was warmly welcomed once again by the US Deputy Defence Secretary in my bilateral discussions with him last Friday.

Pauline Latham: What signal would it send to our NATO partners, and to our adversaries, ahead of the Warsaw summit if the Government took the advice of some in the House and failed to commit to spending 2% of GDP on defence? Will my hon. Friend update the House on the Libya and wider middle east situation?

Mr Speaker: Briefly.

Mr Dunne: I am not sure that the Speaker will give me enough time to answer both those issues, so I will focus on the first, if I may. The NATO Secretary-General was here last week and he praised the United Kingdom for our leadership on defence spending and our contribution to NATO. By the NATO summit in Warsaw in July, we expect to see further progress on the part of our allies in working to meet NATO’s 2% guideline. By contrast, the deafening failure to match that commitment by the Labour party sends precisely the wrong message to our allies and, even worse, to our adversaries.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Has the Minister any plans to increase UK spending to a percentage of GDP?

Mr Dunne: As I indicated earlier this afternoon, NATO makes the definition and assesses the contributions that are made by each member nation to its return. It is not for the United Kingdom to make that determination; it is for NATO to do so.

Procurement

13. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support British jobs and industry through its procurement process.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): In the recent strategic defence and security review, the Ministry of Defence agreed a new strategic objective of contributing to the nation’s prosperity. We do that in many ways, not least by spending some
£20 billion a year with industry, around half of which is in the manufacturing sector, and some £4 billion with small and medium-sized enterprises.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister tell the House just how much his Department has saved by buying cheap steel from Sweden? Does he think that that in any way offsets the devastating impact on our steel industry?

Mr Dunne: I am in a position to update the House on the steel component of the aircraft carrier contract, which is much the largest defence procurement contract. Of the structural steel, some 95,000 tonnes have been procured from UK steel mills over the period of that contract.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the United Kingdom works very closely with countries such as Pakistan on defence procurement? Will he join me in welcoming the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, who is sitting at the top of the Public Gallery?

Mr Speaker: Order. First, one should not refer to the place to which the hon. Gentleman referred. After six years in the House, frankly, he ought to know that. Secondly, that was pretty wide of the question. I call Stephen Phillips. Not—

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! Mr Phillips is here. Splendid. How could I have thought otherwise for a moment? It is only that the hon. Gentleman has perambulated to a different position in the Chamber. We are delighted to see him.

Service Housing

17. Stephen Phillips: What measures he has put in place to improve the quality of service housing. [904495]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): My Department is committed to improving the quality of service family accommodation provided to our service personnel and their families. We have been working closely with Carillion Amey to deliver those improvements. Work to improve accommodation has resulted in the upgrading of some 3,000 homes through complete refurbishment and the separate installation of around 10,000 new kitchens, bathrooms, and central heating systems.

Stephen Phillips: I will be short, Mr Speaker—which may be why you did not see me earlier.

Service housing is absolutely critical not only to the wellbeing of our servicemen and women and their families, but to their morale. Carillion Amey has been an appalling contractor, and I know that the Department has taken this issue seriously. May I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to be robust, and to take the contract away from it unless and until it starts to discharge its obligations properly?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to highlight the poor performance of Carillion Amey to date. I am determined, as indeed is the Secretary of State, to improve this matter, which is why we will continue to work closely with Carillion Amey. I can reassure my hon. and learned Friend that Carillion Amey has committed to meet all the key performance indicators across the suite of the next generation estate contracts, including the national housing prime contract, by the end of May 2016.

Topical Questions

T1. Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): My immediate priorities remain success in our operations against Daesh and implementing our SDSR commitments. This month, the defence budget increases for the first time in six years, and it will increase in every year of this Parliament. Our choice to spend more on stronger defence will help keep us safe.

Kirsten Oswald: The Secretary of State will know about the worrying number of cancers and terminal illnesses among groups of former RAF personnel working in Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s who worked in a toxic soup of chemicals with precious few safety precautions, and he will surely know of the distressing inconsistencies in financial support for those affected. Will he confirm that the Government’s duty of care under the armed forces covenant extends to investigating this properly and to compensating victims fully and consistently?

Michael Fallon: Yes. When a veteran considers that their service has led to an illness or injury, they are entitled to make a claim for compensation through our legal claims department, or to apply for enhancements to their pensions. Let me assure the hon. Lady that the Veterans Welfare Service will listen and will provide all necessary support.

T2. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), responded to a debate in Westminster Hall secured by our hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) on air cadet training facilities. In Southend, 1312 Air Training Corps uses the facilities for gliding in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly). Will the Under-Secretary of State make sure that those facilities are still made available to our cadets?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): Wethersfield, the facility to which my hon. Friend is referring, has been identified for disposal, and the new site is yet to be selected. However, I can reassure him that we are strongly committed to gliding, and 614 Volunteer Gliding Squadron, when it moves from Wethersfield, will expand into its new role as a regional hub. Our immediate priority is to get cadets back flying again, after a gap of about two years. That will start again this year, and should be fully delivered by 2018.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Those injured in the course of their duties should receive the financial support they need, but currently the value of compensation payments is being eroded by a comparative
third under the armed forces compensation scheme’s guaranteed income payments and the war disablement pensions supplement. Applying the triple lock to military compensation payments would ensure that the highest of earnings, inflation or 2.5% was paid. When will the Government take evidence to review this payment and examine the impact of the real-term loss under the current system?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): We always keep our payments systems under review. The hon. Lady will of course be aware that, in the recent Budget, the Chancellor decided that, for the first time, payments under the war pensions scheme would be set aside for care costs. These are the sort of positive measures that we keep under review in support of our veterans.

T3. [904504] Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Kuwait’s decision to buy 28 world-beating Typhoons is testament to the skill of the BAE workforce at Warton, many of whom live in my constituency, and this Government’s commitment to defence exports?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): We welcome wholeheartedly this month’s contract signed by Kuwait for 28 Typhoon aircraft. Kuwait thereby becomes the eighth country to select the Eurofighter Typhoon and the third in the Gulf to do so. It is very positive both for our bilateral and defence relationship and, as my hon. Friend indicates, for jobs across the British aerospace and defence industry, including the thousands employed by BAE Systems at Warton in Lancashire, many of whom are her constituents. It is excellent news for the whole supply chain right across the UK.

T5. [904506] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following the Foreign Secretary’s statement that we “stand ready to provide further assistance to Libya and its people”, will the Secretary of State confirm what kind of assistance the UK would be willing to provide and how much notice this House would have before a vote on military action in Libya?

Michael Fallon: Yes. Last week, I discussed with the Lebanese Defence Minister, Samir Mokbel, the threats that Lebanon faces and the importance of its security. We recently committed to spend a further £23 million on equipment, mentoring and training to help the Lebanese armed forces secure their entire border with Syria. We plan to spend an additional £4.5 million on urban and rural operations training so that by 2019, some 10,000 Lebanese soldiers will have received British training.

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Mr Dunne: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government as a whole are committed to supporting the UK steel industry. The Ministry of Defence has issued new policy guidance to the prime contractors to address barriers to the open market. I am working closely with our contractors to ensure that they support the new policy. In relation to the submarine contracts, as and when they are placed, UK suppliers have an important role to play in the supply of some specialist steels, but at present we do not have manufacturers that are capable of supplying other specialist steels, so there is a balance.

Mark Lancaster: Defence personnel are offered core meals, covering breakfast, lunch and dinner, with set calorific and nutritional standards. That includes unlimited access to carbohydrates and vegetables. I confess that I experience the food that is served to our armed forces personnel on a regular basis, and I have not experienced a poor standard. The normal process is for complaints to be made via the chain of command, but I am more than happy to look into the matter for my hon. Friend.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Ministers have been remarkably coy this afternoon about the timing of the maingate decision for the Trident Successor programme. I understand entirely the point about purdah, but will one Minister at least help the House by indicating whether we are likely to get a vote after 24 June and before the House rises for the summer recess on 21 July?

Michael Fallon: I hope we will have an early debate and vote on the principle of supporting the replacement of our four existing submarines. I should explain to the hon. Lady that it will not be on the maingate decision,
because there is not one maingate decision. We are obviously negotiating with our suppliers for four separate submarines.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State is a suave and polished parliamentary performer, which is why the Defence Committee would like to see a little more of him and why it is doubly disappointing that, despite trying since the beginning of March to agree with his private office to two two-hour slots before the end of May, so far we have achieved only one and the offer of a second on what happens to be local government election day, which is far from ideal. Will he kindly have a word with his private office, ask them to extract their proverbial digit, and thus avoid our two quite important inquiries on the middle east and Russia being either delayed or written without his valuable input?

Michael Fallon: I always enjoy my appearances before my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Select Committee. It is not always easy to reconcile the dates he offers with some of my international travel commitments but I will certainly have another look at the diary today.

Mr Speaker: We all know that the Secretary of State is a very busy man with many commitments and a very full diary, but the House’s Committees are very important, and I am sure that he will not forget that. Get it sorted, man.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hawk aircraft are built at Brough and flown by the Red Arrows, promoting the very best of British. Are there plans to procure new planes for the Red Arrows?

Mr Dunne: I recently announced a new support contract for the Hawk aircraft that takes it up to November 2020. We have time to decide how to sustain Hawks for the Hawk aircraft that takes it up to November 2020. We have time to decide how to sustain Hawks for the Hawk aircraft that takes it up to November 2020. We have time to decide how to sustain Hawks for the Hawk aircraft that takes it up to November 2020.

Mr Dunne: The Department places the safety of our nuclear fleet at the highest possible level. There are continuous attempts to ensure that any potential threats to our submarines are monitored. If the hon. Gentleman has something specific he would like to draw to our attention he should do so, and I am happy to meet him to discuss it.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Tata Steel developed three new types of steel to build the Queen Elizabeth class of aircraft carrier. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that British steel manufacturers continue to innovate with as well as deliver for the Royal Navy?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the success of Tata Steel in supplying steel for the aircraft carrier. Other grades and types of steel are not currently available in this country and we would be happy to talk to the industry about what steps it can take to make such steel types available.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Army Reserve centre in Cobridge in my constituency is home to the A detachment 202 (M) field hospital. I have been in correspondence with the Minister but have yet to receive a response to rumours about its imminent closure. Will he kindly have a word with the wider community about the wider community. May I have a response from the Minister?

Mr Brazier: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. For her letters on this issue; we have also had a word in the margins. We are looking into the matter. We have a robust system for appeals. I am so far unable to offer her any comfort but I will come back to her shortly.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the 1206 Air Training Corps squadron in Lichfield is one of the biggest in the west midlands, but it too has been suffering from a lack of glider training provision. What hope can the Minister give my friends and corps members that that training will be resumed?

Mr Brazier: I am delighted to answer a question from the distinguished president of that squadron. Nearly two years ago, all gliding had to be suspended for safety reasons. We have been unable to find a contractor who could credibly take on the repair of the Vigilants, but the Vikings are all on their way up, together with a very small number of Vigilants. By 2018 we will be delivering a full programme of gliding, with an enhanced level of powered flying with more Grob Tutors, and that will start this summer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some 5,000 service personnel who serve overseas have applied for postal votes. They tell me that by the time the postal votes are sent to the regiment, those serving overseas are...
disadvantaged. How will the Minister ensure that postal votes are received by those serving overseas who wish to vote?

Mark Lancaster: We partook in the Government-wide scheme launched on 1 February to try to ensure that our service personnel were aware that they could register, and we will do the same again through a defence information notice on the EU referendum that will be issued in May. Ultimately, it is down to individual service voters whether they register or vote.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State, or perhaps my hon. and very gallant Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces—[Interruption] Gallant because she is in the Royal Navy reserves—to assure the House that no investigator used by Leigh Day or Public Interest Lawyers is paid for by the Ministry of Defence for any service?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): I can give the assurance that, although the Ministry of Defence does not direct the investigations of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, it is responsible for ensuring that public money is spent well and efficiently. While we can clearly justify investigations into wrongdoing and those that exonerate our armed forces, we cannot justify spending money on processes that frustrate those investigations. We have given clear ministerial direction that those agents are not to be paid with public money, and we have received assurances that that is the case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but demand invariably exceeds supply and we must move on.
Junior Doctors Contracts

3.37 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the imposition of a new junior doctors contract.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This House has been updated regularly on all developments relating to the junior doctors contract, and there has been no change whatsoever in the Government’s position since my statement to the House in February. I refer Members to my statement in Hansard on 11 February, and to answers to parliamentary questions from my ministerial colleagues on 3 March, which set out the position clearly. Nevertheless, I am happy to reiterate those statements to the hon. Lady.

The Government have been concerned for some time about higher mortality rates at weekends in our hospitals, which is one reason why we pledged a seven-day NHS in our manifesto. We have been discussing how to achieve that through contract reform with the British Medical Association for more than three years without success. In January, I asked Sir David Dalton, the highly respected chief executive of Salford Royal, to lead the negotiating team for the Government as a final attempt to resolve outstanding issues. He had some success, with agreement reached in 90% of areas.

However, despite having agreed in writing in November to negotiate on Saturday pay, and despite many concessions from the Government on this issue, the BMA went back on that agreement to negotiate, leading Sir David to conclude that “there was no realistic prospect of a negotiated outcome.”

He therefore asked me to end the uncertainty for the service by proceeding with the introduction of a new contract without further delay. That is what I agreed to, and what we will be doing. It will start with those in foundation year 1 from this August, and proceed with a phased implementation for other trainees as their current contracts expire through rotation to other NHS organisations.

Let me be very clear: it has never been the Government’s plan to insist on changes to existing contracts. The plan was only to offer new contracts as people changed employer and progressed through training. This is something that the Secretary of State, with NHS organisations as employers, is entitled to do according even to the BMA’s own legal advice. NHS foundation trusts are technically able to determine pay and conditions for the staff they employ, but the reality within the NHS is that we have a strong tradition of collective bargaining, so in practice trusts opt to use national contracts. Health Education England has made it clear that a single national approach is essential to safeguard the delivery of medical training and that implementation of the national contract will be a key criterion in deciding its financial investment in training posts. As the Secretary of State is entitled to do, I have approved the terms of the national contract.

The Government have a mandate from the electorate to introduce a seven-day NHS, and there will be no retreat from reforms that save lives and improve patient care. Modern contracts for trainee doctors are an essential part of that programme, and it is a matter of great regret that obstructive behaviour from the BMA has made it impossible to achieve that through a negotiated outcome.

Heidi Alexander: Just when we thought this whole sorry saga could not get any worse, it now appears that Government policy is in complete disarray. Despite the Health Secretary giving us all the impression back in February that he was going to railroad through a new contract, it now appears that he is simply making a suggestion—or, as his lawyers would say, approving the terms of a model contract. Last night, the Health Secretary took to Twitter to claim that this was not a change of approach, and we have heard the same again today, so, on behalf of patients, I have to ask him: what on earth is going on?

We need a straightforward answer to a simple question: is the Health Secretary imposing a new contract—yes or no? If he is not, but merely suggesting a template, why did he not make it clearer beforehand, and why, in his oral statement on 11 February, did he lead Parliament, the media, the public and, crucially, 50,000 junior doctors to believe that he was announcing imposition? The junior doctors committee took the unprecedented step of escalating its industrial action on the back of his decision to force through a contract. How can he possibly justify a situation whereby his rhetoric, underpinned by nothing but misplaced bravado and bullishness, could lead to the first ever all-out strike of junior doctors in the history of the NHS? He must get back to the negotiating table, and quickly.

We also need answers to the following questions. Do all NHS employers have free rein to amend the terms of the Health Secretary’s so-called model contract? Does this include non-foundation trusts? Is it legal for Health Education England effectively to blackmail trusts on the part of the Health Secretary by withholding funding, if that is what Government policy now is? Finally, it seems there are two basic scenarios: either he has known all along that he does not have the power to impose a new contract, and so all this is part of a cynical attempt to take on a trade union, or he was oblivious to the fact that he did not have the power, in which case, what is going on in his Department? This is no way to run the NHS. Today’s revelations call into question the motives, judgment and competence of the Health Secretary, and the House, doctors and patients deserve some answers.

Mr Hunt: That is a truly desperate attempt to divert attention from the single biggest question that people in this House want answered: does the Labour party support or not support a strike that will see the care of thousands of people up and down the country suffer?

Let me answer the hon. Lady’s question very directly. Yes, we are imposing a new contract, and we are doing it with the greatest of regret, because over three years—with three independent processes, 75 meetings and 73 concessions that we made in a huge effort to try to come to a negotiated settlement—the BMA refused to talk. With respect, I think Sir David Dalton, the trusted chief executive of Salford Royal, understands these things better than the hon. Lady. Lady has shown she does today. After working very hard, he concluded that a negotiated settlement was not possible. That is why I announced on 11 February that I would introduce a new contract.
As for foundation trusts, if the hon. Lady had listened to my statement, she would know that it is true that foundation trusts have the freedom to introduce new contracts on pay and conditions. They can choose to exercise that freedom, but none of them has done so. She asked about non-foundation trusts. They do not have that freedom, and that is why we will be introducing a new contract for everyone.

Let me say this to the hon. Lady. There has been a lot of talk about this, but none of it as specious as the story that she planted in The Guardian this morning about the Government changing their position, which was absolute nonsense. We have not changed our position. The fact of the matter is that the Government have bent over backwards to avoid this strike. Right now, the people refusing to talk, whether it be on rota design with hospital managers or training reform with the academy, are not the Government but the BMA. Had it negotiated on Saturday pay, as it said it would, we would have had an agreement by now. Instead, we have a strike—the first ever withdrawal of emergency care in NHS history.

Mr Speaker: Order. Opposition Members should calm themselves. The Secretary of State is responding, and everybody will be heard.

Mr Hunt: Rather than try to fabricate some story about the Government changing their position, which the hon. Lady knows perfectly well they are not, she might think about the words that do need to be said in this Chamber this week—about whether or not it is appropriate for the BMA to be telling people to deny life-saving care to patients.

Some people in the NHS have shown great courage in speaking out, even against their own profession: Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, the NHS England medical director, Lord Darzi, the former Labour Minister, and Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer. But there is one person on the public stage who has not had the courage to condemn those emergency strikes, and that is the shadow Health Secretary. I hope that, for the sake of her constituents and the reputation of the Labour party, she will say at the earliest opportunity that withdrawing emergency care in pursuance of a pay dispute is wrong, disproportionate and inappropriate, and that the right thing to do now is to show courage to reform these contracts for the benefit of patients and a seven-day NHS.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The BMA has always been a very militant trade union. It has had bitter political battles with just about every Secretary of State that the national health service has had since it started. It has, however, never previously contemplated strike action, withdrawing urgent services in pursuit of what is essentially a pay claim. I do not believe that before this year the Labour party would ever have supported the BMA if it had done so. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as the pressures on the NHS are obviously mounting, with the ageing population and the rising level of demand, it is urgent to move towards a fuller seven-day service, and that it would be totally wrong for him to delay that in the face industrial action or nit-picking legalisms from a shadow Secretary of State who has just discovered what the legal status of foundation hospitals actually is?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. and learned Friend speaks with huge wisdom and experience. He makes a point about what happened under previous Labour Governments. He might also have said that those were the same Governments that gave us the current badly flawed contracts. Because those previous Labour Governments did not stand up to the BMA and because they ducked difficult decisions, we saw the pay bill balloon and some shocking failures of care. Leadership is not just about talking and negotiating; it is also about acting. That is what Ministers have to do, and in this situation we have a very simple decision to make after three years of talks: do we proceed with the measures necessary to deliver a seven-day NHS and better care for patients, or do we duck those decisions? This Government choose to act.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Yet again, I must pull up the Secretary of State. It is not a case of excess deaths at weekends; it is a case of people admitted at weekends dying within 30 days. He said the same thing again today, and it is being repeated over and over.

The Secretary of State has described, within the same pay envelope, having more doctors at weekends, not fewer during the week, and reducing a maximum of 91 hours to 72 hours. I do not see how the maths of that can possibly add up. We are not managing to cover the rota that we have, and those rota gaps pose a danger to patients.

I was very disappointed that the equality impact assessment dismissed the impact on women and other people who train less than full-time as acceptable collateral damage. We are facing the first ever all-out strike next week, and I cannot believe that we are not in negotiations. We should be at the table trying to prevent that strike. May I ask the Secretary of State how he plans to get us out of this? He should come back to the table, because that is the only way in which an impasse can ever end.

Mr Hunt: Let me gently ask the hon. Lady how long she expects us to sit round the table. We have been trying to discuss this for three years. She asked how the maths added up. I will tell her how the maths adds up. It adds up because we are putting an extra £10 billion, in real terms, into the NHS over the course of this Parliament. Conservatives put money into the NHS. The Scottish National party, incidentally, takes money out of the NHS.

The hon. Lady referred to the equality impact assessment selectively. She normally pays very good attention to detail, but the paragraphs from which she quoted related to changes that were agreed to by the BMA. What she did not quote was paragraph 95, which says that the overall assessment of the new contract is that it is “fair and justified” and will promote “equality of opportunity”. Why is that? Because shorter hours, fewer consecutive nights and fewer consecutive weekends make this a pro-women contract that will help people who are juggling important home and work responsibilities.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, notwithstanding the appalling nature of the decision that, for the first time during strike action, junior doctors may not provide life-saving care for young children and other vulnerable patients,
that decision is also totally incomprehensible, given that the doctors’ own leader has said that it is indefensible to take such action?

Mr Hunt: It is totally incomprehensible, and I know that many doctors will be wrestling with their consciences. However, I think that, in the context of the House, this could be an occasion for us to put aside party differences. I think that there was a time when Members in all parts of the House would have condemned the withdrawal of life-saving care in a pay dispute, but that day has sadly passed, and it is the Conservatives who must now show leadership in this regard. As we heard from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the NHS faces huge challenges, but we will not tackle those challenges if we allow obstructive unions to hold a gun to the Government’s head and refuse to allow us to proceed with really important changes—modern contracts that will allow safer care for patients and better terms for doctors. We are determined to do the right thing for the NHS, and, indeed, to be the party of the NHS.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Secretary of State wanted to do a deal with anybody, does he not think it is a bit unwise to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the NHS faces huge challenges, but we will not tackle those challenges if we allow obstructive unions to hold a gun to the Government’s head and refuse to allow us to proceed with really important changes—modern contracts that will allow safer care for patients and better terms for doctors. We are determined to do the right thing for the NHS, and, indeed, to be the party of the NHS.

Mr Hunt: Well, if planting a story in a newspaper is reprehensible, I do not think many Members of this House would survive the scrutiny of the hon. Gentleman’s very high code of moral conduct for long. Let me say this to him and to all Labour Members: we should be honest about the problems we face in the NHS, whatever those problems might be, and we should not sweep them under the carpet. One problem that we face—not the only one—is the excess mortality rates for people admitted at weekends. There was a time when Labour Members would have recognised that their own constituents were the people who depended most on services such as the NHS and who had the most to gain from a full seven-day NHS. Labour Members should be supporting us, not opposing us.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): We are eight days away from an unprecedented full walkout of junior doctors, including the withdrawal of emergency care. Our constituents want to know whether they will be safe on the strike days. Will the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State join me in calling on the BMA at least to exempt casualty departments and maternity units from this walkout? We know that, even with goodwill arrangements in place to bring people back in when hospitals are overwhelmed, the delays will cost lives.

Mr Hunt: As ever, my hon. Friend speaks very constructively on this issue. She is absolutely right to say that the departments at most risk are emergency departments, maternity departments and intensive care units. Those are the areas that we are most keen to ensure will maintain critical doctor cover over the two strike days that are planned. I really hope that the BMA will co-operate with NHS England as we identify where we think the gaps might be. We will share that information with the BMA and I hope very much that it will help us to plug those gaps with junior doctors, because in the end no one wants there to be any kind of tragedy. We all have a responsibility to work to ensure that that happens.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that, when it comes to a medical diagnosis, words and clarity matter. The same applies to us as politicians. He has said today that he is imposing a contract, in contrast with what his legal team are saying to the doctors. For the avoidance of doubt, will he set out explicitly what legal powers he thinks he has to do that?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do so. We are introducing a new contract from this August, and it will be for all junior doctors. It will go progressively through the different ranks of junior doctors and, over the course of the next year, the vast majority of new doctors will move on to the new contracts. The reason that we did not use the word “impose” in the original statement was not a matter of semantics. We are proceeding with this new contract and everyone will move on to it, which is the gist of what most people mean by this. What we are not doing is changing existing contracts, so when people move trust or move to a new position, they will move on to a new contract. That is why we have used the term “introduction” of new contracts. However, it would have been much better if the introduction of the new contracts had been done through a negotiated process. That is why we took such trouble: we went to 75 meetings and made 73 different concessions in order to try to do this on a negotiated basis. Very regrettably, that proved not to be possible, which is why we took the difficult decision to proceed with these new contracts anyway.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is totally unjustified for doctors to demand higher premium rates at weekends when almost all other NHS workers, and indeed most other working people across the economy, do not get them? It is completely disrespectful for the BMA to suggest that doctors’ lives are somehow disproportionately inconvenienced by Saturday shifts and that those of other people are not.

Mr Hunt: It is true that the BMA rejected Saturday premium pay that was more generous than the Saturday premium pay offered to nurses, healthcare assistants or paramedics working in the same hospitals and operating theatres as those doctors. Many people will ask whether that was a reasonable position to take, given that the doctors’ overall pay was protected. I think they will also ask whether, even if the doctors disagreed with the Government on that point, it was appropriate or proportionate for them to withdraw life-saving emergency
care from patients in the pursuance of their disagreement. I wonder whether that is something that will shape many people's confidence in what the NHS stands for.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I have been disappointed by the Secretary of State, and by his language and tone, during this urgent question. Looking at how he has responded here, we can understand why the discussions and talks have ended up as they have done. He asked how long we should do this for; I would say, "As long as it takes." The problem with the negotiations so far has been the Government's failure to respond to the BMA and to work with junior doctors, who do care about their patients and do want to provide a good quality of care.

Mr Hunt: I think that sums up the difference between the two parties. It is true that Labour would take "as long it as takes" to negotiate the changes, which is why we ended up with poor contracts in 1999, 2003 and 2004. After three years of trying to get reforms to contracts to make the NHS safer for patients and better for doctors, we need to proceed with a manifesto commitment. Ministers have to decide and act as well as talk. We did not choose this outcome and tried hard for a negotiated decision, but when the hon. Lady says that talks should go on for "as long as it takes", she is actually saying that the other party has a veto over change. No one should have a veto over an elected Government's manifesto commitments.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): One thing that the whole House can agree on is that the postponement of treatment or operations is never cost-free for patients. Every hospital has an ethics committee, so does my right hon. Friend agree that all striking doctors should consult their hospital's ethics committee? Does he agree that the removal of emergency cover by any doctor for industrial reasons would be unlikely to meet with the approval of any medical ethic committee? Finally, does he agree that it is unacceptable for any doctor to act unethically, and that that would place him or her in serious jeopardy?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks wisely. A whole chorus of senior doctors, from Professor Sir Bruce Keogh to Dame Sally Davies to Lord Darzi, have urged doctors to think hard about the ethics involved. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that consulting the ethics committee in the trust is a wise thing to do. Doctors might also take note of what the General Medical Council said about it being increasingly difficult to justify the withdrawal of emergency care and about the ethics involved. In the end, this is a personal decision for doctors, and it is about whether it is right to withdraw emergency care from patients in an industrial dispute about pay. This is a bridge that the NHS has never crossed before. It is a very big decision, not only for the NHS, but for every single doctor inside it.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): On the basis of the Secretary of State's previous comments, and particularly his opening comments, is he absolutely confident that he has the legal power to impose the new contract?

Mr Hunt: Yes.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): In November, the BMA promised to negotiate on Saturday pay. Has it kept that promise?

Mr Hunt: No, it has not. If it had, I do not think that we would be having a strike. I think we would have a negotiated settlement, and the NHS would be able to proceed with the contracts, which have important benefits for doctors, such as reducing the number of consecutive nights or consecutive long days that they can be asked to work. The refusal to negotiate on the crucial issue of Saturday pay, which is not a reduction in take-home pay because the reduction in Saturday premiums was made up for with an increase in basic pay, was what led Sir David Dalton to say that a negotiated settlement was not possible. It is a matter of huge regret, but I am afraid that it leaves the Government with no option but to proceed in the way that we are doing.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A senior executive at Babcock once said to me that there are employers who could pick a fight with themselves. During 30 years in the world of work, I cannot remember a legitimate sense of grievance so grotesquely mishandled. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that he is poisoning relationships with a generation of junior doctors? Will he not get back to the negotiating table and stay there until the dispute is resolved?

Mr Hunt: Without going over the previous points about the three years we have been around the negotiating table, I just say this to the hon. Gentleman: I think there are legitimate grievances for junior doctors, and they extend well beyond the contract. There are some big issues with the way training has changed over the years, and there are some serious issues we need to address about the quality of life for junior doctors—sometimes they have a partner working in a different city and they are unable to get training posts nearby to each other. We want to address those issues, which is why we set up a review, led by Professor Dame Sue Bailey, the president of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. Who is refusing to talk to that review, and refusing to co-operate with it? It is the BMA. That is why it is so important that people get around the table and start to talk about how we resolve these problems, rather than remaining in entrenched positions.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the new contract provides a far better work-life balance than the current contract, which doctors tell me cannot even help them to provide and plan for important family events?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. One of the key changes in the new contract that we hope to see is much more predictability about weekend working, and a sense for junior doctors that when they do go into work at the weekends they will get the same support around them as they would during the week; it can be incredibly stressful when junior doctors are called into work at the moment. All these things are improvements, and what has made it very difficult is that these improvements have been misrepresented by the BMA to its own members, so that people have become very suspicious about these changes.
[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

That is why we tried so hard to get a negotiated outcome, and why we have been so disappointed that that has not been possible.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the studies of mortality rates within 30 days of weekend admissions have in no case said that the rostering of junior doctors is a problem? Instead of talking about others negotiating, why does he not take responsibility and get around the negotiating table himself?

Mr Hunt: With respect, not very far away from the hon. Lady’s constituency is the Salford Royal, whose very respected chief executive concluded that a negotiated outcome was not possible. That is why I reluctantly took the decision to proceed with the new contracts. As for the studies on mortality rates, we have had eight studies in the past six years, six of which have said that staffing levels at weekends are one of the things that need to be investigated. The clinical standards say that we need senior decision makers to check people who are admitted at the weekends, and junior doctors, when they are experienced, count as senior decision makers, which is why they have a very important role to play in delivering seven-day care.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know that the BMA very properly balloted its members before embarking on a policy of industrial action, but has it yet balloted junior doctors on the specific question of withdrawing emergency cover?

Mr Hunt: No, it has not, and I think that is what is causing many junior members to pause for thought. Many people say that this escalation is something that the BMA should consult its members on, once again.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that we need closure on the junior doctors’ strike, for patients and for doctors, to enable the NHS to concentrate on issues such as the projected £8 billion shortfall in the NHS; the GP out-of-hours services, which are under real pressure; the worst projected £8 billion shortfall in the NHS; the GP out-of-hours services, which are under real pressure; the worst

Mr Hunt: With respect, that precisely encapsulates the problem. The hon. Gentleman has interpreted the fact that I want to do something about excess mortality rates, which mean that a person admitted at the weekend has an 11% to 15% higher chance of death than if they were admitted in the week—that is proven in a very comprehensive study—as an attack on the medical profession. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was actually the medical profession—the royal colleges and Professor Sir Bruce Keogh—that first pointed out this problem of the weekend effect. We are simply doing something about it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Health Secretary rightly mentioned the excellent Salford Royal, which the BMA has used to suggest that what might be right in a large hospital in a densely urban centre might not be applicable right across our national health service. Is that not the case that what might be right in a large hospital in a densely urban centre might not be applicable right across our national health service? Is that not the case that what might be right in a large hospital in a densely urban centre might not be applicable right across our national health service? Is that not the case that what might be right in a large hospital in a densely urban centre might not be applicable right across our national health service?

Mr Hunt: Yes, there are some hospitals that have managed to eliminate the difference between weekend and weekday mortality under the current contracts, but there are only a few. Having talked more widely with the
medical profession, it is clear that we need a sustained national effort—contract reform is part of that effort—if we are to promise uniformly across the NHS that we will provide every patient with the same high-quality care, every day of the week. Part of that is having a modern contract for junior doctors that deals with the anomalies that they themselves recognise in the current contract; that is why this is the moment for wider reforms.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): This is clearly a fight that the Secretary of State went looking for because he expected to put himself on the side of the patients. The trouble is that it has not worked out like that, because the patients, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), use these services and know that junior doctors are in work at the weekend; it is some other procedures that are sometimes not available. Their feelings now will be fear and anxiety that their children or their elderly relatives will get sick, fall or need help on strike day. They will be seriously, seriously worried about that. Does the Secretary of State take any responsibility for the situation that he has caused?

Mr Hunt: On the contrary, I take full responsibility for delivering a safer NHS for patients. That is my job. If the hon. Lady wants to talk about patients, perhaps she might listen to the comments of one of the most famous patient safety campaigners in the country, James Titcombe, who tragically lost his son because of mistakes made at Morecambe Bay. He said that there has been “much progress towards a safer NHS in recent years”, but that there is “much more to do to reverse the cover-up culture that flourished under Labour.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that on the last occasion that the BMA called on junior doctors to take strike action, that call was rejected by 47% of junior doctors? Now the BMA wants junior doctors to remove emergency cover. What does he think it will say about the BMA’s mandate for future action if fewer than half of junior doctors support its call for further strikes?

Mr Hunt: That is a very important point to make. On the BMA’s mandate for the current strike action, many hon. Members have said today that we should get back to looking after patients. They are concerned about things to do with their training and quality of life—things that I think we can sort out together—but I will tell him exactly the answer to his question, which he can relay to his constituents. What we want to do is reduce the difference between the mortality rates for people admitted in the week and at weekends. We have identified four key clinical standards that we believe are necessary to do that. It is by making sure that we can deliver those four clinical standards across the NHS that we will deliver this strategy.

Mr Hunt: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman’s definition of “ideological” is. If “ideological” is giving safer care to patients, it is an ideology that we can all share, but I will tell him exactly the answer to his question, which he can relay to his constituents. What we want to do is reduce the difference between the mortality rates for people admitted in the week and at weekends. We have identified four key clinical standards that we believe are necessary to do that. It is by making sure that we can deliver those four clinical standards across the NHS that we will deliver this strategy.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right. What patients want is a safe NHS where it does not matter on which day of the week they are admitted if something goes badly wrong. The big surprise here is that this is not something that the whole House can unite behind. It is something that people who believe in the NHS, as I think we all do, should strongly support. We are standing up for those patients, and I hope Labour, the party that founded the NHS, might do the same.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could update the House on any legal action against the Department, and on whether the Department will be defending it.

Mr Hunt: We have two cases ongoing, and we are defending them vigorously.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I, too, have been contacted by a number of junior doctors who are increasingly disillusioned by the way that the BMA is handling the dispute, and especially by the militant tendency, which has been hell-bent on strike action for many months. Will the Secretary of State meet other groups of junior doctors who want to resolve the dispute, recognise that a reformed contract is needed, and want to get back to looking after patients?

Mr Hunt: Of course I am delighted to engage with junior doctors, and I have been talking to a number of them over recent months. I agree with my hon. Friend. My observation from talking to junior doctors is that most of the time I am with them, they are not talking about things they do not like about the new contracts. They are concerned about things to do with their training and quality of life—things that I think we can sort out outside the current contractual negotiations. As my hon. Friend has correctly been passing on to them, there are many things in the new contract that will benefit junior doctors, and we should make sure that everyone knows about them.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): How can the Secretary of State claim that he is motivated by a desire for a seven-day NHS when he and others in the coalition Government legislated to allow hospitals to...
make up to 49% of their money from private patients? If hospitals achieve that 49%, what impact will that have on mortality rates for NHS patients?

Mr Hunt: The difference between those of us on the Government side of the House and those on the Opposition side is that we do not have an ideological view about a trust wanting to offer some private treatment in order to benefit its NHS patients. That is what some trusts are doing, within very strict constraints. I think that most people know that all the scare stories that were put out about the Health and Social Care Bill in 2012 have not materialised. We are finding that trusts are being very sensible about making sure they get that balance right. Indeed, in certain circumstances it makes a big difference to improving NHS care.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): The key thing is looking after patient safety, so will my right hon. Friend consider changing the law so that hospitals such as Derriford hospital can make use of dedicated military doctors to fulfil that service if it is needed?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend always makes important suggestions that can benefit his constituency, and rightly so. I do not think that there is a need to change the law for that to happen; if military help were needed, I think the military would stand ready to offer it. At the moment, we are making contingency plans by drawing on the consultant workforce, who are not involved in industrial action, and our hope is that A&E departments throughout the country will be covered by that extra support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If the Health Secretary is unable to impose the original contract, how can people be expected to abide by a new contract that is not legally binding? Does he agree that maintaining a constant approach is absolutely vital, particularly in a fifth walkout, which could involve everyone? What actions is he taking to restore faith in the NHS among both the staff and the general public?

Mr Hunt: Just to be absolutely clear, the new contract is legally binding and it will apply to all junior doctors in the NHS. On restoring confidence, obviously morale is low at the height of an industrial relations dispute. I think the real way to restore confidence is to point out to the doctors who work incredibly hard inside the NHS that the Government are this year giving the NHS the sixth biggest funding increase in its history, that we are committed to making the NHS the safest and highest-quality system in the world, and that we believe that if that happens it will also be a better place for them to work. I believe that all those things will come together, but obviously there is a very difficult period that we have to get through first.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Against the background of Kettering general hospital being under huge pressure, there is a great deal of local sympathy for junior doctors, but increasingly people are bemused as to what the strike is about, given that the contract involves a reduction in hours from 91 to 72 and a 13.5% increase in basic pay. My constituents are opposed to strike action, and they are completely opposed to any strike action that involves the withdrawal of emergency cover.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am sure that that position is shared by many members of the public. I think people are very perplexed, because both sides in the January negotiations concluded that there was only one area of outstanding difference, which was Saturday pay. I adopted a compromise position on Saturday pay, which I thought was the fairest thing to do, but the BMA was not prepared to countenance any flexibility on that whatsoever. I therefore had to make the very difficult decision of whether we go forward, or whether we do not address the big issues that we need to address for a seven-day NHS. I share his concern about whether the strikes are really worth it, and I am concerned about the impact on the residents of Kettering.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If the Secretary of State is correct that he has the legal power to impose contracts, can he tell the House from where that power derives? Can he also explain why the Government's legal team failed to argue that case?

Mr Hunt: I hope the hon. Lady understands that I am not going to go into the details of the legal cases that we are currently arguing. However, let me make it clear that the Secretary of State does have that power and that we are using it correctly, and we will argue that case very strongly in the High Court.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Many hundreds of operations were cancelled during the last strike. The next strike will see the unprecedented step of emergency cover being withdrawn, and many junior doctors are themselves worried about that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time for the BMA's leaders, who are calling for the strike, to heed the worries of those junior doctors and of patients, and to call it off?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree. It is entirely legitimate to disagree with the Government of the day about contract reform—we have tried to make the case as to why that reform is important—but it is wrong for patients to pay the price for that disagreement. While the NHS can cope with the withdrawal of labour for elective care, it is a much bigger deal when emergency care is withdrawn, and people throughout the NHS are extremely worried about the impact of that. Doctors should also worry about how the public will view their profession if they proceed with this wholly unnecessary step.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am glad the Secretary of State has come to the Chamber to answer the urgent question—I witnessed for myself his eagerness to get here as he sprinted across Portcullis House.

There is a real lack of clarity in this debate. “Agenda for Change” staff get paid a premium rate for working unsocial hours. Foundation trusts' freedom to set rates allows them only to improve conditions and pay, not to diminish them. May I add that 98% of those who voted in the BMA's ballot supported industrial action, including...
the full withdrawal of labour? May I suggest that the Secretary of State arm himself with the facts and get back round the negotiating table?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right that I sprinted here—I was a little concerned that Defence questions might not last the full hour, although they did, and I am sure Mr Speaker is pleased about that. The point I would make about the ballot, which did receive the overwhelming support of junior doctors, is that it happened before they knew what the deal on the table was. On the heated issue of Saturday premium rates, we ended up with a proposal where the Government agreed to pay premium pay on Saturdays for any doctors who work one Saturday or more a month. At the moment, therefore, we have this extreme step—the withdrawal of emergency care—to boost the pay of doctors who work less than one Saturday a month. I think many members of the public will say that that is not proportionate.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Let us be clear: this is an old-fashioned wage dispute, run by one of the most militant long-standing trade unions. My constituents are asking why the highest-paid NHS workers should be paid extra for working Saturdays when some of the lowest-paid NHS workers are not.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right. Doctors who strike will need to explain that to paramedics, healthcare assistants and nurses working in their own operating theatres. In the end, that issue is why this strike is happening. The BMA said in writing in November that it would negotiate on Saturday pay; it went back on its word in February. As a result, this is the only outstanding issue, and we now have this extreme step—the withdrawal of emergency care. I find that very hard to justify.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): At the beginning, the Secretary of State said he was publishing a model contract, which he believed trusts, including foundation trusts, would by convention implement, but he has subsequently said that there is a legal duty that he can impose. He needs to clarify that, and it would be helpful if he could publish the legal advice. That would not be a surprise in the judicial review cases, because his lawyers are presumably doing their skeleton arguments. We have a right to know the answers to these questions.

Mr Hunt: With respect, all the hon. Gentleman needs to do is look in Hansard at my response to the urgent question, which made it clear that we have the right to introduce a new contract. On the basis of the conventions that currently apply in the NHS, that contract will apply to all junior doctors. Foundation trusts do indeed have the right to set their own terms and conditions, but they choose not to do so.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): This unprecedented withdrawal of emergency care seems to revolve principally around the issue of pay on Saturdays. Will the Secretary of State clarify whether pay uplifts will continue to be available to junior doctors who work regular Saturdays?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. More to the point, any doctors who see an increase in their Saturday workload will see a significant increase in their pay, including their premium pay. The contract is designed to make sure that we reward people who work the longest and most antisocial hours, including women, but in a way that means that we can afford to deliver a seven-day NHS, which is why it is good for patients as well.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Many weekend admissions are for urgent cases such as heart attacks and strokes, while many weekday admissions are for elective surgery and other non-life-threatening conditions. Is not that the main reason for the myth of excess weekend deaths?

Why will the anxiety of this strike be felt only by patients in England, while the other nations have settled? Is it because of bad negotiation or because the health service is never really safe in Tory hands?

Mr Hunt: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would have the courage to say that in Wales, but let me answer his question directly. The 15% increase in mortality rates for people admitted at weekends falls to 11% when we take account of the more chronic conditions, so there is a small reduction, but the mortality rate is still significant.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): May I take the Secretary of State back to the question he did not answer when it was asked by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State? If the Government are now arguing that the Secretary of State does have the power to impose a contract, can he explain why Government solicitors did not argue that case in their letter of 15 April? Can he point to where it is proved that he actually has that power?

Mr Hunt: We do have that power by law. The letter we put out in defence against the legal action that has been taken against the Government explains very clearly why and how we have that power. It is all written there for the hon. Gentleman to see. I assure him that, on something as contentious and difficult as this, we take every care to make sure that we are acting within the law.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If I were Secretary of State for Health, I would feel personally responsible for this unprecedented action taking place on my watch, and I would do everything I could to build bridges to make sure it did not happen and that patients were not threatened in the way we all fear. What is the Secretary of State doing to build trust between himself and the NHS workforce?

Mr Hunt: I will tell the hon. Gentleman one of the things we are doing, which is turning around the hospital in his own constituency, which is no longer in special measures because the quality of care has improved dramatically. What else are we doing? Over three years, there have been 75 meetings, 73 concessions and three different independent processes. We have tried everything to get a negotiated outcome, but in the end we have to do the thing that is right for patients.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State needs to face reality: there is a recruitment and retention crisis of junior doctors in paediatrics, A&E, intensive therapy units and acute medicine. Those specialisms demand seven-day working and people working unsocial hours. The junior doctors
know that these contracts will make the situation worse, so why is the Secretary of State not doing everything in his power to get people to sit around the table—even if that does not include him personally or David Dalton—to have negotiations to address the real issues concerning junior doctors?

Mr Hunt: That is exactly what we have been doing. Indeed, there are a number of changes in the contracts that will be beneficial for people working in A&E departments, as has been recognised by the president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, Cliff Mann. The difficulty we have had in terms of morale is that we have been faced with the BMA, which has consistently misrepresented the contents of the new contract to its own members. Nothing could be more damaging for morale than that. What we will need to do, I am afraid, is wait until people are on the new contracts, and then they will actually see that they are a big improvement on their current terms and conditions. That is the right thing for doctors and the right thing for patients.

Point of Order

4.34 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There is great concern in Wrexham about the disappearance in Peru of a local cabinet maker and craftsman, Harry Corder Greaves. I have spoken today to the Foreign Office, which has been extremely helpful both to the family and to me, and I am grateful for the support that it is offering. May I, through your good offices, Mr Speaker, make it clear to the Government of Peru that the people of Wrexham and the wider community would be extremely grateful for any efforts that that Government can put in to try to find this young man, who is 29 years old, and whose family is going through terrible distress at the present time?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. Although this is not a matter for the Chair to determine, the hon. Gentleman has made his understandable concern about his constituent extremely clear. He will have been heard on the Treasury Bench, and his concern will doubtless be conveyed to the relevant Ministers. I hope and trust that they will have contact, as appropriate, of a kind that I hope will, in due course and preferably soon, allay the concerns of the hon. Gentleman.
Appointment of the Commissioner for Public Appointments

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We come now to two Select Committee statements. In a moment, I shall ask Mr Bernard Jenkin to address the House. He will do so for up to 10 minutes, during which I remind the House that no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on its subject, and I will call Mr Bernard Jenkin to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. The Front Bench team may take part in questioning. The same procedure will be followed for the second Select Committee statement.

These are extremely important matters, but I hope that the House will understand if I express the hope that together, the two Select Committee statements do not consume more than 40 minutes of our time, because there are important Backbench Business Committee debates—two of them, to be precise—to which we need to move on, and in which I want to accommodate all interested would-be contributors. With that, I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, Mr Bernard Jenkin.

4.37 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful to have this opportunity to make a statement on the report by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee entitled “Appointment of the Commissioner for Public Appointments”, which we published last week. The post of Commissioner for Public Appointments was established in 1995 following the recommendation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in its first report, the Nolan report. The Nolan report recommended the creation of the post as a means of enhancing public confidence in the public appointments process and the quality of appointments made under it. The role of the Commissioner for Public Appointments is set out in the Public Appointments Order in Council 2015.

Since the post and office of the commissioner were established in 1995, there have been four Commissioners for Public Appointments. From 2011 to 2016, the post of CPA was held jointly with the role of First Civil Service Commissioner by Sir David Normington. However, with Sir David’s departure, the two posts of First Civil Service Commissioner and CPA were advertised separately. That was the result of a recommendation made to Ministers by Sir Gerry Grimstone prior to the publication of his review of public appointments. As indicated by the recruitment advertising for this post, the commissioner will be expected to work with the Government in implementing the Grimstone review’s recommendations. The Grimstone review, however, was published only in March this year.

After two hearings with the Government’s preferred candidate, the right hon. Peter Riddell, and after some discussion, we have given Mr Riddell a qualified endorsement as Commissioner for Public Appointments. He is well known to many in this House as a respected political journalist and commentator. He was appointed a Privy Counsellor for his work on the Gibson inquiry into the possible illegal rendition of UK detainees. He has also been chair of the Hansard Society and, most recently and perhaps relevantly, director of the Institute for Government.

PACAC remains concerned, however, that the changes proposed by the Grimstone review, as interpreted by the Government, alongside other changes, such as the introduction of enlarged ministerial offices—whereby Ministers, instead of the civil service, can themselves make appointments to their private offices—may be leading to an increasing politicisation of senior public appointments. We will report on our inquiry into the Grimstone proposals after the code of practice for public appointments and the new Order in Council have been published.

The proposals are controversial. They propose a significant removal of the powers exercised by the office of the CPA over the public appointments process. Ministers, instead of the CPA, would set the rules by drawing up the new governance code. Ministers could decide to run an appointment process without referral to the CPA. Ministers, not the CPA, could determine the membership of appointment panels, including the independent member. Ministers could include on selection panels an official acting as a Ministers’ representative without the consent of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Ministers would have latitude to interview and appoint someone even if the selection panel had marked him or her below the line.

The new Order in Council and the new code of conduct for public appointments have yet to be published even in draft form. Publication of the Grimstone review was originally expected last year, but it was held back. There was a gap of only three days between the publication of the Grimstone review, along with the Government response, and Mr Riddell being named as the preferred candidate. That left us with no opportunity, by the time of Mr Riddell’s appearance before the Committee on 21 March, to consider the Grimstone review.

We concluded that it would have been inappropriate for us to make a report on the Government’s preferred candidate that could have been regarded as an implicit and unqualified endorsement of the Government’s interpretation of the Grimstone proposals. After our initial evidence session with Mr Riddell before Easter, we therefore issued a call for evidence on the Grimstone review. We took evidence from the outgoing CPA, Sir David Normington, from Sir Gerry Grimstone himself and from my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General prior to concluding our pre-appointment scrutiny of Mr Riddell on 12 April. I am very grateful to the Government for delaying Mr Riddell’s appointment while we completed our pre-appointment scrutiny.

We intend to report on the implications of Sir Gerry Grimstone’s review shortly. We will welcome any further written evidence. The present Committee on Standards in Public Life has warned that this could “all add up to a public perception of a system which was being operated under increased political patronage. It could also run counter to the intentions to increase transparency and diversity.” The outgoing CPA, Sir David Normington, has expressed his opposition to the proposals as a reversal of the Nolan reforms of 20 years ago. Sir Gerry Grimstone
has made it clear that transparency rather than the direct powers currently held by the commissioner would enable the commissioner to remain a powerful regulator. However, the Minister for the Cabinet Office has made it clear that the CPA would be consulted by Ministers, but the CPA would no longer have the power to direct an independent appointment process, as now.

PACAC will therefore closely monitor how Mr Riddell works with Ministers to implement the Grimstone review’s recommendations, and how he responds to the recommendations that PACAC have yet to make on the Grimstone review. PACAC will underwrite Mr Riddell’s authority and independence as the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and we will make use of our ability to carry out follow-up scrutiny, if necessary, to make sure that any concerns we have are heard. We agree with Sir Gerry Grimstone that the role of the CPA should be robust and authoritative, and should not be undermined.

Furthermore, in the light of the Grimstone review’s proposed changes to the public appointments process and in line with other roles, such as those of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and the chairs of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the UK Statistics Authority, PACAC recommends that future appointments of the Commissioner for Public Appointments should be subject to a resolution of both Houses of Parliament. This will be an additional safeguard, and act as a public reassurance that the independence and status of the Commissioner for Public Appointments is not threatened. We also recommend that a similar procedure should apply to the post of First Civil Service Commissioner. I am very pleased to present this report to Parliament.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for his report and today’s statement.

Sir David Normington, the outgoing Commissioner for Public Appointments, said that the Government’s proposals put at risk 20 years of progress and risk ushering in “a return to the days of political and personal patronage”.

Indeed, he said that as the commissioner, he would be contacted once a month by the Prime Minister or other Ministers, asking why party donors, office holders or former MPs had not been shortlisted or recommended for posts.

In the light of those concerns, does the hon. Gentleman agree that to ensure that the best candidates are aware of these opportunities, the vacancies must be promoted far and wide? That would go some way towards ensuring that applications were received from candidates regardless of their race, creed, colour, religion, gender or even the university or school they happened to go to. It would also open up the process to people from different and varied walks of life who could bring their life experience to a different arena. Advertising a job on a specialist website and then phoning round our pals to encourage them to apply is not an effective or appropriate way to attract the strongest candidates.

Mr Jenkin: I think the danger is not that those things will happen, but that people will say that they may seem to be happening. Curiously, it might make it harder for the Government to put a friend or supporter into a public appointment job if the Minister is more directly involved. The current arrangements were created to protect Ministers.

If Ministers are frustrated that the wrong people are being interviewed, that people are being appointed according to the wrong job specifications or that people with the right skills are not being given an interview, it is up to them to make sure that the job specification for a job is as they think it should be before the recruitment process starts.

I will not defend the public appointments process in total. The Grimstone review has started a much-needed debate about public appointments, but before my Committee and I give a definitive view of Sir Gerry Grimstone’s proposals, we want to consider all the arguments and all the evidence.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on their excellent publication and the robustness of their recommendations, and I congratulate him on his statement to the House. What was Mr Riddell’s response when the Committee put the points that my hon. Friend has made to him? Does my hon. Friend foresee Mr Riddell being invited back before the Committee before the end of 12 months?

Mr Jenkin: On the latter point, we certainly intend to give Mr Riddell an opportunity to appear before the Committee before too long to see how he is settling into his new role. We would not have agreed to his appointment unless we were convinced that he was determined to be independent, but with so many of his powers being questioned and with Ministers substantively proposing to take back control of the appointments process, how he carries out the role will be crucial. How he maintains the importance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments will be very interesting to observe.

We would like whatever changes are made to be made on the basis of consensus. We have picked up a certain amount of—how shall I say it?—tension between civil servants and Ministers about these appointments. There may be an opportunity to build a better understanding of both parties, so that these changes are not necessary.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to ensure that the best candidates are aware of these opportunities, the vacancies must be promoted far and wide? That would go some way towards ensuring that applications were received from candidates regardless of their race, creed, colour, religion, gender or even the university or school they happened to go to. It would also open up the process to people from different and varied walks of life who could bring their life experience to a different arena. Advertising a job on a specialist website and then phoning round our pals to encourage them to apply is not an effective or appropriate way to attract the strongest candidates.

At a time when the public are rightly demanding more accountability from their elected representatives, the opportunity to apply for jobs such as the Commissioner for Public Appointments should be widely publicised across a spectrum of United Kingdom society to encourage a diverse range of applicants, rather than going down the traditional route, which will reaffirm the public’s view that there is cronyism and engender disenchantment and apathy.
Mr Jenkin: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s contribution. I thank him for the very diligent work that he puts in on the Committee. I do not think he will mind me putting on the record that in the discussions to which I referred he was one of those who expressed a strong reservation about this appointment, not least because no one could possibly describe Peter Riddell as an outsider to Westminster. Whether an outsider is appropriate for this particular role is debatable. We do not know who else was interviewed for the role, as that is not the job of a Select Committee. One of the frustrations of pre-appointment hearings is that we are not interviewing the person for the job but merely trying to establish in our own minds whether the proposed appointment is an appropriate one and the person has the necessary skills and experience. That is what we concluded, but with reservations. In his evidence, Mr Riddell confirmed his determination to make sure that a much wider pool of people are attracted to public appointments than currently appears to be the case. Certainly, we do not want to go back to the discreet tap on the shoulder—“Why don’t you apply for this job, old boy?”—that used to exist before the Nolan rules were brought into operation.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Are we not going back to pre-Nolan days, which were rife with personal and political patronage? Is this not a case of the role of the commissioner being emasculated? Sir David Normington said that he managed to see off the monthly attempts by the Prime Minister and other Ministers to appoint Tory donors or former MPs to key roles. We will be back in that position. Will that emasculation not be very similar to what has happened with the Government’s adviser on ministerial conduct, where we have seen cases of the most egregious misconduct by Ministers that were not referred to the adviser? We are going back to the bad old days. As a sturdy defender of the principle of parliamentary democracy, does he accept that voters would expect Ministers to make appointments to these vital public roles?

Mr Jenkin: Yes, of course they do. In the end, no public appointment of the general nature that we are talking about is made without a Minister signing off that decision. The question is twofold. First, are Ministers being presented with a choice of candidates that they consider appropriate? If they are, can we be certain that the process has not been fixed to get friends and cronies through the appointment process? We need a balance that the public will respect and have faith in. On job specifications, if we get the process right at the outset, there should be no need for the Minister to complain. If we take away too many safeguards, it is Ministers who will be criticised for the appointments they make, not civil servants who have been sitting on panels and been ignored.

Mr Speaker: We are most grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee.
Private Members’ Bills

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

4.55 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am presenting the third report of the Procedure Committee 2015-16. On private Members’ Bills, the Government are in the last-chance saloon. I adore this place, and I adore taking part in debates, but for so many good, hard-working and committed people here, Fridays are becoming no-go zones. The private Member’s Bill process is in total disrepute, and I hope that we can bring it back from the edge in the months ahead. If we cannot, I see a world where private Members’ Bills as we know them cease to exist. People in this place are doing so much good work in their constituencies and on legislative matters that they will not be willing to give up their time for something that many would say—indeed, as tens of thousands of people are now saying in petitions—is broken.

Let me bring the House’s attention to our report. The current system is designed to fail. We do not recommend getting rid of the ballot system in its entirety, but at the start of each Parliament it creates a scenario in which people put their name into a lottery and if they are lucky—or, indeed, unlucky—their name is drawn out and they are bombarded with worthy causes to take forward as legislation. That is for Opposition Members. Government Back Benchers are bombarded by bright and good ideas from the Whips, and they are seen as another avenue for the Government to get their legislation on the books.

That means that either we have handout Bills, which are worthy but boring, or we have Back-Bench Bills proposed by Opposition Members, a lot of which, to be fair, are frankly ill thought through and perhaps do not deserve to become law. That is how the system is structured and what it creates. Our key recommendation is to give the Backbench Business Committee a role in how private Members’ Bills are conducted in this place.

Our report suggests that up to four Bills—the first four Fridays—should be decided by the Backbench Business Committee. I hope that will mean that groups of Members, or individual Members with a good legislative proposition, can invest a great deal of time—perhaps upwards of a year—working on that proposition, talking to Ministers and respected Members in this place, and building coalitions in and outside Parliament. They can then take that legislative idea before the Backbench Business Committee and say, “This is our work. This is what underpins our legislative idea. It is not a flight of fancy. It has real support in this place and out in the wider community.” The Committee will decide whether a great deal of work underpins that proposition and whether it deserves to be heard in Parliament. That is for the first four Bills. The Committee could decide in one year that no Bills are worthy of one of those sought-after slots, but in other Sessions it might decide that four Bills are worthy of being taken forward.

We recommend that, on the first seven Fridays, the first private Member’s Bill on the Order Paper gets a guaranteed vote on Second Reading. That is important because a lot of people do not turn up, thinking, understandably and with demonstrable proof, that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), while opining often on things of importance that matter to him, might fail to express himself in a measured period of time—to put it generously—but instead orate for vast acres of time. I am afraid that a lot of people, as much as they love him and other hon. Members who specialise in boring the House to tears, find better things to do with their time.

Our proposals, however, would provide protections even for my hon. Friend. I do not want to ruin his Fridays. If a Bill, when it came out of Committee and on to Report, still did not meet with his approval, he could do what he does best. I am hoping, however, that if we allow the first seven Bills at least to get to Committee, the sponsors will have a significant amount of time in which to talk to Ministers, build support and perhaps iron out some of the problems that would otherwise lead the Bill to be talked out.

We suggest reducing the number of Bills in the ballot from 20 to 14 to ensure better and more thorough scrutiny. Of those 14, four, potentially, could be assigned by the Backbench Business Committee and a further 10 through the ballot, but if the Committee decided that nothing was worthy of being introduced by it to the House, there would be 14 in the ballot. There is a proposal to change the name from “private Members’ Bills” to “Back-Bench Bills” but there are people in the House who might not like that, and we cannot force anything on the House; all this can be contested in debate.

We recommend changing the system whereby Members have dozens of presentation Bills on the Order Paper on a Friday to one in which a Member has only one a day. We want to remove the dummy Bills from the Order Paper. I am sure this will find favour with a lot of colleagues. If we remove them, we will not be asked to turn up to Parliament on a Friday to vote on a Bill that is 18th on the Order Paper and has no chance of seeing the light of day. Our report also refers to the possibility of taking a private Member’s Bill or two on a Thursday, but again that is just a suggestion.

We say that not every happy thought that occurs to a Member should become law—that would not be a good thing—but we think that serious legislative propositions should have the chance of progressing. I read closely the speech by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) last week in Westminster Hall, and I apologise to everyone in the House for not having resolved this matter in the last Parliament. As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I have to be held accountable for the lack of progress, but I conclude my brief speech by saying that the Government are in the last-chance saloon, and if they do not act now, there are other people in this place who will be less understanding than me, and the change they will bring forward will make the Government’s eyes water, and rightly so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) says he adores the House, and we adore him—certainly more than we do the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—not least because he is quite right: the private Members’ Bills system is, frankly, bust. It is not only open to abuse but is regularly abused. It misleads the public and wastes the House’s time, so we stand four-square with the Committee and
will do everything we can to support him. I take just one tiny exception to his report. He says this should start in 2017-18. What is wrong with now? Why can the Government not give us time to debate these changes before the next Session of Parliament so that we can do it in May?

Mr Walker: That is an ideal suggestion, and I look to the Government to be revolutionary in their approach to our report and to take it forward as quickly as possible. I am sure the Deputy Leader of the House will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I shall aim to be brief. In saying that the first Bill on the Order Paper should be guaranteed a vote, my hon. Friend failed to mention that the first Bill on the Order Paper can already be guaranteed a vote. All it requires is for 100 MPs to turn up to support it. As we saw with the overseas aid Bill—the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Bill—the European Union (Referendum) Bill and the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill, if a matter is important enough to hon. Members, plenty of them turn up to debate it. Does my hon. Friend not agree that if a Bill cannot muster the support of 100 MPs out of 650, it clearly does not have the support that others might claim it has?

Mr Walker: I say to my hon. Friend—I love him dearly—that his determined efforts and those of a few of his colleagues, including Labour colleagues in previous Parliaments when Labour were in government, have almost destroyed people’s faith in this place and in the process. People are simply not turning up because, too often, they spend a lot of time listening to my hon. Friend. [Interruption.] As I said, we are not trying to ruin my hon. Friend’s sport because we are not recommending a guaranteed vote on Report. What these Bills need is a bit of space on Second Reading to get approved at that stage so that negotiations can take place with the Government before the Bills go into Committee and there is a chance of some output. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend will not wind me up with his barracking because I love him too much to rise to the bait.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As a member of the Procedure Committee, I pay tribute to the skilful work of its Chair, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), in piloting this report through. Those of us from Scotland are familiar with the far more robust procedure for Members’ Bills in the Scottish Parliament. Perhaps that provides an example of the process that the hon. Gentleman threatens if the Government are not willing to give ground on the proposals in our report. I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House on the importance of the Government providing time at a very early opportunity to debate, consider and implement these proposals. If that fails, perhaps we could look to the Backbench Business Committee to give us some time.

Mr Walker: I hope the Government are listening to these exchanges because the mood is darkening, and quite rightly so, not just in the Chamber, but out there among those whom we represent. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), along with all members of the Committee and the Clerks, for their hard work in bringing forward a sensible report. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is so agitated by it because he knows it is sensible and reasonable, and he will find it difficult to oppose it.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): One problem with private Members’ Bills is that pressure groups raise the expectations of the public that every private Member’s Bill stands a really good chance of becoming law. Does my hon. Friend not agree that it is incumbent on us all to make sure that the procedures for private Members’ Bills are more widely and better understood?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. In communicating with constituents, we too often demur from telling them how it is. I suspect that on occasions that is because we are embarrassed about what happens on Fridays.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I would not go as far as to say that I adore the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), but I certainly hold him in high regard. Any criticisms were not directed at either him or his Committee. Does he agree that this issue now needs to be resolved, and speedily? We need some means of testing the will of the House. The options set out in the report, and options proposed by me and other right hon. and hon. Members, could be put before the House so that people can vote on how they want to proceed.

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point. If the Government find time to debate the report, which I sincerely hope they will, there would be opportunities for Members to table their own amendments to the report. I hope that this will be a vehicle for change in this place and for improving a fairly bankrupt private Member’s Bill procedure.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I commend the report and the Chairman, who has been a superb leader of the Procedure Committee in recent years. Does he feel as I do that the process misleads the public when every Private Members’ Bill brings the House into disrepute, and that if the Government fail to act now—this is our second report on this issue—the problem will get ever-deeper and the public will lose even more faith in the processes of this House?

Mr Walker: I agree with the hon. Lady, who worked tirelessly on the report, and who has been involved in this process for a number of years. We are selling our constituents a false prospectus as private Members’ Bills Fridays are currently constructed, and they will not forgive us lightly for that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his chairmanship of the Committee, but I think that he is being extremely unfair on our hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), because our hon. Friend and others are the ones who actually turn up on Fridays to scrutinise draft legislation. Is it not the case that in any given year there are 52 Fridays, and the House sits on only 13 of them? The myth has built up that every Friday is a constituency Friday, as an excuse for Members not to be here, but the bald truth is that only one person per constituency is entitled to
[Mr Philip Hollobone]

represent his or her constituents in this House, and that is their Member of Parliament. The Members who should be condemned are those who do not turn up on Fridays, not those who do.

Mr Walker: I have been so generous in my appraisal of the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley! He often does very important work, but on occasion he does not, in my view. The truth of the matter is that people are not coming here because they have lost faith in Fridays, and they are bored with listening to my hon. Friend.

As you know, Mr Speaker, and as the Deputy Speakers know, if we have a guaranteed vote on Second Reading of the first seven days of private Members’ Bills, you could put a time limit on speeches—and what a happy occasion that will be for the ears of some in this place.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent chairing of the Committee, and for producing the report. Does he agree that, if implemented, the report will increase the transparency and credibility of the private Members’ Bills process, and will therefore increase our standing in the eyes of the general public whom we serve?

Mr Walker: I can tell the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman—who also serves on the Committee—that incrementally it will, but we have a lot of ground to recover in this place. As I have said to him, and as he knows, if we do not succeed in implementing the report, there is no guarantee that the House will tolerate private Members’ Bills remaining on Fridays. They could well end up being dealt with on another night of the week.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As a Member who has been present on Fridays since being elected, I have seen both the good and the bad in terms of Friday debates, and I therefore welcome the report. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need less focus on individuals, and that there is already a procedure that could bring debates to an end? How does he think that the Backbench Business Committee will be able to define the level of cross-party support, given the comments that have been made about pressure groups and the impression that is given that Bills that have no chance are going to get through? How can there be a definitive ability to work out which Bills have enough genuine support to take those prime slots?

Mr Walker: I have been involved in a successful private Member’s Bill, the Bill that became the Mental Health (Discrimination) (No. 2) Act 2013, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), and which attacked discrimination in the area of mental health. In partnership with Lord Stevenson, my hon. Friend spent an enormous amount of time—over a year—building up a coalition of support across the Benches, talking to private secretaries and Ministers, and to well informed pressure groups which are well respected by Members on both sides of the House. By the time the Bill appeared on the Floor of the House, a great deal of the hard work—the groundwork—had been done. That, I hope, is what members of the Backbench Business Committee will be looking for when assessing whether a Bill warrants one of those coveted first four spots.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for all the work that he and his Committee have put into the report. I was grateful for the chance to give evidence to the Committee during its preparation.

It seems to me that, provided that we allow filibustering to be the means by which the Government defeat legislation in 2016, the reputation of the House will simply sink lower and lower. If the substantive changes are to be made in 2017-18, or even in 2016-17, the onus is now on the Government to provide a debate in Government time so that these issues can be discussed and further suggestions can be made. Filibustering Friday must end, and we must have change now.

Mr Walker: I am delighted that the mood of the House is more ambitious than that of the Chairman of the Procedure Committee; the House is to be commended for that. If we can bring forward these recommendations earlier, that would be a truly fantastic thing. We need to restore faith in Fridays so that people attending on Fridays have a chance to put their point of view and so that people watching Fridays with interest have a chance to hear a diversity of voices in this place from both sides of the argument. I do not want to see poorly drafted legislation getting on to the statute book, however. As I keep saying, the protections that we are proposing will not protect Bills on Report. If they are not up to scratch by Report, they can be dealt with by a variety of means.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for this incredibly impressive piece of work, and I support many of the recommendations in it. I welcome the fact that it looks as though it will at last bring to an end the sport that takes place on private Member’s Bill Fridays, when on many occasions there is no serious attempt to have a proper debate on issues that concern or distress the wider public. It brings the whole of Parliament into disrepute when serious issues are the subject of sport in this House.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Debate in this place should never be a sport; it should be about contesting the issues, arguments and propositions before the House. I agree with her sentiments, and I hope that we are beginning to travel in the right direction.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate the Procedure Committee on its report and wish it more success than previous attempts at achieving reform. We have a tired, discredited system that really does us no credit at all. Much of this short debate has focused on the benefits of Fridays, and I note that the report does not talk about the sitting hours of the House. May I urge the Committee to look at that question as a matter of urgency, because I believe that some of the answers might lie in having different sitting times for private Members’ Bills?

Mr Walker: The Procedure Committee has deliberately steered away from looking at the sitting times of the House, but during the last Parliament, we pledged to conduct a survey of Members’ views on sitting hours at
the end of the first year of every new Parliament and to bring forward a neutral motion that Members could then amend. I hope that will provide the hon. Gentleman with some comfort. He will get an opportunity at some stage in the near future to look at the sitting hours of the House, at which point I imagine that everything will be up for debate.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I should like to assure the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that, as a new Member and a London Member, I did make an effort to turn up on Fridays early in the Session. However, I am afraid that I now have to write back to my constituents to explain that my time is better spent in my constituency. I welcome the report from the Procedure Committee, and I hope that it will give people more confidence in Back-Bench business. Given the Chair of the Committee’s experience of previous attempts at parliamentary reform, does he agree that the risk now is that perfect will be seen as the enemy of good, and that we need to build as much consensus as possible for at least some reform, if not perfect reform?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and I really hope that the Government are listening to him. Let us try to build some consensus and find a way forward. I do not think that we are going to come up with a perfect solution, simply for the reason that every happy thought that occurs to Back-Benchers should not become law, as I said earlier. However, I would just say that in my time in this House, serving under two different Governments, I have observed that the people who specialise in talking out Bills are very good at talking out Opposition Back-Bench Bills but they seem to go missing in action when it comes to a Government handout Bill. That applies to Members on both sides of the House.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I also welcome the report from the Procedure Committee and I strongly agree with the comments made by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). We had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall in my name on this subject last week, in which it was made clear that there is a desire for change right across the House. I would have liked a slightly bolder proposal involving moving private Members’ Bills away from sitting Fridays. Nevertheless, this is a step in the right direction. I should also like to echo the plea from the Chair of the Committee and others for the Government to act quickly on this. Does he agree that we need to move quickly in order to restore the reputation of Parliament?

Mr Walker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. For the sake of Members on both sides of the House, I must stress that it is important to recognise that the Procedure Committee cannot impose anything on the House. Our recommendations will be subject to debate and a vote. [Interruption.] I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, as a procedural expert, would be aware of that, but he clearly is not. All our recommendations will be subject to a vote on the Floor of the House, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will have the chance to carry the day for his side of the argument, just as the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) will have the chance to carry the day for his point of view.

Backbench Business

National Living Wage

Mr Speaker: As a courtesy, I might mention to the House that the motion was to be moved by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). Unfortunately, she sustained an injury and had to go to hospital and was not, despite her willingness, allowed to be available to move the motion today. In the circumstances, I am sure colleagues will agree that is perfectly fitting and right that the motion should be moved instead by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), her good friend and colleague.

5.21 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Chancellor of the Exchequer that Britain deserves a pay rise and commends his introduction of the national living wage; notes, however, that some employers are cutting overall remuneration packages to offset the cost of its introduction, leaving thousands of low-paid employees significantly worse off; and calls, therefore, on the Government to guarantee that no worker will be worse off as a result of the introduction of the national living wage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has been campaigning tirelessly on the implementation of the national living wage, and has been fighting for all workers to truly benefit from the new proposals. Unfortunately, as Mr Speaker said, she is in hospital and cannot be with us today. I am sure that Members from across the House will join me in wishing her a speedy recovery. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I have spoken to her today, and she is on the road to recovery. I understand that she will be listening and possibly watching our proceedings.

I had intended to speak in support of my great friend and colleague’s work, but I am proud to be a signatory to the motion, and I am honoured to have been asked to present her speech and lead this important debate on her behalf. She is delighted that the debate can go ahead without her. She thanks the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for the debate, and the Speaker’s Office and the Table Office for allowing me to lead the debate on her behalf.

When my hon. Friend made her application to the Backbench Business Committee, she had no idea just how huge the issue would be. It all started a few months ago, when a friend of hers approached her with his payslip from B&Q. He said, “Siobhain, B&Q has given me new terms and conditions, which it says I have to sign or I’ll lose my job. It is cutting back my Sunday and bank holiday pay, as well as my summer and winter bonuses. I think I might have my pay reduced.” How right he was. Indeed, my hon. Friend was shocked when she calculated that he would lose up to £50 a week, or about £2,600 a year. The saddest thing was that this was happening after his basic pay had been increased by the introduction of the national living wage. To be clear, this was a pay cut after the Chancellor guaranteed that Britain was getting a pay rise.

After raising the matter at Prime Minister’s questions—frankly, the Prime Minister did not have much of an answer for her—my hon. Friend started receiving dozens of emails from B&Q employees from around the country.

5.30 pm
From Exeter to Aberdeen, she was contacted by staff at all levels and from all walks of life who would also lose out.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pass on my best wishes to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who has done tireless work on this issue. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that, as I have heard myself, because of the differential whereby under-25s are not eligible for the living wage, others are losing out on overtime and other hours, which are given to younger workers who can be paid less? Not only are younger workers losing out because they are paid less, but other people are not getting the overtime or extra hours that they might have thought they would.

**Joan Ryan**: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. This is a double whammy for some workers; not only are they losing out because their employers are altering their terms and conditions, but they are losing these valuable other hours. Many of these workers absolutely depend on being able to work extra hours and overtime.

B&Q, like so many companies nationwide, has made all employees sign new terms and conditions under a variation of contract. Those new terms scrapped double time for Sundays and bank holidays, as well as seasonal bonuses and other allowances that staff relied on to top up their income. These pay cuts were much greater than the gains of the national living wage, which is why so many employees are losing out.

**Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Would my right hon. Friend think it a good idea for the UK Government to make a register of the companies that have undertaken such action, and bring them to a round-table meeting to explain that the purpose of the living wage was to improve, not reduce, people’s expenditure power?

**Joan Ryan**: I would indeed. Part of what we are doing today is asking the Government and the Chancellor to address these issues. There are strengthened penalties for employers who do not pay the national living wage, but I suggest that alongside those should go penalties for employers who deliberately circumvent the national living wage in this way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden was grateful for the fact that her speech during the Budget debate last month offered a great platform to get this issue the recognition it deserves. She was especially grateful for the interest shown by the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, which doubtless brought further attention to this issue, and I am pleased to see her here. My hon. Friend’s speech highlighted how illogical and unfair it was to claim that Britain was getting a pay rise while hard-working employees across the country were being hit by such pay cuts. She reminded the Government that the week before, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had been unwilling to promise that nobody who works on the shop floor would be taking home less money after 1 April. Last year, the Chancellor said he was committed to a higher-wage economy. He said:

“It cannot be right that we go on asking taxpayers to subsidise...the businesses who pay the lowest wages.”

He promised that the change would have only a “fractional” effect on jobs, and that the cost to business would be “just 1% of corporate profits.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015, Vol. 598, c. 337 to 338.]

That was a cost he offset with a cut to corporation tax.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this opening speech, and on the way in which she is making it. May I raise the issue of care providers? The care sector is faced with a bill of £330 million for implementing this legislation—this is money that the Government have not provided—and I hope to be called today so that I can talk about the impact the change is having on wages and conditions there.

**Joan Ryan**: That is a crucial point, because the cost to business is offset by the reduction in corporation tax, and smaller businesses will also benefit from increased business rate relief and higher national insurance allowances. In terms of care homes, there is also a significant impact on local authorities, and that has not been taken into account.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I should declare an interest as a councillor in the London borough of Redbridge. The Local Government Association and others have estimated that the amount put aside through tax increases—through the new social care levy—will barely cover the cost to local authorities of providing the living wage, as they should. This is once more a Government pledge being delivered through stealth taxes, with the buck passed to local authorities.

**Joan Ryan**: I could not in any way disagree with my hon. Friend, and as ever, it is the most vulnerable and the needy who suffer the most.

Companies such as B&Q use the introduction of the national living wage to “reform their pay and reward structures”, as they put it. That is a euphemism for cutting staff pay. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden received a rather panicky email from B&Q requesting a meeting to clear things up. Indeed, B&Q’s chief executive officer and its head of human resources were eager to convey how much they appreciated their staff and how generous the reward package was. At the same time as my hon. Friend’s meeting with them, they announced that they would extend by an extra 12 months the period of compensation for those staff members who were going to lose out—an increase from 12 to 24 months. Of course that was because of the reputational pressure that B&Q was under. Although that is definitely a good step forward, achieved because of the considerable public pressure, lots of questions remain unanswered. What will happen to these employees after 24 months? Does B&Q hope that we will forget about the issue and quietly let these long-serving staff members lose out? Will it review its pay structures to guarantee that staff receive the pay they deserve?

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend think that the Chancellor’s decision to conflate the national minimum wage with the reality of the living wage was the gimmick at the outset that allowed these employers to think that this
was not to be treated seriously, and that is why we see these different actions by big chains and unscrupulous employers?

Joan Ryan: Undoubtedly that is the impression, especially as the real living wage recommended by the Living Wage Foundation is significantly higher than the one that the Chancellor proposed. We certainly could question it, as he could not have been unaware that what happened was always going to be possible.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, welcome though the living wage is, the tendency of many employers—some of them with internationally high reputations—to introduce the casualisation of labour through zero-hours contracts and rolling contracts is likely to be accelerated? Does she also not agree that, in exposing these companies, the Government should go not just for a register, which would be welcome, but for regulating the way that these contracts are used, as they undermine wage rates and people’s security in employment?

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. There is no question but that low pay runs alongside job insecurity, and the situation is getting worse. What has happened absolutely demonstrates that terms and conditions and pay are inextricably linked. Again, as we have said with the care sector, people who are vulnerable and needy and who have the weakest voice are always the most affected. If it were not for the trade unions raising their voice, us raising ours, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden focusing on the issue in such a forensic manner, awareness of this matter would probably have been nothing like it is. Whatever the outcome, it is clearly totally wrong that any company should cut wages of loyal, long-standing members of staff off the back of the national living wage.

Let us make no mistake about it: if a company as big and as well known as B&Q can do this, anyone can. When my hon. Friend met the chief executive, Michael Loeve, he told her that he was “a bit annoyed” that B&Q was being singled out. He said, “We’re a great employer, and we’re not the only ones making the changes.” We seem to be in the realm of two wrongs making a right. He is right, though, about not being the only ones, sadly. B&Q was just unlucky to have received the double whammy—loss of current income with what happens to the companies: they gain from cutting pay, and from the reduction in corporation tax, which should offset the pay increase, not allow them to cut pay. Although B&Q says that it has rectified the sort of situation I have described, I defy B&Q senior management to place themselves in the shoes of Mr Jones and Ms Smith and honestly say that they feel optimistic about their future.

Joan Ryan: Indeed. Compare that double whammy—loss now and loss of deferred income, which is pension income—with what happens to the companies: they gain from cutting pay, and from the reduction in corporation tax, which should offset the pay increase, not allow them to cut pay. Although B&Q says that it has rectified the sort of situation I have described, I defy B&Q senior management to place themselves in the shoes of Mr Jones and Ms Smith and honestly say that they feel optimistic about their future.

Joan Ryan: rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Thirteen Members wish to speak after the right hon. Lady. Lady, and we are already well into a good debate, so I am worried that we might be squeezing the time for other Members.

Joan Ryan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take your point.

Certainly, the national living wage does not mean that that is all that employers can pay. Bradgate Bakery, like B&Q, found an opportunity to save money, so it has changed staff terms and conditions to phase out double pay for Sundays by 2019. That means that while
employees on the national minimum wage earned £13.78 per hour on a Sunday last month, by 2019 they will earn just £9 per hour. That is the national living wage according to Bradgate Bakery. Extra pay for night shifts, Saturdays and overtime are also being scaled back. In sum, Bradgate workers are being sold a lie: they are told that their pay is increasing, but what the Government are giving with one hand, Bradgate is taking with another. According to one very worried worker who approached my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, these cuts will affect the whole range of shifts that run in the factories. That means that by 2018 a production operative on night shift will be paid £2,778 less a year, while a night shift team leader will be paid £344 less.

I want to make a few things clear. First, increasing the minimum wage is not a bad thing. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, myself, and indeed all hon. Friends, were proud to be part of the Labour Government who introduced it almost 20 years ago, and we wholeheartedly support moves to increase it. Our workers work hard and deserve every penny that they are entitled to. We quite agree with the Chancellor that Britain does deserve a pay rise.

Secondly, despite what they say, businesses can cope with the increase in the minimum wage. Every minimum wage rate rise since its introduction has been greeted with predictions of doom and gloom by a minority of employers, but their dire warnings have not come true.

Thirdly, we all know that businesses will tend to pay their workers less than they actually can, because that is what profit-making is all about, but businesses should not be cutting staff pay via terms and conditions to offset the costs. Despite what they say, there are alternatives: they could improve productivity and invest in the skills and talents of their employees; they could cut back shareholder pay just a little, so that those who work hardest get the remuneration they truly deserve; or, following the Chancellor’s suggestion, they could use the further 1% cut in corporation tax announced last month to fund the increase in the minimum wage.

Fourthly, I have discussed B&Q and Bradgate Bakery today, but there is an industry-wide problem. Huge supermarket retailers, such as Morrisons, cut their staff pay months ago, to little media attention. For instance, while hourly pay at Morrisons has now increased to £8.20, the firm simultaneously scrapped a raft of pay perks to save money. Only last week, we read reports of how popular, thriving café businesses, such as EAT and Caffé Nero, are cutting free staff lunches to claw back costs. That will save them about £3.60 per employee per day—less than the cost of one of their toasted paninis. According to media reports today, it looks like Waitrose will also be scrapping Sunday and overtime rates for new workers. This is all part of a worrying trend.

I am sure that my hon. Friends will agree that what we are asking for is not easy, but we truly believe that there is a precedent for cross-party support on this issue. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden was delighted to receive the support of the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) during their “Channel 4 News” interview on the subject last week. He joined her in calling for employers to guarantee that no one loses out. During the interview, my hon. Friend said:

“Any Member who wants to join me on calling for action from employers and the Government, from whichever side of the House they may be, is a friend of mine.”

The truth is that securing meaningful change is not beyond the Government’s ability. If the Chancellor promised everyone a pay rise, then everyone should receive one. If he promised that the Government would be radical on strengthening wages, then he needs to deliver radical change. A thriving economy is not built on low pay and unscrupulous employers; it is built on a proper day’s pay for a hard day’s work. It is time the Government gave hard-working people—the same people all political parties claim to represent—the outcome they truly deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest that people use up to seven minutes? However, if you start making interventions, I will have to drop the time later. It is up to Members, but I do want to get everybody in.

5.44 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I want to make a few brief points in the time available. The first—we have to have a few home truths here—is that the whole concept of a national living wage is intellectual nonsense. The amount that people need to earn to cover their living costs depends on all sorts of factors. It depends on their housing costs. It depends on how close they live to their workplace and how much it costs them to get to work—the cost is obviously a lot less for somebody who lives right next to their place of work than for somebody who lives a considerable distance away. The idea that one national living wage can apply to everybody in the country, irrespective of their personal circumstances, is therefore nonsense, and we should make that clear from the start. What we are talking about with the living wage is an increased minimum wage, so let us just be honest about our terminology.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) made the usual mistake of thinking that every employer in the country is some rich baron who lives in a huge mansion, drives around in a Bentley and has all the goods in the world. Actually, the vast majority of businesses in this country are small and medium-sized enterprises. I advise her to speak to a few shop owners down her local high street, because she will actually find that many are struggling to earn a living. In fact, many of the people she is talking about do not earn the minimum wage or the living wage—whatever anyone wants to call it—themselves. She berates them for trying to do down their staff, when many of them are working desperately long hours to keep their staff in employment because their staff matter to them.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is throwing up all sorts of straw men, but what we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) were concrete examples of large companies that have the ability to pay their staff properly but are not doing so. When will the hon. Gentleman engage with the facts rather than straw men?

Philip Davies: I am engaging with the facts—these are home truths the hon. Gentleman should appreciate.
When people ask, “Do you think everybody should get a pay rise to £9, £10 or £11 an hour?”, everyone of course says yes. I think it was Norman Tebbit who said that if we ask people, “Would you like a Rolls-Royce?” they will all say yes, but if we say, “You’ll have to live in a tent for the rest of your life to pay for it,” the answer will be no.

We have to realise that there are consequences to increasing the minimum wage. We all know that if we want to reduce the consumption of something—if we want less of something—we increase its cost. If the Government want fewer people smoking, one of the tools they use is to put the price up. If we want fewer people drinking, we put the price up. The same rules apply to employment: if we put up the cost of employment, we will find fewer people employed—that is just an economic fact.

**Mr George Howarth:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but the binary choice he presents of a Rolls-Royce or a tent is not the living reality of most of our constituents.

Last year, the Big Help Project’s food bank in Knowsley helped to feed 6,000 people, 3,500 of whom were children, for three days. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that cutting people’s wages will mean that even more people are dependent on food banks? Is that the 21st century, or is he harking back to the 19th century?

**Philip Davies:** The right hon. Gentleman should be aware that what is more likely to send people to a food bank is not having a job at all.

When the Chancellor announced the higher rate of the minimum wage, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimated that 4 million hours a week would be lost, half resulting from reduced hours for workers and half resulting from the loss of 60,000 jobs. The great thing about the OBR is that at least we are now able to understand the consequences of such a policy.

There are a lot of advantages to having a higher minimum wage. A lot of low-paid people have found themselves in higher-paid jobs, and I very much welcome that. However, Labour Members who praise the policy should at least be honest about its consequences.

**Mr Howarth rose—**

**Philip Davies:** I have already given way to the right hon. Gentleman; he can have another go in his own speech later.

Labour Members have to face the consequences of the policy: the OBR has made it clear that it will result in fewer people being employed. The right hon. Member for Enfield North mentioned companies such as B&Q and Morrisons. When I worked for Asda, every employee was given a 10% discount card. I have no idea what Asda’s policy is today—it may well be the same—but it used to employ a lot of people with families, and a 10% discount card was a very valuable commodity to them.

We should be wary about forcing employers to put up pay, because the inevitable consequence will be that some benefits might have to go if they want to keep the same number of people employed in their stores. These decisions have consequences, and we cannot pretend that increasing people’s pay will not have consequences.

The right hon. Lady mentioned care homes and the care sector. We need to think carefully about what the consequences will be for them. In my constituency, in Bradford, a very small proportion of the extra 2% that is being levied on council tax is being passed on to independent care homes. I thought it was designed to help them with the costs of things such as the national living wage. This high-minded policy is motherhood and apple pie. It enables people to look good and argue, “I think that, whatever people earn, they should get more, and that even when they do get more, they should get even more than that,” but an awful lot of care homes around the country could close as a consequence. Is that really what we want to happen in the UK? It would happen not because employers are mean, nasty people, but simply because they cannot afford to pay the national living wage at the rates that the councils are giving them for care home fees. That is the economic reality, whether people like it or not.

I met a number of employers recently, and they pointed out that the policy takes no account of differentials. When the pay of people at the bottom is raised to a higher rate, they are not the only ones to get a pay rise, because everyone else in the organisation will say, “Hold on a minute, I was paid £1 an hour more than they were, so if their pay’s being increased by £1 an hour, I want an extra £1 an hour as well to maintain that differential.”

Anybody who knows anything about running a business will know that, particularly for employers who run small businesses on the high street in small towns in our constituencies, there is not a never-ending pot of money to pay higher wages to everybody and to protect those differentials. Something has to give: either those differentials disappear, much to the unhappiness of the people who had them before, or fewer people will be employed, or people will be employed for fewer hours.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Philip Davies:** I am afraid that I cannot give way, because there is not much time left.

Finally, I have two very quick points to make. First, the increased national minimum wage will almost certainly lead to even more people from the European Union coming to the UK if we do not leave the EU in the forthcoming referendum. That is a basic fact. Secondly, a higher minimum wage is great for people who are already in work and getting paid. However, it can be as high as we like, but it will be of very little use to those who do not have a job. Many people in this country already find it very difficult to get on the jobs ladder, for all sorts of reasons.

I have made this point before and got into terrible trouble for it, but the fact, whether people like it or not, is that too few disabled people in this country are employed. It would not be good if they were put further away from the jobs ladder, and I want the Government to think about what they are going to do, when wages are higher, to help disabled people find a job, including subsidising employers to bring them up to the living wage. Something has to be done. We cannot just leave people on the scrapheap unable to get a job because the first rung of the jobs ladder was too far away to give them a chance in the first place. We have to think through the consequences of all these high-minded policies.
5.54 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. In opening, may I place on the record my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her efforts in securing this Back-Bench business debate? She is a fearless campaigner and a credit to this place. I wish her a speedy recovery, which I know she will achieve through sheer force of willpower. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for stepping in.

When I sat in this Chamber alongside many other hon. Members not so many months ago and heard the Chancellor say that he was going to increase the pay of the lowest paid, I was speechless. The glib tagline was, “A pay rise for Britain”. Throughout my political life, I have fought for improved pay and conditions for the working people of this country, especially the lowest paid. One of the proudest moments in my political life was seeing a Labour Government, in this very place, introduce the national minimum wage as one of their first acts—a move that was strongly opposed by the Conservatives.

Despite my understandable cynicism, I was delighted that the Chancellor had undergone his own damascene conversion and had finally seen the light by belatedly understanding that every worker in this great and prosperous country, not just those at the top of the ladder, deserved to be paid fairly. But—and there is always a “but” with this Government—my initial delight soon dissolved as I rapidly discovered that my cynicism was not misplaced but very much spot on. As the now former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for stepping in.

Despite the Chancellor’s embarrassing U-turn on tax credits, he has ploughed ahead with cuts to the successor scheme, universal credit. Cuts introduced this very month mean that tens of thousands of low-paid working families who are in receipt of universal credit are expected to lose up to £200 a month from their pay packets. That is the first attack by this Tory Government. The second attack, and the topic of today’s debate, is the Chancellor’s spectacular failure to ensure that big business funds his so-called national living wage off its own back and through its profits, rather than off the backs of workers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Daily Mirror newspaper, through its coverage in recent weeks, have shown that, when given the choice, big business has seized on the cheapest method to fund a pay rise for its workers by heartlessly cutting their overall pay and benefits package. That is simply shameful.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a very strong speech. Many businesses, particularly in the care sector, have got away with not paying the minimum wage and used all sorts of tactics such as clipping and not paying for travel time. An even greater number of them now use tactics such as cutting tea breaks and lunch breaks, in order to get away with it on an even greater scale. The Government failed to enforce the original minimum wage, and the situation is now being compounded further.

Judith Cummins: I thank my hon. Friend for giving that very good example. My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North mentioned the glaring example of B&Q, which has asked its workers to sign a contract that reduces a number of their benefits. It is believed that the overall result will be that many will lose thousands of pounds. The company’s response has been to introduce a temporary scheme, for just two years, to protect the value of its workers’ overall packages. That is simply not good enough, particularly as it has been reported that the parent company of B&Q, Kingfisher, may pay its chief executive officer a total package of up to £3.6 million. The numbers are jaw-dropping, as is the hypocrisy. Once again, this Tory Government are presiding over the shameful exploitation of those who are least able to make ends meet, least able to make their voices heard and least able to stand up and tell the Government that what they are doing is simply unfair and unacceptable, and that it cannot go on.

The Chancellor cannot even plead ignorance and suggest that this shameful episode is an unexpected by-product of his noble and good deeds. A ministerial answer to a written question by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) on 21 March revealed that the Government were aware of the possibility that big business would choose to fund their so-called national living wage through cuts to wider remuneration packages. The Government’s view was:

“It is for individual businesses to decide exactly how to respond to the introduction of the National Living Wage, appropriate to their circumstances. But any changes to contractual pay should be discussed and agreed with workers in advance.”

The Government simply do not get it. If the choice for workers is between unemployment and agreeing to changes designed to reduce their overall contractual benefits, most, if not all, workers—especially the lowest paid in society—will sign up.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that another group of workers, namely the self-employed, are also in a difficult position? I was recently contacted by a constituent whose partner works for a courier company. Once his petrol has been paid for, he is getting paid about £260 a month for working a 50-hour week. My constituent told me that she works on the minimum wage as a pizza delivery driver, and she earns about three times as much for doing half the hours that her partner works. Does that not show that a whole group of people is being forced into an invidious position?

Judith Cummins: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. Big business knows that the voice of the lowest paid is easily silenced, because the fear of unemployment is a powerful tool. The Government need to step up and legislate for big business to fund the so-called national living wage not through cuts to workers’ wider benefits but by, quite rightly, sacrificing a percentage of its own profits. That is not only fair but proper, given that tax on big business profits was cut in the Chancellor’s
6.2 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins). I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for helping to secure this vital debate, and I hope that she gets well very soon.

Britain certainly deserves a pay rise. It has been due one since 2010. If we listened to the rhetoric from the Government, we might be forgiven for believing that the new national living wage would end all the problems of those who are struggling to make ends meet. We have heard the radio adverts in which countless actors with differing regional tones deliver sonnets about what the new national living wage entails for them. In reality, this is not a real living wage—far from it. Although many will receive a step up, some in our society will face an uphill challenge from 1 April. As chair of the all-party group on small shops, I have spent the last couple of months talking to business owners, who fear that the increase in their wage bill will be the final nail in the coffin, because they will simply not be able to meet those costs. I will come on to some of the points raised by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

There were some promising features in the Budget on business rates, aimed at small businesses. From April 2017, small businesses will either be taken out of the business rate system completely or have a smaller burden to pay. However, 2017 is the key point.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Government’s new measures on business rates. I do not know whether he is aware of this, but some local authorities may lose out because of that. In other words, it may cost them more.

Simon Danczuk: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is a real concern for local authorities, and there is disparity across the country. That is a good point.

The other point about business rates is that there is an issue with the fact that the relief will not be introduced until 2017. Small businesses will struggle for a whole year before they receive the relief that is in the Budget. As I have already mentioned in this Chamber, the retail business rate relief grant has been stopped this year for small business owners as well. Small businesses employ 35% of the nation’s workforce, but they employ more than half of those who are on the minimum wage. From 1 April, small businesses will be dealt a double whammy of increased wage bills and a reduction in support from business rate grants. They will be under real financial pressure for a whole year.

Mr Nuttall: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Danczuk: I am going to make a little bit of progress. Larger retailers will be able to offset their costs by reducing the benefits that they pay out, such as Sunday pay, as we have seen from the examples that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden has raised in the media recently. Smaller businesses will have to put up prices, slow recruitment or perhaps downscale their operations. Some will have to shut down because they are unable to shoulder the costs until 2017 after having struggled for years. The truth is that the new national living wage should have coincided with the changes to the business rate system.

Next I want to mention the pressures facing the social care sector, which has faced a wave of pressure from the Government over the last few years. We have heard much recently about the social care precept, which enables councils to raise council tax by 2% to pay for care costs. Senior members of Rochdale Borough Council have told me that with the introduction of the national living wage, the precept will provide very little extra funding, if any. Poorer areas such as Rochdale—this is similar to the point made about business rates—will raise only just over £1 million from the precept, because of the council tax bands of the properties in the borough. Even the Conservative-led Local Government Association has warned that the national living wage will put adult care services at breaking point.

The new change is even more worrying in view of the fact that many in the care sector are not even paid the minimum wage. Work by Unison has shown that pay structures, such as not paying travelling time, mean that those who care for our elderly loved ones are not being paid for the vital work that they do. If we want to give careworkers the wage that they deserve, it must be adequately funded. They are some of the most hard-working people, and they deserve to earn at least the minimum wage. Unless the appropriate funding is in place, that simply will not happen.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I was not referring to the living wage, as such. I was talking about the cost to local authorities of the change in the business rates. Some local authorities will lose out on this.

Simon Danczuk: I understand that point, and I agree with it completely. Britain deserves a pay rise, not some public relations stunt from a Chancellor who is obsessed with political strategy. An increase in the minimum wage must be done properly, and small businesses must be helped so that they can afford it. Most importantly, it must enable individuals to support themselves. The minimum wage remains a great Labour triumph. By the look of things, we will need a Labour Government once again to give Britain a proper pay increase.

6.8 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing a debate on this important topic, and I wish her a speedy recovery. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on the way in which she has led the debate.

Like so many Members in the House, I welcomed the news in last year’s Budget that the Government would introduce a new national living wage, as a result of which workers aged 25 and over would receive £7.20 an hour in April—an increase of 50p from October 2015, when the minimum wage was set at £6.70. I also welcomed
the plans for it to rise to £9 per hour by 2020. Both those measures are important steps towards securing a real living wage, which the Labour party continues to campaign for. After years of workers enduring the bulk of the Government’s austerity agenda, a pay increase for 1.8 million workers is welcomed, even though it does not go far enough.

For me, this is a local issue, that affects the lives of many of my constituents. According to the House of Commons Library, 19% of people in my constituency will benefit from the living wage this year. That figure will rise to 27% by 2020. I understand that the changes will have a disproportionate impact on small businesses, which employ 35% of the adult workforce and 52% of Britain’s minimum wage workers, and that it will be concentrated in the hospitality and retail sectors, which account for more than 46% of minimum wage jobs. I also note the concerns coming particularly from the social care sector, which is already underfunded. The Government urgently need to do more to address the shortfall in funding.

In the recent weeks leading up to the implementation of this new wage, a campaign of fear has been put out by large employers that simply do not want to pay their employees a fair wage. Some have claimed that a living wage will lead to job losses. Others have had the gall to say that raising wages is in effect a tax targeted at large employers that simply do not want to pay their employees a real living wage. Which employers can choose between holiday pay and a living wage. Other suggestions floated by large retailers include cutting the number of staff or speeding up the implementation of technology to replace staff, such as using more self-checkout tills in supermarkets. These regressive actions are in complete contradiction to the aims of the living wage, as the Government pointed out when they introduced it. They said it would prompt employers to invest in training and technology to make their workers more productive and break the low-pay, low-productivity cycle. I do not see how cutting in-work benefits will make employees more productive, or break the cycle of low pay and insecure work.

Costa Coffee, Next and other high-profile companies have said that they will increase prices to cover the change in wages by passing the price directly on to the consumer. I was astonished to hear a member of staff in a small chain in my Burnley constituency tell a customer that the price of bread had gone up because of the change to wages. These companies can afford to pay and should pay a living wage off the back of the profits that they produce. This should not be a system in which employers can choose between holiday pay and a living wage, or between raising prices and sacking staff.

Those guilty of such actions show their contempt for their customers, for this Parliament and the law and, most importantly, for their staff—the very individuals who give their sweat and blood, and their time and effort, so that those at the top can receive large salaries deducted from record profits. If such large companies employing thousands of people across the UK can afford to pay their lawyers and accountants large fees to deduct their tax bill and avoid paying corporation tax, I do not see how they cannot afford to pay their employees a real wage that they and their family can live off.

The Low Pay Commission has warned that some employers may decide to label employees as apprentices or self-employed to avoid having to pay them the living wage. Other suggestions floated by large retailers include making workers sign away their rights to a range of in-work benefits worth more than a month’s rent and being kicked out on to the streets. This intimidating and bullying of staff should not be tolerated in any workplace.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is outlining what I regard as very underhand practices that are hurting such workers. Will she join me in paying tribute to the work of trade unions such as the GMB, USDAW, Unison and Unite, which have played a key role in exposing a lot of these problems during the past few months? That underlines why trade unions are so crucial in standing up for workers in workplaces, such as the care sector or the retail sector that she mentions.

Julie Cooper: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend and pay tribute to the trade union movement, which has done so much to stand up for the rights of workers when faced with such threats from some big companies.

Eat, the café chain, has reportedly stopped paying staff during lunch breaks. Caffè Nero has told staff that it cannot afford to pay the national living wage and allow their workers a free panini at lunch time, despite the fact that its profits grew by 8.5% to £241 million in the 12 months to last May and that the company has not paid corporation tax since 2007. As was mentioned earlier, B&Q has demanded that employees sign away their rights to a range of in-work benefits worth more than a £1,000 a year or face the prospect of being sacked. This intimidating and bullying of staff should not be tolerated in any workplace.

The Government estimate that the total cost to employers of implementing the national living wage in 2016–17 is £1.1 billion. Yet last year, according to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, tax fraud cost £16 billion, with tax evasion alone meaning that the Government collected £4.4 billion less in tax. The money lost to the economy could easily cover the cost of the implementation of a real living wage.

Some claim that a living wage will lead to job losses. In the face of much of the scaremongering about job losses, it is worth pointing out that there has been little to no negative impact on our economy or jobs since the introduction of a minimum wage in 1999, despite the fact that the same people made the same arguments then. I am happy to say that some employers have welcomed the wage rise. Some have gone further by paying all their staff, irrespective of age, a higher wage than the Government’s living wage.
This debate is not simply about the cost of a living wage; ultimately, it is a wider reflection of an increasingly divided society. I am running out of time, but I would like to share with hon. Members my own experiences. For 24 years, I owned and ran a successful small business in which I employed 10 people. Through all that time, I recognised that the staff were a real asset, helping to build the success of the business. They worked hard and contributed much, and they were valued highly. I was proud to pay them a real living wage, and they certainly deserved no less. Similarly, when I was leader of Burnley Borough Council, I was pleased to introduce the real living wage for all employees. Not only is this the fair and decent thing to do, but it makes sound economic sense, because when people have more money in their pocket, they create demand for more and better services and shops. Thus the living wage, far from damaging business, actually acts as a boost.

I call on the Government to protect workers’ rights that are clearly being undermined. It should be made clear, through legislation if necessary, that employers should not see the living wage as an opportunity to cut back on holiday pay or other hard fought for entitlements—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order.

6.16 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate, and I wish her well with her recovery. I am only sorry that she could not be in the Chamber to deliver her speech, but I thank the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for opening the debate.

As a signatory to this motion, I want to recognise that the idea of a living wage sounds positive and a great thing. In fact, it sounds like a boost for people on low incomes. Who would argue with an increase to the living wage or to any wage? However, the fact is that this is not a living wage. I do not often find myself agreeing with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—in fact, I do not think I ever have until today, when he stated that this policy is nothing more than an increased minimum wage.

The fact that we are already witnessing the unintended consequences of this policy—the reality of an adverse effect on workers’ benefits—only proves that this Government have once more undermined the role of workers in favour of businesses. Once more, the hard-working people of this country will pay, while the bankers, businesses and tax avoiders continue to profit. As employers seek to manage the impact of wage bills, the reality is that no business wants to lose profit. Reducing staff numbers, cutting hours, misusing or abusing zero-hours contracts and reducing employee benefits are just some of the ways in which businesses are managing to subvert the cost of paying people real living wages, while expecting more from their employees.

Let us be clear: the real living wage, as defined by the Living Wage Foundation, takes into account living costs; whereas this Government’s so-called living wage is calculated on median earnings and completely fails to take into account the cost of living. How can it actually be called a living wage?

**Richard Fuller** (Bedford) (Con): I have listened to several speeches from Opposition Members and the hon. Lady is making the same argument. It is important to understand that the living wage should be seen in the context of hourly pay. She is right to say that employers look at the total wage bill and look for other changes, but she should not conflate the two. I think she wants to support the Government’s intention of increasing the hourly pay of workers. Does she agree?

**Angela Crawley:** We can agree that workers deserve a real living wage, but this is not a real living wage. To go back to my argument, it is merely an enhanced minimum wage. While I would welcome a living wage, this does not meet the mark. Sadly, this does not even apply to those under 25. Try telling a 17-year-old part-time worker that their work is of less value than that of someone who is a few years older. Is that really what we think of our young people? Is that really the value we place on the work of our young people, who are all too often forgotten in this Government’s priorities?

The term “living wage” is important. In Scotland, we recognise that. We set a target to have 500 real living wage employers by the end of this Parliament and we have already exceeded it. Last year, the Scottish Government announced that they had become an accredited living wage employer. The SNP Government have introduced a requirement to pay the real living wage as an integral part of the public sector pay policy. Since 2011, we have invested £1.5 million per year in paying the living wage rate across the parts of the public sector where the Scottish Government control the pay bill, directly benefiting 3,000 workers. Scotland has a higher proportion of workers who are paid the living wage than any other nation of the UK.

There are some positive examples in my constituency, such as Hamilton citizens advice bureau, Bluebird Care in Larkhall, the medical centre in Lanark and Emtec contractors in Uddingston, all of which are leading the way as real living wage employers and showing what can be achieved. In many ways, what the Government are doing will undermine the incentive for employers to achieve a real living wage.

Despite what the Government have said, they must do more to ensure that no worker is worse off as a result of this change. We have all seen the worrying reports about employers mitigating the cost of the new rate by cutting hours and premium rates for overtime and bank holidays. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden asked the Prime Minister whether he would guarantee that no worker would be worse off as a result of the national living wage, but she never received a response. Perhaps the Minister will give that commitment today.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am depressed by the negativity of this debate. People who have come to me in my constituency are pleased that they will have £900 more in their pockets. Some 40% of people will get a wage rise. This is something that the Government have been speaking up for. People want more money in their pockets and they are going to get it. On the whole, businesses in my constituency are in favour of the national living wage. It is difficult, but they are for it.

**Angela Crawley:** Although it will always be welcome if people have more pennies in their pocket, the Government are not looking at the full picture. When cuts to universal
Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that valid point.

Despite the Chancellor’s claim that the lowest-paid workers need a pay rise—indeed, they do deserve a pay rise—his actions will result in the rich getting richer while people in low-wage jobs see no real benefit. Indeed, they will experience an erosion of any employer benefits that they once had.

It is telling that the Government believe that women will benefit most from this change in policy, because it means that they recognise that women are more likely to be stuck in minimum wage, part-time, uncertain employment. That tells the story of gender inequality, whereby women are systematically paid less than men. It perpetuates the gender pay gap—something that the Prime Minister has pledged to end in a generation. His deeds do not appear to be matched by words. Once again, the Government know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

6.23 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate and my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) on stepping in to introduce it in such an impressive manner.

Given that most of our constituents will at one time or another find themselves working for somebody else, we give far too little attention in this place to the reality of the world of work. To many, that reality involves insecurity, uncertainty and exploitation. This debate has exposed the level of exploitation that still pervades many workplaces in this country. Members have listed many examples of employers abusing their bargaining power to take away with one hand what the new minimum wage gives with the other.

I agree with Ian Hodson, president of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, whose members have seen this at first hand, that the way in which the new minimum wage has been introduced has allowed employers to force through changes to contractual entitlements. If it is the Government’s intention for the increase in the minimum wage to end the underwriting by the state of poverty wages, they surely cannot want that increase to be paid for out of the pockets of the very people the policy is intended to help.

Richard Fuller: On that point, the change in the living wage over five years will effectively mean a 30% increase in the labour costs for companies. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government did not want that to result in people losing wages, but what would he say to the employers—the small business people that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) spoke about—who have to meet that increase in costs? What is the alternative that the hon. Gentleman wants them to undertake—an increase in prices? What else would he like to see?

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman is missing the point, which is that we have a very dishonest settlement whereby the Government are saying, “You’re going to get more money in your pocket,” but again and again we are seeing employers use unscrupulous methods to take that money back. We want the Government to come up with a much more clear and transparent way of dealing with this, so that employers end up paying what the Government have decreed is the minimum that people can live on.

Jo Stevens: Specifically on the point about small businesses, we know that if the lowest-paid workers, who often work for small businesses, have a pay increase, they tend to spend it locally, so the local economy grows. In addition, the Government have given tax cuts to businesses, so small businesses are not being deprived of any benefit.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have heard examples today involving large national chains. We can all use our spending power to go elsewhere and support local businesses, which are the lifeblood of our communities.

We should not be surprised by the way this policy is panning out, because this is the way in which some employers have always operated—they see every issue that affects their business as an excuse to whittle away at the terms and conditions of their staff.

The Minister for Skills said in a written parliamentary answer, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) referred to earlier, that any changes to terms and conditions should be discussed and agreed with workers in advance. I am sure that that advice will come as a surprise to the Secretary of State for Health, given his approach to the junior doctors dispute. I am afraid that the idea that employers will wait for an agreement on these issues is fanciful and bears no relation to the reality on the ground.

Those who are represented by a trade union at least have a fighting chance, but the reality is that employers can and do change terms and conditions fairly frequently. When they do so, it is almost always to the detriment of the people they employ. Once an employer gives a notice of change, the employee has very little redress. If legal redress is an option, the introduction of employment tribunal fees has made that a most unlikely route, given the 80% drop in employment tribunal claims since fees were introduced.

My constituency of Ellesmere Port and Neston is one of the top five living wage blackspots for women working part time across the north-west, according to the TUC, with 66% earning less than the living wage. Any increase in basic pay has to be a step in the right direction for that group of workers, as long as it does not come at the expense of other elements of the pay package.
It would be a mistake to claim that simply increasing basic pay means that there is now a fair workplace settlement. We know that many ruses and mechanisms are used to stop effective workplace protection, such as bogus self-employment and zero-hours contracts. This policy could even see the development of other scams. Some unscrupulous employers might sack people just before their 25th birthday just so that they can get someone on a cheaper rate. More apprenticeships that are apprenticeships in name only might pop up because they offer the chance for an employer to pay someone a lower rate for the same job. What will be done to tackle that?

Nearly half of all minimum wage jobs are in hospitality and retail—sectors that are both major employers in my constituency. I have conducted my own research into the practices of many of the national restaurant and fast food chains, which has revealed widespread abuse that the Government do not appear to be interested in tackling. The research, which was conducted at the end of last year, showed that 90% of the 9,000 outlets surveyed did not pay the real living wage. It also highlighted the widespread practice of what is known colloquially as “shift shafting”, whereby staff are sent home at the start or in the middle of a shift if the outlet is not busy; without any pay or compensation. More than 80% of respondents to the survey admitted that they would do that. It means that people can end up out of pocket simply by going to work, through being made to wait around without pay and then being sent home without even having their travel costs reimbursed. I hear a lot about the Government wanting to get everyone into work who is able to work, but I hear no condemnation from them of the blatant exploitation of people who are trying to do the right thing, and find themselves out of pocket through the very act of going to work.

Let us make every job reward people with a wage that they can actually live on, but at the same time let us put in place a proper system of workplace protection so that a Government policy is not allowed to be undermined by unscrupulous employment practices that take away other benefits so that people end up no better off, and in some cases actually end up worse off. To achieve that, we need a fundamental change in the Government’s approach, starting with the recognition that trade unions and collective bargaining have a significant role to play in the future prosperity of our nation. We need a fundamental change not only in the Government’s attitude but in the attitude of many employers, with a move away from the bean-counting philosophy that views the worker as a disposable item ready to be replaced by a machine that does not question, expect to be paid or belong to a union. For many people, being in work means vulnerability and uncertainty about their future.

How can we tolerate a situation in which people in work who is able to work, but I hear no condemnation from them of the blatant exploitation of people who are trying to do the right thing, and find themselves out of pocket through the very act of going to work.

We should not be fooled into thinking that this policy is a panacea. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that even with the new minimum wage, people with children will be £700 a year worse off thanks to other changes introduced by the Government. The reality is that we are having this debate because the law and culture in this country place far too little emphasis on employment rights. Until this place resolves to do something about that, the kind of injustices that we have heard about today will continue.
are employed in non-graduate roles, a trend that has steadily increased since the 2009 recession. A young graduate who has done all the right things—worked hard and got a degree—and who is saddled with up to £40,000 of debt as a result has only a 53% chance of securing a graduate job, and is not even entitled to the new living wage. That also means that they will not start paying their student loans back to the Government, which surely does not make sense for anyone.

When I graduated from Lancaster University at 21, I started working for an SME in my constituency, predominantly working in sales both overseas and across the UK. As one of the few employees who was young, was not married and did not have children, I was regularly asked to travel at short notice and do the out-of-hours engagements, working evenings and weekends. That reflects the experience of young people across the country. Young people are often asked to work harder and longer hours because of their youth—to work the longer shifts, lift the heavier packages and work the antisocial hours—and often obliged, through a desire to prove themselves and to move up the ladder, but also because sometimes their circumstances mean that it is easier for their employers to ask them, as a young person, rather than older members of staff who might have commitments at home.

Matt, who works in my parliamentary office, is 23. He graduated from Oxford University at 21. He works, in all honesty, like a Trojan, as do my other staff, who are over 25. It would be completely unfair and unjust to pay Matt less than my other members of staff simply because of his age.

There is also a danger that the omission of under-25s from the living wage makes those over 25 more vulnerable in the workplace, as it has the unintended consequence of making those under 25 more attractive to companies that have to deliver a service at the lowest possible cost. I hope that when summing up the Minister will outline what safeguards the Government intend to introduce for the living wage. In an economy where a few pounds is the difference between winning and losing a contract, how do we ensure that firms will not seek exploitatively to employ only under-25s, doing a disservice both to them and to those who are over 25 and will miss out as a result?

With that in mind, I ask the Government to reflect on their offer to young people. Citizens Advice recently published a report stating that young people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds are starting their adult lives with a significant and sometimes crippling amount of personal debt. Further figures from the Office for National Statistics confirm that as a result of lower pay, under-25s are being sucked into debt. According to the latest figures, 16 to 24-year-olds have the highest level of debt compared with income. It is double the debt level of the population as a whole. Would it not make sense to give that group a helping hand, and extend the offer to young people. Citizens Advice recently published a report stating that young people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds are starting their adult lives with a significant and sometimes crippling amount of personal debt.


However, we are once again on the wrong side of the debate on equal pay for equal work. I ask the Government to rethink their decision to deny under-25s the national living wage.

6.38 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I too thank the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for her powerful introduction to the debate. I wish the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) a speedy recovery and return to this place.

Let us be absolutely clear: what the UK Government have put forward is not a living wage. It is an enhanced minimum wage. We have heard that before, but it is important to stress it. The real living wage is some £8.25 in Scotland just now, not £7.20. The living wage calculation is made, as it should be, according to the basic cost of living and what is adequate for households to maintain an acceptable living standard. A higher minimum wage for the over-25s will help some of the low-paid, but has other consequences.

In January, the Resolution Foundation made it clear that the national living wage is not a real living wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) have made very important points about the differential in pay for young workers. The point about the unique effects that the introduction of the new so-called living wage—actually a new minimum wage—which will have on young workers was particularly powerful. A differential in pay for young workers is simply unacceptable. Fair pay should be fair pay for the job done; there should be no exceptions. The UK Government are discriminating against those under 25. They have also brought into question the future role of the Low Pay Commission, which has been devalued by this exercise.

Back in 2011-12, the Scottish Government introduced the real living wage as an integral part of public sector pay policy, and they contribute more than £1.5 million per year directly to wages. They continue to require all employers covered by public pay policy to pay the real living wage, and as we have heard, those employers became accredited in 2015. The Scottish Government are encouraging the real living wage, which 80% of employees are now paid. Earlier we heard that 500 Scots-based living-wage employers are up and running in Scotland, and the target has been set to make that 1,000 by autumn 2017.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman may have heard Labour Members say that they want to ensure that no employee is made worse off by the change to the national living wage. Do the Scottish Government have a policy to ensure that that is the case?

Drew Hendry: As I have said, the Scottish Government have introduced the real living wage. They have taken control so that proper safeguards are in place to ensure that people are treated fairly across the piece. The hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) said that as council leader she introduced the living wage for the council. That is laudable and something we have in common; as leader of the Highland Council, I was responsible for leading the charge to introduce the real living wage.
Crucially, we included apprentices of all ages on that real living wage, and there was no discrimination against the under-25s. Young people received the same fairness, and that extended to arm’s length bodies, the Highland third sector interface, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

Councils in Scotland are helped by the Scottish Government to provide for careworkers, and support with the real living wage is provided for care homes and to those who provide care in the community. The Government are committed to making further progress on that. In 2015-16, the Scottish Government put £12.5 million into a tripartite agreement worth £25 million to improve the quality of care, create a fair workplace, and make progress on the real living wage. The First Minister of Scotland has said that from October 2016, thanks to Scottish Government decisions, the real living wage will be paid to social care workers across Scotland.

We have heard a lot about business from Conservative Members—the one thing that I and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) agree on is his description of the UK Government’s living wage proposal as a minimum wage. He spoke about how business struggles with the living wage, but earlier I mentioned those Scots-based businesses that are now accredited living wage employers, and the target to go further. The independent Fair Work Commission framework was set up this year to “deliver fair work by providing an effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect.”

From experience, I know that implementing the real living wage for business pays dividends. It pays dividends in productivity, because people enjoy doing more for companies that respect them. There is better retention of staff—people are not looking around for the next job to help them scrape through the day because they are getting paid fairly. Companies are able to plan better. Team morale is fostered, and people are able to work better collegiately to achieve results for business. Companies can focus not just on survival or how they recruit and replace staff, but on growth. A real living wage paid by companies provides them with good results.

In conclusion, the list of living wage employers includes the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, the Scottish Parliament, the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the major political parties; the Scottish National party, of course, pay the real living wage in Scotland. However, there have been a couple of notable omissions: the UK Government and the Conservative party. Something must be done to ensure fair pay across the piece. Those under 25 should not be excluded, and a real living wage should be put in place to ensure that people have a decent chance of an adequate standard of living.

6.45 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her work in preparation for the debate, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for the way in which she opened it.

I want to focus on the impact that the Government’s so-called national living wage is having, and could have, on the care sector, following the theme raised by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). The care sector is under increasing financial pressure, and many organisations have warned that the Government’s failure to provide additional funding for the national living wage could result in a number of care providers becoming financially unviable. It will also have an impact on the pay and working conditions of care staff.

The Local Government Association has estimated that introducing the Government’s national living wage will cost home care and residential care providers at least £330 million this year. A number of Members have mentioned the social care precept. In my local area of Salford, the precept can raise only £1.6 million, but the cost of the national living wage increase to the care sector is £2.7 million. It has clearly been left to taxpayers to pay for, with a mechanism that is not even sufficient.

Care England says that the Government’s national living wage announcement “places additional, unfunded pressures on the care sector that it cannot cope with. Care providers have already had to fund the National Minimum Wage increase of October 2015, plus standard Cost of Living increase in contracts from local authorities, and increases in Care Quality Commission regulatory fees... The aggregate impact of all of these increases is substantial: providers estimate that this will cost them a 5% rise in the wage bill in the first year, and 7% each year thereafter.”

I have already been told that, like other businesses, some care providers have altered their employment contracts and conditions as a way of coping with those changes, meaning that additional costs from the national living wage are being paid for by careworkers themselves. As we have heard, many careworkers are already underpaid. The National Audit Office has reported that up to 22,000 home care workers in England are illegally paid below the national minimum wage, and I believe the actual figure is much higher.

In HMRC investigations of care providers between 2011 and 2015, more than four out of 10 were found not to be complying with the national minimum wage. The Resolution Foundation has calculated that careworkers are collectively cheated of £130 million a year due to pay levels below the minimum wage. That is done through a variety of mechanisms, such as careworkers not being paid adequately for travel time, despite statutory guidance. As one careworker has said:

“In order to earn a full time wage, the carers in our company usually start work at 7 am and work until 9 pm five/six days a week, with gaps throughout the day where we wait in the car until due at the next client.”

Some careworkers are paid as little as £3.50 per hour when lack of pay for travel and waiting time is considered.

Mr George Howarth: In response to a point that I raised earlier, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said that he thought the biggest cause of more people going to food banks would be if people lost their jobs. As I know he is aware, the facts show that the majority of people who use food banks are those in low-paid and insecure employment.

Barbara Keeley: Very much so. We are talking about people who are paid £3.50 an hour, and their hours are being cut. Careworkers on zero-hours contracts complain about not getting the hours they want and are finding it hard to make ends meet, so my right hon. Friend is quite right. In a recent Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme, an undercover reporter employed as a careworker confirmed...
the point about staff being paid way under the minimum wage. He was being paid just £3.89 an hour, working in a London borough.

Rather than improving pay, the introduction of what the Government call the national living wage is having an adverse effect on the working conditions of some careworkers. I have heard reports of one domiciliary care provider in the north-west raising the wages of care staff to £7.75—fair enough—but balancing the increase by introducing other changes that have a negative impact on employees. Sick pay, which was previously two weeks on full pay and two weeks on half pay, has ended. The hours during which careworkers must be available for work now run from 7 am to 11 pm. Mileage claims no longer include the first 10 miles of each day’s journeys—and staff are already paid only 20p a mile, which is well below HMRC’s recommended rate of 45p a mile. Workers at that care provider believe they are effectively paying for their own pay rise.

I have heard of a care provider in the east midlands cutting staff allowances and charging more for services in order to implement the national living wage. I am sure we will see much more of that up and down the country. As a result of the mileage allowance being cut by 15p to 20p a mile and the first and last seven miles of travel each day being excluded, 35% of the workforce at that care provider will lose out. Some workers have reported that they will lose up to £1,000 a year. That is shameful. It is just like the B&Q workers my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North talked about.

The introduction of what the Government call the national living wage was supposed to improve employees’ living standards, but it appears that some careworkers are receiving little or no benefit from the changes and that some might even be worse off. If careworkers continue to suffer because of unpaid travel time, care visits that are too short and unfair working conditions, it will have a detrimental effect on their work and the wellbeing of the people they care for. In fact, the Social Care Institute for Excellence has warned that stress and low morale resulting from how care staff are treated can have a direct impact on care service quality.

I believe that care work is a demanding job and requires skilled workers who are compassionate and have the time to provide good-quality care. It is completely unacceptable that a job that has historically been undervalued is being so exploited today and that careworkers are not being paid the basic wage for the job they do. Given the examples I have quoted, will the Minister tell us what the Government will do to ensure that careworkers are not worse off as a result of the national living wage?

6.52 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Mitchem and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate and the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for speaking very well in her place.

The Chancellor announced the national living wage with great triumphalism, but as with so many aspects of Government policy, it was quickly exposed as nothing more than smoke and mirrors. As we heard earlier, it is not a living wage but a rebadging of the minimum wage. The real living wage is independently determined by the Living Wage Foundation and currently set at £8.25 an hour. If a person cannot live off it, it is not a living wage. The Government and the Minister should apologise to the Living Wage Foundation, to the many trade unions and employers that have legitimately taken up the real living wage and to the many campaigners who have fought for it over the years. It is a gross insult to those campaigners to appropriate their term, and it is bound to lead to misleading job adverts. It is not a real living wage if it is not an actual living wage for everybody.

It is also not a living wage if someone happens to be under 25. The Chancellor said:

“Britain deserves a pay rise and Britain is getting a pay rise.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 337.]

Interestingly, under-25s are clearly not “Britain”, because they are not entitled to the higher rate of the minimum wage. Their fair day’s work is not receiving a fair day’s pay. Since the minimum wage’s inception, it has contained an in-built aspect of age discrimination. It has been Scottish National party policy for some years to equalise the minimum wage—I was convener of the youth wing when my colleagues raised it in the party. I am proud to raise that point today, along with the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I have heard it said that younger workers lack experience, but the minimum wage is not based on experience; it is based on age. A person can start on a minimum wage job at 16 and work in it for nine years before they are legally entitled to this new pretently living wage, which a 25-year-old would get on their first day at work. They could walk in the door and get the higher living wage.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Halifax, this new minimum wage has also exacerbated the differential in the wages paid to younger workers in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, the most pronounced effect has been on apprentices. There are 54,000 apprentices in the UK who are not entitled to this living wage. They may have families and various other needs to meet, and they deserve fair pay as well. They cannot be expected to live off nothing. Discrimination of that sort is opposed in all other parts of society. This long-standing, state-endorsed age discrimination must end, and I call on the Government to take action. If they will not, I would like them to devolve employment law to the Scottish Government, who are making tremendous progress in promoting the uptake of the real living wage in Scotland.

The need to equalise the minimum wage has increased significance for younger workers on zero-hours contracts. I had a constituent in my surgery a few weeks ago who worked in a bar in Glasgow city centre. One day, she received a phone call from her employer saying that there was no need for her to come into work that evening because her services were no longer required. After getting over the shock of her sudden dismissal, she researched her options. Citizens Advice and ACAS both said she had no rights in her circumstances as a zero-hours worker. She suspects but cannot prove that she was let go because she was over 25 whereas her colleagues were under 25. I have heard the same thing anecdotally from friends who are over 25 and have seen their hours cut. They are now finding it difficult to make ends meet and to find another job in their sector.
Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady is making some very good points, including about the potential for discrimination at the age of 25. Would she be interested to hear from the Minister, as I would, what steps the Government might take to ensure that that does not happen?

Alison Thewliss: I would be interested, but I would be more interested to hear what we can do to equalise the wage so that unscrupulous employers are not tempted to discriminate in the first place. The Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training, Roseanna Cunningham, posted on her Twitter feed a photograph of a sign in a shop window advertising for a waitress but saying that applicants had to be under 24. That is illegal, but it is encouraged by the differential in the living wage. Particular attention needs to be paid to under-25s on zero-hours contracts, who are doubly discriminated against.

I wrote to the Minister asking who was enforcing the minimum wage. I had received figures in a parliamentary answer suggesting that a great number of people were not earning the wages to which they were entitled. There are 1,718,000 over-21s earning less than £6.50 an hour, 78,000 under-18s earning less than £3.87 an hour, and, as I mentioned earlier, 54,000 apprentices earning less than £3.30 an hour. Despite those figures, which show that hundreds of thousands of people are not earning the wages to which they are entitled, according to the Minister’s letter there have been only nine successful prosecutions of employers since 2007. That is because the people affected are in a position of weakness, as they might lose their job if they complain. We have to do an awful lot more. His letter mentioned that the Government were taking on more staff and investigating more, but only nine prosecutions is absolutely woeful given the scale of the problem.

There is another way of dealing with this. The Scottish Government have worked with employers—it is not necessarily about imposing a real living wage on employers, because as the Scottish Government acknowledge, that might be difficult for small employers—and as a result 56,000 employees now earn the real £8.25 an hour living wage. In my constituency, they include employees of large organisations such as Barclays and SSE; small organisations such as An Clachan café, the Good Spirits Co and Locavore; organisations that provide services, such as Southside Housing Association and Glasgow Association for Mental Health; Glasgow Caledonian University; and supermarkets such as Aldi and Lidl. If they are all able to do it, there is no reason why other employers cannot work towards it as well.

The Scottish Government, through their Scottish business pledge, have moved dramatically towards getting more people on to the real living wage, and it has been a hugely successful scheme. They first ask employers to pledge to pay the real living wage, and employers then have to meet two of eight further elements of the pledge, which can include ending exploitative zero-hours contracts and investing in young workers. They must also work towards achieving all nine elements. It has been a very successful scheme, so I suggest that the UK Government take a leaf out of the Scottish Government’s book.

7 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) for standing in for her and opening the debate. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden makes a speedy recovery.

I shall focus my remarks on a specific group of workers—seafarers. These are the only group of workers who are excluded from the full protection of the national minimum wage legislation and equal pay legislation.

Ships working in UK waters between UK ports and between UK and continental ports are crewed by staff on pay rates that are well below the national minimum wage. Increasingly, companies are recruiting outside the UK to crew their ships with non-UK seafarers, particularly ratings, in order to profit from sub-national minimum wage pay rates.

Allied to the rise of the flag of convenience vessels, these exploitative pay and employment practices are driving a decline in the number of UK seafarers. In the early 1980s, there were 28,000 officers and 30,000 ratings in the UK merchant navy, but by June last year, the total number of UK seafarers had dropped to 23,380—a fall of nearly 60%. The position for UK ratings, particularly deck and engine, has become exceptionally precarious, with 8,830 working at sea last year—a fall of over 25% since 2011 and over 70% in the last 30 years. Pay exploitation in the UK shipping sector is happening because non-EU seafarers are excluded from the full protection against nationality-based pay discrimination in the Equality Act 2010.

Following years of campaigning by maritime unions, the last Labour Government commissioned an independent assessment of the impact of nationality-based pay differentials in the shipping industry, which was known as the Carter review. It concluded at the end of the parliamentary term in May 2010 that there would be no adverse impact on the shipping industry or jobs and recommended the outlawing of all nationality-based seafarer pay differentials.

The last coalition Government, however, rejected the Carter recommendation, but the Government were forced, under threat of infraction by the European Union, to protect European Economic Area seafarers from nationality-based pay discrimination. In recent months, maritime trade unions have contributed, with the Government and industry, to a working group on the effect of the existing protections in the Equality Act 2010, and it will report in the summer.

At present, passengers and businesses are travelling on vessels crewed by seafarers who are earning as little as £2.40 an hour. This legalised exploitation has systematically undermined maritime jobs in the UK, damaging the skills base and driving up unemployment rates in seafarer communities across the UK.

The RMT trade union estimates that prior to the introduction of the increase in the national minimum wage, over 8,300 seafarer ratings working on UK-flagged or other vessels qualifying for the tonnage tax are likely to be earning hourly rates of pay below the national minimum wage. It stands to reason, therefore, that the introduction of a higher statutory minimum wage will put more seafarers below that threshold and more employers in breach of the national minimum wage legislation.
In its March 2016 report to the Government, the Low Pay Commission recommended that a stronger third-party complaints system be introduced for employers breaching the national minimum wage. That would be through the creation of a public protocol to govern HMRC’s investigation of third-party complaints. This would provide feedback to the complainant and could be a useful source of additional evidence on the rates of pay and contractual terms and conditions of employment for seafarers. The Low Pay Commission said:

“We recommend that the Government establishes a formal public protocol for HMRC to handle third party whistleblowing on breaches of the NMW, which should include arrangements for giving all possible feedback to relevant third parties and appropriate continuing involvement in any resulting casework.”

I urge Ministers to accept that recommendation. A strengthened third-party complaints procedure represents the most effective way to tackle pay rates in the shipping industry that fall below the national minimum wage because of the understandable reluctance of the affected industry that fall below the national minimum wage. That would be through the introduction of the Government’s new living wage. I almost have to grudgingly admire its ingenuity because of the understandable reluctance of the affected industry that fall below the national minimum wage. That would be through the introduction of the Government’s new living wage. I almost have to grudgingly admire its ingenuity because of the understandable reluctance of the affected industry.

I have mixed feelings about the Government’s new living wage. Of course an increase in low-paid workers’ wages is to be welcomed, but what we have here is, in effect, a new national minimum wage. The real living wage, as other Members have mentioned, is set by the Living Wage Foundation and calculated by the centre for research in social policy at Loughborough University. The research looks in detail at what households need in various ways it has employed in attempting to cut other areas of pay in order to save itself from having to pay its workers any more money. B&Q is a well-respected national retailer and it is regrettable to see the company behaving in this manner.

Here I feel I should declare an interest in that my partner is such an avid DIY-er that he contributes substantially to B&Q’s profits, but he, too, was shocked to hear that the staff who serve him so well and so frequently are being treated so shabbily. Thanks to the tireless campaigning of my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden, B&Q has now announced a two-year protection period, for which I am grateful. Surely, however, for a major retailer whose parent company, Kingfisher, declared profits of £512 million last year, implementing the new living wage without attempting to offset the costs by cutting other elements of pay would have been the right thing to do and the actions of a good employer.

Yesterday, it was my pleasure to visit the beautiful village of Port Sunlight in the Wirral South constituency. Port Sunlight is a “model village” of architect-designed houses, originally built to house the workers in Lord Lever’s Sunlight soap factory. Lord Lever, a businessman and philanthropist, put into action his belief that good housing ensures a happy and healthy workforce. He also implemented a workplace pension scheme, thus ensuring that his workers could enjoy a comfortable retirement. I cannot help comparing and contrasting the altruism of Lord Lever in the 19th century and early 20th century with the antisocial attitude of some modern businesses, which appear to think only of profit and the shareholder and not of that vital asset, their employees.

However, not all businesses are villains. It was my pleasure recently to attend an event in Parliament, organised by the Living Wage Foundation, which showcased the work of small businesses that had signed up to be accredited living wage employers. Those employers told me that they had a much higher rate of staff satisfaction as a result of becoming living wage employers, and—importantly—that it had improved their status and standing as employers in the community. One of them said to me, “If you can’t afford to pay the living wage, then, quite simply, you shouldn’t be in business.” That is a philosophy from which some of our larger employers could learn.

The Government’s tag line for the national living wage is “a step up for Britain”, but some companies are trying to take a step back from their commitments to workers’ rights. Where companies are trying to find a loophole to take remuneration from their employees, I ask all Members on both sides of the House to work together to stop that happening, and to protect low-paid workers. I hope that one outcome of the debate will be the ability of workers who fear that they cannot speak out against the imposition of new contracts for fear of losing their jobs to contact their local Members of Parliament and ask them to stand up and speak out in their support, so that not one constituent loses out as a result of the new so-called living wage. That, surely, was never the intention.

7.11 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhian McDonagh), not just for her efforts to secure today’s debate but for the work that she has...
done in recent months, fairly consistently, on this issue. I am sorry to hear that she is not very well, and I wish her a swift recovery and return to the House. However, the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) stepped up to lead the debate with aplomb.

I think that Members throughout the House should be disturbed about the fact that some companies are seeking to undermine the legislative provisions of the minimum wage increase by cutting other employee benefits, such as additional premiums for Sunday working, antisocial hours or working on bank holidays. I am glad that some of those firms have been named and shamed this afternoon, because there is no excuse for poverty pay, and trying to offset business costs on the backs of the very lowest paid workers is unacceptable. However, reputational damage has been shown in the past to have a fairly limited impact on such firms. I hope the Government will take the opportunity to set out the action that they intend to take to ensure that employers meet their obligations and do not erode the terms and conditions of those on the lowest pay and in the most insecure jobs. I ask them to look at the variation-of-contract procedures to see what can be done to ensure that companies do not try to get round what is, I believe, a well intentioned increase in the pay of those on the lowest wages.

Many people over 25 who are working hard in minimum wage jobs will have been pleased to learn that they would receive at least a modest pay increase, but that will have turned rather sour for those who have learned that they will be losing out. A number of Members have highlighted cases from their constituencies, many of them in the retail sector, but others in the social care sector and the hospitality industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), and the hon. Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), made the key point that people under 25 were in a particularly vulnerable position when they reached that magic age, and suddenly became less attractive to their current employers because they would have to be paid more. It strikes me as an arbitrary age, because it does not seem to be based on anything more tangible than when people’s birthdays are. At 25, young adults are probably at the peak of their labour abilities and cognitive functions. Surely that should be recognised, and they should receive a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work like every other employee.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the setting of a floor on wages has had enormous benefits for those working in low-paid sectors of the economy, the vast majority of whom are women. When we think back to the introduction of the minimum wage some years ago—and, indeed, to every occasion on which minimum wage has been increased in the past, but does the hon. Lady accept that this is a different approach? In the past, increases in the minimum wage resulted from discussions and decisions on the part of the Low Pay Commission, in conjunction with business, whereas the introduction of the national living wage constitutes a Government-imposed increase.

Dr Whiteford: I certainly acknowledge that the approach is different, but I think that we should all appreciate the work done by the Low Pay Commission in assessing the levels of pay increase that our economy can sustain without pushing up unemployment, and the possibility of gaining that optimal balance between the two. However, I fear that the commission’s role has been rather undermined by this process, although a significant pay increase is long overdue. I think that we need to recognise the benefits that the minimum wage has brought, and the need to bring wages into closer alignment with the real cost of living in the longer term.

I echo the point that was made so forcefully by my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who welcomed the increase in the minimum wage for those over 25, but said that rebranding it as a national living wage did not make it an actual living wage. The so-called national living wage is significantly lower than the real living wage, which is calculated by the Living Wage Foundation on the basis of the cost of living. A national living wage of £7.20 an hour is well below the real living wage, which is £8.25 an hour, and more in London. That is what it actually costs to have an acceptable minimal standard of living in this day and age.

That issue becomes much more acute in the context of the shift away from tax credit towards the new universal credit, which was touched on earlier in the debate. For many low-paid workers, especially parents, the increases in the minimum wage and the personal allowance will not offset the reduction in income that will result from universal credit. Moreover, the real living wage has been calculated on the assumption that families will be receiving their full entitlement of tax credit. The cuts in tax credit, work allowances, housing benefit, and other benefits that help to make work pay for low-income families will not be replaced by the increase in the hourly rate of minimum pay, and thousands of families will be worse off overall. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who is not in the Chamber at present, gave the example of a constituent who had found himself in exactly that position.

It is estimated that the total wage gain for low-paid workers resulting from the increase in the minimum wage will reach about £4 billion by 2020, whereas the estimated reduction in tax credit and other allowances over the same period is three times that amount. The notion that this will have a significant positive effect on the living standards of low-income households is misplaced. The fact that businesses will now be paying more of the real costs of labour will not be much help or consolation to the low-paid workers whose incomes will fall.

We have heard today that some low-income working families will indeed be badly hit. The TUC calculates that those who are set to lose out financially include families consisting of three children and two parents working on the minimum wage, one full time and the other part time. According to the Equality Trust, a single parent with two children, already working full
time, would also lose out, and would have to find an extra 16 hours of work a month just to plug the gap. Meanwhile, the tax changes that were announced in the Budget mean that the wealthiest 15% of earners will be hundreds of pounds better off every year.

One issue on which I have pressed the Government in the past, and on which I have been given a less than satisfactory answer, is the question of whether the increase in the minimum wage should trigger a commensurate increase in the carer’s allowance earning limit. That is not uprated through the benefits uprating order, although I fail to see why it should not be. Instead, it is raised on an ad hoc basis. For those carers who are able to work, it is often important to keep in contact with the labour market, and for those in low-paid jobs, the increase to the minimum wage could have significant implications. Some might consider reducing their working hours, but that could cause problems for their employer and also create problems with their entitlement to tax credits. The net result would be a reduction in carers’ incomes, which are already very low. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that point today, look at it more seriously and work out how he might ensure that carers’ incomes are not inadvertently squeezed by these increases.

I hope we all recognise the value of reducing wage inequality and ensuring that everyone gets a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. We can make a start in the public sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) pointed out, back in 2011 the Scottish Government introduced the requirement to pay the living wage as an integral part of public sector pay policy, and in 2015 they became an accredited living wage employer. That means that all employees on Scottish Government-controlled payrolls receive the real living wage, which is already well above the new minimum wage being talked about today.

The Scottish Government have also established an independent fair work convention and introduced the Scottish business pledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central explained. Becoming a living wage employer is only one part of the process, however, and there are already ambitious plans for expanding those commitments. The Scottish Government are also working closely with local authorities and private sector care providers to fund improvements in pay in the social care sector. This has been mentioned frequently in the debate today, and it is pertinent to my own constituency, where a care home has closed as a result of staff recruitment and retention problems. Social care sector wages have traditionally been very low, and recruitment has been difficult because of the nature of the work, yet care assistants do an enormously responsible job. They look after people who can no longer fully attend to their own needs, often going into people’s homes. If we are moving towards fairer pay, this is a great place to start, and it will benefit not only the employees but the whole community as well as delivering better and more consistent care.

It is in everyone’s interest to move to a higher wage economy. It is quite right that the minimum wage has been raised to bring it closer to the cost of living, but this Government need to make it enforceable and to enforce it, as well as taking action to stop companies sidestepping their obligations. They could lead by example by seeking to become a living wage employer and ensuring that all Government employees earn the living wage. They could also do much more to encourage private sector firms to become living wage employers.

7.22 pm

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who has been more than a super-sub for my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) today. We all wish my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden a speedy recovery. My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North gave the House some good examples of people who could lose out despite the fact that the so-called national living wage was intended to increase pay for those on low incomes. We have heard a lot of very good contributions.

We heard a contribution from the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who appears to have read, in his book on microeconomics, of the impact of increasing wages, but not to have got on to the volume on the impact of labour as a derived demand and the impact of higher wages on aggregate demand in the economy. As we discovered when we introduced the national minimum wage, increasing pay for the less well-off can result in a more prosperous economy because of their higher propensity to consume.

**Philip Davies**: I just want to know on what basis the hon. Gentleman feels more qualified than the Office for Budget Responsibility, which made it very clear that 4 million hours and 60,000 jobs would be lost.

**Kevin Brennan**: I will come to my concerns about the way in which this policy is being introduced in due course. There is plenty of evidence from the introduction of the national minimum wage that if it is done correctly, increasing pay for the lowest paid workers can result in an increase in aggregate demand, and in greater productivity and prosperity for the economy.

We have heard contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), and for Burnley (Julie Cooper). We have also heard from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), whose reference to Adele and the importance of paying young people sounded convincing to someone like me.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who talked about his experience as a council leader. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), and from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). My neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), made a pertinent point about seafarers. It is important to remember that seafarers are exempt from this legislation, and we need to bring in new protections for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) told us about her partner spending a lot of time at B&Q. If her household is anything like mine, that is no doubt a
result of his being told that he has to go to B&Q and do certain DIY jobs. This happened to me so much in years gone by that we used to call it “Be in the Queue” because I was down there so much. We also heard from the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford).

Today’s debate has been rather peculiar. On this side of the House, there has been general support for the idea of the so-called national living wage that the Chancellor announced in his Budget, but there has also been criticism of its implementation and its potential to make some people worse off. That is the purpose of today’s debate. However, the only contribution from a Back-Bench Conservative Member seemed to be against the Government’s policy altogether, so it has been a peculiar debate in that respect.

As has been highlighted, the national minimum wage was introduced by the Labour Government in 1999. It was opposed tooth and nail by the Conservatives, but the Minister for Skills has previously and rather generously acknowledged that they were wrong to do so, just as they were wrong to oppose other progressive achievements of Labour Governments, such as the NHS. He has acknowledged that fact on the record in my presence in this House, and I am grateful for his generosity in doing so.

I referred to the “so-called national living wage” because, as has been pointed out many times today, it really is not a new concept. It is a symptom of the Chancellor’s inability to do anything that might be worth while without trying to extract the maximum political advantage from it. This was highlighted when the former Work and Pensions Secretary resigned, saying that the Chancellor was always seeking to do something that was “distinctly political rather than in the national economic interest”.

The Chancellor could have said, “I want to increase the national minimum wage for the over-25s”, which is in effect what this policy does. Instead, he chose to pinch the name “living wage” from those who have worked on devising and calculating it. This was held against him when he announced his policy, and who have campaigned for it right across the country with great success. He nicked that name for his policy, which, it has been pointed out, will not introduce a true living wage based on the concept of the evidence based on need to formulate the concept of a living wage, and who have campaigned for it right across the country with great success. He nicked that name for his policy, which, it has been pointed out, will not introduce a true living wage based on the concept of the evidence of need as developed by the Living Wage Foundation.

Similarly, the Chancellor could have done the thorough preparation that a policy such as this requires. He could have put the policy through a proper stress test, as was done by Ian McCartney and others when the national minimum wage was first introduced. However, that would have spoilt his piece of political theatre in the Budget, and the Great Osborne would not have been able to pull a rabbit out of his hat to the delight of all his misguided audience on the Conservative Benches. The problem of some workers potentially being worse off could have been avoided if we had a Chancellor who was more interested in the substance of making policy work than in the smoke and mirrors of political presentation.

It is illegal for employers to pay less than the national minimum wage, yet figures provided by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills show that the numbers of employers being fined for doing so have actually increased in recent years. We would like to know what measures will be put in place to ensure that we do not have a repeat of this deliberate lawbreaking and undermining when the so-called national living wage is more established. Will these companies be named and shamed? Will there be financial penalties?

Stephen Doughty: Is my hon. Friend aware of the case of MiHomecare, a subsidiary of Mitie in the care sector? It has had to make a significant number of payments to workers in Wales and has been involved in out-of-court settlements for non-payment of the minimum wage, yet it was the Conservatives who gave Mitie’s chief executive, now Baroness McGregor-Smith, a peerage.

Kevin Brennan: I am aware of that case. My hon. Friend, who is my other parliamentary neighbour, accurately reflects the problems in the care sector that came up in the debate, and describes the connections to some of the companies that need to be looked into more carefully.

The action being taken by some employers may not be illegal, but it undermines the spirit of the law, which is to provide an increase in wages and living standards for British workers. Some of those taking this curmudgeonly path are in the sectors that might benefit most from workers having extra purchasing power in their pocket, such as tourism, retail and hospitality. As we have heard, the Low Pay Commission warned that some employers could label employees as apprentices to avoid having to pay the so-called national living wage.

We have heard examples involving various supermarket chains, retailers, restaurants and so on. In the interests of time, I will not name them or repeat what was said in the debate, but in a week when we have seen one loss-making chief executive officer try to secure a pay package of £14 million a year, it is obscene that an ultimate pay rate of £9 by 2020 is being undermined by the heads of some of these big businesses. Corporation tax has been reduced in recognition of the introduction of the so-called national living wage, leading to savings for businesses. Was that intended to compensate businesses for the phased introduction of the so-called national living wage? If so, does the Minister condemn the businesses using some of these practices?

Private sector businesses may have other opportunities to recoup increased costs by raising prices for goods and services, or by altering how labour, capital and profits are apportioned and rewarded. However, those options are not available to local government, as was pointed out, and the gap there is huge. Will the Minister agree to review the local government cuts in view of the impact of the national living wage?

Many hon. Members referred to young people, who have been deliberately excluded from the so-called national living wage. The Guardian recently highlighted the case of a worker at a well-known DIY store—I will put it no more strongly than that—who was on £7.20 before the introduction of the so-called national living wage and £6.70 after its introduction. He said:

“I’m getting less for doing the same job… I feel so worthless.”

What is the Minister’s reaction to that? What assessment has he made of the impact of the so-called national living wage on workers under 25? As was asked in the debate, what is the purpose of widening the differential between the under-25s and those who are older? Is it to
increase demand for the under-25s, or does it reflect that the Minister somehow believes that the under-25s are worth less in productivity terms than those over 25?

The so-called national living wage could be celebrated on all sides of the House if it was introduced properly and if the letter and spirit of the law were upheld. If not, many workers could, as we have heard, be considerably worse off. The Opposition will be watching closely to ensure that that does not occur. The Government, with all their resources and power, should be introducing the change with real vigour. Will the Minister act to ensure that, as the motion demands, no workers are worse off as a result of Government policy? I invite him to tell the House how he will do that.

7.34 pm

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): This has been an excellent debate. My, how we have missed the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). We are all agreed on that. If she is listening, I hope that she is enjoying the hospital grapes. We look forward to her rejoining us and adding great wisdom to our deliberations. However, she was well represented by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who brought equal passion to her argument for working people in her constituency and across the land, who, as we all agree, deserve a pay rise.

I was struck by the fact that most Opposition Members failed to recognise the significance of the achievement. Call it a national minimum wage or a national living wage—I do not really care—but please recognise that it is a significant increase in the legal minimum hourly rate for workers across the country. I would have hoped that there might be a little more recognition of that, although I acknowledge that the right hon. Member for Enfield North and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) were gracious enough to call it a step in the right direction. Indeed, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) did the same from the Front Bench, even if there was a little sting in the tail, as there always is with him.

However, none of the Opposition contributors recognised why the Government are able to do this now, namely because of the steps that we have taken to ensure that the economy is strong. If the economy was weak, unemployment was rising and business failures were increasing, such an intervention would have been profoundly damaging to the British economy and to the interests of all employers capable of meeting them. First, let me remind him about the previous Labour Government, whom I am sure he supported. He was not in that moment, I will move on to discuss the enforcement of the national living wage next year will be more than double what it was in the last year of the Labour Government. Spending on enforcement of the national minimum wage and the national living wage next year will be more than double what it was in the last year of the Labour Government.

Stephen Doughty: Even if the situation were as rosy as the Minister paints it, which it is not, there are the underhand tactics of companies in cutting benefits aside from pay to offset the increase or even make workers worse off, which have been pointed out repeatedly in the debate. Will he respond to that? Does he consider those tactics underhand?

Nick Boles: If the hon. Gentleman will give me a moment, I will move on to discuss the enforcement of what I consider to be moral obligations that fall upon all employers capable of meeting them. First, let me remind him about the previous Labour Government, whom I am sure he supported. He was not in that Government—he was not yet in the House, and nor was I—but they spent only £8 million on enforcing the national minimum wage in 2009-10. At a time when they seemed able to spend unlimited amounts of money on almost everything else, they thought it rated only £8 million. We are going to spend £20 million in 2016-17, which is up from £13 million in 2015-16 and from only £8 million in the last year of the Labour Government. Spending on enforcement of the national minimum wage and the national living wage next year will be more than double what it was in the last year of the Labour Government.

Furthermore, we have introduced the scheme of naming and shaming companies that do not pay the national minimum wage or the national living wage and do not have a good reason for explaining why. That has been an extremely effective approach. Hon. Members should see some of the letters I receive from employers trying to persuade me to exclude them from a naming and shaming round; they take it very seriously indeed, as they do not want their customers and suppliers, and
indeed their neighbours, to know that they have broken the law. I do, however, agree with the hon. Gentleman that legal obligations are not enough—not for us as individuals and not for employers either. I welcomed the contribution of the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who talked about her experience in employing 10 people and insisting on paying them a proper living wage because that was good for them, for her as an employer and for the business. Without being too pompous about it, let me say that that is the kind of moral responsibility we would hope and expect every employer to seek to fulfil.

I recognise the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that some small employers will find the national living wage very difficult. I do not criticise them for an instant if they are not able immediately to ensure that every aspect of an employee’s conditions is preserved in full, because I am sure we would all agree that if the alternative is to fire some people, we would prefer to have more people being paid the legal national living wage than to have people losing their jobs. However, I am clear that for larger employers there is simply no excuse for trying to evade the effect of the national living wage by cutting other benefits and premiums.

Richard Fuller: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Boles: Will the Minister give way?

Joan Ryan: I thank all Members for their contributions to the debate. Low-paid, hard-working employees in the UK are being sold the same lie they were sold last year. The Chancellor tells them that their lives will get easier, but from this month thousands of them know that that is not true, and that cannot be right. I hear what the Minister says, but the loophole is not being closed. He made a generous offer, and I am sure people will take it up, but it was about applying pressure. That was not the promise that the Chancellor made; the Minister cannot guarantee that all people will be better off and will get the pay rise.

Increasing the minimum wage is not a bad policy, but I know my Labour colleagues will share my view that £7.20 an hour is not nearly enough to live on. That is why the Living Wage Foundation calculates that a worker in London needs at least £9.40 an hour to achieve a basic standard of living. Although the £7.20 hourly rate is not nearly enough, it is a start. It is, however, fundamentally unfair that hard-working people—the same people this Government have claimed they care about—should earn less as a result of this policy. If the Chancellor means what he said, and if he is genuine in his promise of a pay rise for Britain, he should join me in supporting the motion and closing the loopholes. It is a serious matter if the Budget can be so undermined. After all, who is running the country—is it the Government or companies such as B&Q? I call on the Chancellor and the Government to guarantee that no employee will earn less as a result of the national living wage; to close the loopholes; and to recognise the rights that people are entitled to under the announcements that the Chancellor made.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House agrees with the Chancellor of the Exchequer that Britain deserves a pay rise and commends his introduction of the national living wage; notes, however, that some employers are cutting overall remuneration packages to offset the cost of its introduction, leaving thousands of low-paid employees significantly worse off; and calls, therefore, on the Government to guarantee that no worker will be worse off as a result of the introduction of the national living wage.
The evidence is now so compelling about this gulf in regional attainment and the crippling impact it has on individuals, communities and the economy that it is time for a revolution in how we tackle the problem. 
gesture when we think about the scale and importance of this crisis—particularly when only £10 million will be spent this year. The recent recalculations of the International Democratic Education Conference index on levels of deprivation had a severe impact on many schools across my local authority, Kirklees, with one school, for example, losing £300,000 per year.

The region needs real investment, not just rhetoric. We also need to learn the many transferable lessons from the success of London. In the 1980s, the south-east and the east of England had better results than London, but the most recent evidence now shows that London is outstripping the rest of the country. The Labour Government’s London Challenge saw the combination of a political push and huge investment to raise standards across the capital. With the long-term backing of Downing Street, the Challenge focused on three clear and measurable objectives: to reduce the number of underperforming schools, especially in relation to English and maths; to increase the number of schools rated “good” or “outstanding”; and to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am pleased that we have the opportunity to debate this important issue this evening. One thing that I learned from the London Challenge, which is key to all this, was the co-operation and the co-ordination among schools across the capital. Rather than being set against each other in different schools, teachers came together and worked in a co-operative model. That is the best way of sharing good practice and building capacity.

Jo Cox: My hon. Friend’s point is valid and offers a stark contrast to current Government education policy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York, which has the best results of schools across Yorkshire, also has the York Challenge, but it is co-ordinated by the local authority. Is that not why it is crucial that the local authority is at the heart of our education system in the future?

Jo Cox: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I fear that the Government are trying to take the heart out of local authority support for education, and there is no evidence that such a strategy will improve standards.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) said, a key element to the success of the London Challenge was a focus on leadership and support for teaching and learning. In supporting leadership in that way, clusters of schools were established and encouraged to work together. Headteachers from good and outstanding schools were chosen as “consultant heads” who could share experience and expertise with others in the area. The language and ethos of the London Challenge were positive. A highly experienced advisory team provided tailored support for each school and local authority, but at the heart of the London Challenge was collaboration, which sits in stark contrast to current education policy. The Government’s plan to force schools to become academies is perhaps the most blatant example of that policy. Instead of enhanced local co-operation, we will, I fear, see schools existing in an increasingly competitive environment—on recruitment, admissions and salaries. As one local headteacher said to me:

“There is collaboration already. We have natural partnerships where geography is key. Academisation potentially shatters years of trust and joint working.”

I supported the original purpose of academies in the provision of much-needed, targeted support for failing schools, which has in many cases transformed children’s lives, especially in London. However, as the evidence shows, the reality of academies is that they are neither inherently good nor bad and thus should not be bluntly imposed on all schools.

The Government simultaneously want to erode a key source of support in the education system—local authorities. As Conservative Councillor Roy Perry notes:

“Ofsted has rated 82% of council-maintained schools as good or outstanding, so it defies reason that councils are being portrayed as barriers to improvement.”

There is no compelling evidence that dismantling the role of local authorities in this regard will improve educational attainment. What is more, evidence from 2009 showed that English schools were already the third most autonomous in the world, yet were still ranked 23rd in terms of global pupil performance.

So instead of fixating on school governance, the Government need to ensure that schools have the tools they need to do the job. This means ripping up their flawed proposals for academies and focusing instead on key issues, such as teaching standards and recruitment. As the chief inspector of schools has noted:

“We’ve seen a significant difference in the quality of teaching between the South and the Midlands and the North” and a significant difference in the quality of leadership. Yet we know that the surest way to improve our children’s attainment is by raising the standards, standing and status of teaching in our schools.

We need to be much more ambitious about improving teaching, dealing with teacher shortages, ending the use of unqualified teachers in our classrooms, and tackling low pay, which deters far too many good young teachers from going to and staying in the toughest schools. We know that there is an emerging two-tier system where some schools are more able to recruit good teachers than others. It is surely time to look at financial incentives to encourage trainees to move to and work in those regions that most need their talent. To this end, the new National Teaching Service, which will see 1,500 of the country’s top teaching talent matched to the schools that most need them, should be accelerated urgently. Currently the service does not go far enough, with the aim of only 100 teachers to the north-west by 2016.

Teach First should work far harder to expand beyond London, where it sends a whopping 40% of its teachers. It is time to ensure that training is not overly concentrated in London, which has huge cost and time implications for teaching staff based in remote and rural areas, excluding many from this vital opportunity to learn.

I recognise that the answers to these problems will not be found easily, but surely the growing divide in regional academic attainment can no longer be left unchallenged. Indeed, I contend that nothing we do in this place matters more than ensuring that no child is left behind. If education, education, education is a priority, the answer must, in part, be teachers, teachers, teachers. What has worked in London can work elsewhere. It can work in Yorkshire, but it will need real investment and sustained political commitment. It is time for a new, bold and ambitious target to end the postcode lottery in educational attainment. We have a duty to
ensure that every child has access to the best possible education. It should not matter where they were born. No child should be left behind.

8.3 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing it and for setting out so passionately and in such a well informed way her desire, which we all share, to see no child left behind and the regional gaps that have occurred in this country closed.

Members on both sides of the House will surely agree that raising school standards in our part of the country is essential if we are to raise the life chances of our constituents’ children. It is not just that in Yorkshire and the Humber our education has been left behind; average earnings tend to be lower than they are nationally. There is a link between the life chances of someone 20 or 30 years after they were at school, and their performance and the support they received while they were at school.

As has been set out, results in Yorkshire are among the lowest in England, so Yorkshire is at the frontline of the education debate. The question is how to deliver the Government’s twin aims: to raise standards for all and to close the gap between rich and poor. Teach First has just released research showing that poor children are four times as likely to go to an inadequate primary school or one that requires improvement than children from wealthier backgrounds, and poorer children are only half as likely to go to an outstanding primary as their richer peers. In Bradford, for instance, the schools that serve the poorest have a one in three chance of being inadequate or in need of improvement.

Teaching lower income children is more challenging and requires higher skills, yet the system penalises professionals who seek to go where they are needed most. Schools can end up, as the Sutton Trust reported last week, putting barriers in the way of poorer children getting places at their schools. According to the trust, more than 1,500 primary schools have socially selective intakes.

As the hon. Lady rightly said, we need to work constantly to improve the incentives for the best teachers to teach in the poorest communities and be rewarded for staying there. As has been said, however, there is not just a social divide, but a geographical one. As Sir Michael Wilshaw, the head of Ofsted, said on 1 December:

“We are, in effect, a nation divided at the age of 11. We are witnessing an educational division of the country, with schools performing well overall in the South but struggling to improve in the North and the Midlands. If schools north of this line were performing as well as those south of it, 160,000 more pupils would be in a good or outstanding secondary school.”

In the east riding, 76% of pupils attend a primary school that is rated good or outstanding, a figure that falls to 68% for secondary schools. Like the hon. Lady, I would like to pay tribute to those phenomenally hard-working teachers who are succeeding, and those who continue to work flat-out to try and raise standards in schools that are not succeeding. We owe it to our constituents to improve the situation.

It is important to say that the divide in educational attainment was not created under this Government. There has long been a divide. We need to find a way—ideally, in education policy—with the maximum consensus possible, of creating a framework of incentives to get the best teachers to the places where they are needed most, and which can transcend any general election, regardless of who wins it. Without that, the divide will continue and there will be unnecessary tinkering and disruption of improvements to the education system.

With that in mind, it would be unfortunate if the 2022 deadline for total academisation of schools led our energies to be deployed debating that rather than how to improve teaching and thus standards of education. Whether such a policy was necessary or wise I will not debate today, although I note that many colleagues have already expressed some doubts. As Sir Michael also said in his speech in December, “we should not waste time in tendentious arguments about the relative merits of academies but rather on how we can make them work. Academies, like all schools, work if they have good leaders and good teaching. If they lack them, they do not.”

Sir Michael is absolutely right. It cannot be emphasised too often that the key to raising performance and narrowing the attainment gap between rich and poor lies, as the hon. Lady rightly said, in the quality of teaching, and that is what we need to focus on. One of the best sources in this area is the work of Professor Eric Hanushek of Stanford University. It is shocking how much difference there is between how much a child learns in the classroom of a teacher at the 90th percentile compared with how little they learn with a teacher at the 10th percentile. Hanushek has calculated that one of the teachers at the top will give their students an entire year’s worth of additional learning in one year, compared with those near the bottom in teaching quality. That is, they advance their pupils’ understanding 150% compared with what might be expected from an average teacher in that time, while their least talented counterparts help their students to make only 50% of the progress that would be expected.

As if that was not important enough, Professor Hanushek has found that the effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, who do not have the other support and succour to help them make up for an inadequate teacher. These findings not only underline the importance of good recruitment and teacher training models, which are critical, but show that we need to ensure that the best teachers work where they are needed most. Academies’ flexibility to design attractive packages to recruit and retain good teachers has the potential to help here.

I also believe that the new National Teaching Service—the hon. Lady referred to it—which will be piloted in the north-west this autumn, could make a significant contribution once it is rolled out to our area. By the end of this Parliament, it will see 1,500 of the country’s best teachers assigned to the schools that need them the most. To support those teachers in their new roles, a package of incentives is being offered, including help with relocation, assistance with commuting costs and access to prestigious leadership development programmes, as well as great mentors.

Underlying this, there is also a pressing need to ensure that our education system is structured so that it does not conspire to drive talented individuals away from underperforming schools. There are many idealistic teachers and leaders who want to help at the educational frontline, but for too long they have been incentivised...
to teach elsewhere. Why? Because in our high-stakes accountability system, a headteacher working in a successful school in a prosperous area has long been less likely to be fired, found wanting or publicly criticised than one who opts to work somewhere such as Knowsley, where not a single secondary school was rated good or outstanding in 2015.

That is why I am so encouraged that the new White Paper, “Educational excellence everywhere”, proposes the introduction of “improvement periods” during which schools under new leadership will not be inspected by Ofsted. For schools that have been judged to require improvement, new heads will have a grace period of around 30 months before inspectors visit again, and the same goes for new academy sponsors. Ministers deserve credit for addressing that issue and tackling the perverse incentives that deterred good leaders from taking on some of the toughest challenges.

We also need to boost effective partnership working between schools, as the hon. Lady said, something that can be a particular problem in a large, sparsely populated rural area such as the east riding, with significant distances between schools. If I was to draw a circle around some of the schools on the coast in my constituency, I would of course find that half the area from which they might seek support or collaboration is in the North sea, and they are unlikely to get any help from that direction. School leaders could be encouraged to sign up to partnerships by introducing Sir Michael Wilshaw’s proposed “Excellent Leadership” awards. The Government have resisted that, but we need by every means, from status to pay and any other structures we have, to level the playing field so that we encourage people to go where they are most needed.

I must touch on fair funding, which is one of the most significant issues. The hon. Lady mentioned London, which receives significantly more funding in general—inner London certainly does—than the rest of the country. The Association of School and College Leaders found that the top 10 local authority areas in the country get an average of £6,300 per pupil, and the bottom 10 get £4,200. That is based not on need or deprivation, but on historical anomaly. Therefore, I must again congratulate the Government on grasping that. I ask colleagues on both sides of the House to celebrate the fact that the Government are moving towards a fair funding formula that will mean that a rural school in the east riding or an inner-city school in Bradford can expect to have a formula that is transparent and that reasonably seeks to provide fair funding for everybody. With that, I am pleased to bring my remarks to a close.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest that Members should speak for up to 10 minutes, which will allow us to get everybody in.

8.14 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for permitting me to speak in this important debate. I will keep my remarks short. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing this debate about education in our region, a topic that is arguably more critical than any other to the success of our constituents and, in particular, our region’s future generations.

As the Member of Parliament for Bradford South, I have raised on a number of occasions in this House, including in my maiden speech, the question of educational standards in the city of Bradford. Why? Because I know personally just how transformational education can be, and how it has the potential to broaden horizons more than any other tool available to us as a society. Very sadly, right across the board, too many of my constituents and their children do not have access to the high standard of educational provision that they rightly deserve.

I could illustrate the underperformance in the education system in my constituency with a raft of statistics, but I find that the following two most disturbingly reveal the position. First, of the 650 constituencies across the UK, Bradford South comes 609th when we consider the percentage of individuals with level 4 qualifications or above. Secondly, Bradford South is ranked 74th in constituency league tables for those without any qualifications whatsoever.

So what is to be done? The city of Bradford faces an almost unparalleled set of challenges, none of which can be solved easily. However, with cross-agency working by all those in the public sector and, importantly, with the help of those in our business community, we can at least begin to turn the tide. I want to touch on the important role of our business community in helping to improve standards in our schools. Why? Because at a time of the first real-terms cuts to school funding in well over a generation, help from our business community is becoming increasingly vital.

When I spoke recently at a session of the Bradford chamber of commerce, along with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), among the headline issues was educational standards. Arguably, our business community knows how poor standards hold back my constituents, our communities and, by extension, business success. If the northern powerhouse is to mean anything at all, we need extra investment in education. I therefore look forward to working with businesses big and small, the Bradford chamber of commerce, my local authority and other partners in the coming months and years to tackle underperformance and low educational achievement in Bradford and the wider region.

8.17 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who has rapidly carved out a reputation in the House as a strong supporter of Bradford, and Bradford South in particular. I commend her on everything she has been doing in that regard. I also want to thank the Minister for recently visiting two schools in my constituency, where he saw at first hand the education situation in Bradford and met the local authority people, which I think was very useful.

It is important to say right from the word go that there are some fantastic schools in Yorkshire, and indeed in my constituency, and I am very pleased that the Minister was able to see that for himself when he visited. We should not get too bogged down in doom and gloom, because there are some very good schools with excellent standards for pupils right across the region. However, it is perfectly clear that standards are not good enough as a whole. Yorkshire—and particularly my local authority district of Bradford, which has suffered low attainment for many years—is ranked lowest in the country for educational attainment. A recent report by
Bradford Council’s children’s services scrutiny committee ranked Bradford 139th for the number of seven-year-olds achieving level 2B-plus in reading—in writing it was 123rd, and in maths it was 137th—out of 150 local authorities nationally. For pupils achieving the higher “gold standard” level 4 in reading, writing and maths combined at the end of primary education, Bradford was ranked 142nd out of 152 local authorities.

Although some areas are showing signs of improvement—the performance of children at key stage 1 is improving faster than the national average—unfortunately in some areas progress does not seem to be moving in the right direction, with Bradford remaining 3% behind the national average for attainment by the end of year 2. The authority fell two places to 128th between 2014 and 2015 for pupils making more than two levels of progress in reading, remaining 2% behind the national average.

There is also a worrying trend in the disparities between boys and girls’ attainment in Bradford schools, as there is around the country. The recent report by Bradford children’s services scrutiny committee showed that while 71% of girls in Bradford achieved a good level of development by the age of five, only 53% of boys achieved the same. We must look at the widening performance gap between boys and girls in our schools; we cannot just allow it to continue to flourish.

The lower educational attainment in Bradford is also seen at secondary school level. In September 2015 the proportion of students attaining five A* to C GCSEs, including English and maths, in Bradford was 44.6%, whereas the national average was 52.8%. Bradford is ranked 148th out of 151 local authorities for GCSE performance. Clearly, those figures show that the position is not good enough. Pupils get only one go at their education, and we have not got time to try to turn round this oil tanker, because all the pupils now going through our schools deserve the best possible education, and it is clear from those results that they are not getting it.

Bradford has some features that I hope the Minister will accept make it a special case. There is certainly an issue around language. Many pupils start school from a much lower base, and particularly from a much lower language base, than those in other parts of the country, and that must be given some recognition. In many schools in Bradford, teachers face very difficult circumstances.

We should also mention parental responsibility, which does not get mentioned often enough. Parents have a responsibility to make sure their children are up to a certain standard before they start school. Often, teachers find that children starting school are below the level that is expected of them at that age. We should not absolve parents of responsibility in this; they have a role to play in the education of their children and in helping teachers to bring children up to a particular standard.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of that is about parents having access to local libraries, so that they can read with their children?

Philip Davies: Yes, I very much agree, and I am sorry that Labour-controlled Bradford Council does not seem to believe in that as much as the hon. Lady does.

Bradford Council has raised the funding formula for schools with me. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s view of the formula, and of whether it takes into consideration the current standard of educational attainment in places such as Bradford and makes sure that no action is taken that puts that already poor educational attainment under further pressure. The consultation is only at the first stage, and we are unaware of the numbers or the possible effects of the new regime, but concerns have been expressed that the parameters being set will disadvantage schools in the Bradford district. Need and pupil mobility are not necessarily guaranteed to be part of the new formula. As outlined by Ofsted, the Bradford district, in particular, has high levels of need, as well as the highest number of in-year admissions in the country. Attainment standards are already below average in the district, and if the new formula does not acknowledge the specific challenges there, schools could be unfairly disadvantaged and face a tougher task in addressing those challenges.

It is important to mention that the big disparity between schools in my constituency and schools in other parts of the Bradford district. We must not let schools coast in what might be seen as better areas, where educational standards are not as low, because we are focusing too much on the schools with the lowest attainment. We must make sure that all schools do their best for every pupil, but we sometimes overlook that priority.

Leadership is an important issue in our schools. We must do much more to attract the very best leaders and headteachers to our schools. My hon. Friend the Minister visited Beckfoot School in Bingley, which has an outstanding headteacher, who has transformed it into one of the best schools in not just the Bradford district but the country, and it is now rated as outstanding. We need to find ways of getting more leaders into the most difficult schools.

Graham Stuart: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about attracting great leaders into Yorkshire? We need to do more to grow our own, and we need to build the systems to do that. Attracting them from outside is probably not going to be the primary answer; growing our own is.

Philip Davies: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a good point, as he always does on education matters.

I emphasise that we have some fantastic schools and some fantastic teachers, who are all working incredibly hard. I am very pro-teacher. My dad is a retired teacher, so I will certainly not criticise them; they work very hard in sometimes very difficult circumstances. I am not often a big fan of all the teachers in the National Union of Teachers, but teachers on the whole work incredibly hard, and it is important that we do not criticise them when we are discussing some of these educational standards, because they often operate in very difficult circumstances.

Finally, I was struck by the good point the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) made about opportunities being harder to come by for people in the north than for those in places such as London, and I would like to float an idea. We often give student loans to people who want to progress their career through the
Jo Cox: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I am going to finish; otherwise, Mr Deputy Speaker will get annoyed with me, and I do not want that to happen.

I hope that the Conservative party, which I believe is about social mobility, will look more imaginatively at what we can do to help kids from poorer backgrounds who are perhaps not the most academic to access the best opportunities. I would like to think that student loans could be extended to them for their benefit.

8.27 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing this important debate. This issue is important for a number of reasons. First, unless we address the regional disparities in educational attainment, this country will continue to become more divided. Secondly, that attainment gap wastes the talent of young people in our communities.

I pay tribute to the great work going on in Barnsley. Fantastic people across our community are working incredibly hard to give our young people a bright future and to help close the attainment gap. I am thinking of people such as Chris Webb and his great team at Barnsley College, which is rated outstanding and ranks as one of the best further education colleges in the country. I am also thinking of our great headteachers, including Kate Davies, Simon Barber, Dave Whitaker, Nick Bowen, Diane Greaves and Paul Haynes, and of great teachers such as Mat Wright, who I met during the Easter recess at the Barnsley teaching and learning festival. They are people with great passion for improving the lives of young people in Barnsley.

Teaching is a hugely valuable form of public service, but we all know that huge challenges come with it. In Barnsley, less than a fifth of pupils on free school meals get five A to C grade GCSEs. That damning statistic represents a massive waste of talent. I know that the young people in Barnsley do not lack talent. I think of the young people I know in the Barnsley youth choir; the young people I have met who are involved with the community work of Barnsley football club; and the young people I meet when I visit primary schools in my constituency who have the most curious minds and often ask the most brilliant and challenging questions. It is clear when I meet these young people that they are being failed, and the talk of how prosperous Britain has become and how well things are going simply rings hollow to those young people who are being failed by the system. I want to address three areas where progress needs to be made if we are to change that, namely poverty, aspiration and leadership.

First, I recently wrote a report on child poverty that found that more than one in five children in my Barnsley Central constituency grow up in poverty. There is no doubt about the crippling effect that poverty has on educational attainment. Poverty is a complex and difficult issue to solve, but some of the Government’s measures over the past six years have contributed to children in my constituency remaining in or falling into poverty. I fear that the Government’s approach has best been represented by their ambivalence towards independent evidence that the Government’s policies are hitting the poorest hardest.

Bold and practical measures can be taken to reduce child poverty and boost educational attainment. For instance, we know that promoting the bonds between parents and children in their early years not only leads to happier and more prosperous lives, but saves considerable future spending on the cost of family failure. At present, the Government spend too much money dealing with the symptoms of the problems. Our priority should be to shift spending to investing in preventing the causes of social problems. By shifting resources to targeted early years intervention, we can help tackle the root causes of social and emotional problems among children and young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) has done great work in that area, and the cross-party manifesto, “The 1001 Critical Days”, sets out a policy framework from the period of conception to the age of two, because services and children’s centres need to be co-ordinated in a whole-family approach, working with all members of a family involved in the care, education and health of a child. Louise Casey’s troubled families programme has been pioneering that approach with success.

Secondly, poverty in my community is often intrinsically linked to poverty of aspiration among young people. In Kingston upon Thames, many children are the sons and daughters of barristers, surgeons and media executives, but in Kingstone in Barnsley, children are more likely to be the sons and daughters of barmaids, cleaners and call centre workers. When they are growing up, too many children in Barnsley do not comprehend the opportunities that could be available to them. They do not know that they are this country’s talent of tomorrow. Raising aspiration will not be an easy task, but better careers education and career guidance are clearly part of the solution.

The recommendations of the Gatsby Charitable Foundation’s “Good Career Guidance” report should be looked at more closely. It states: “Every school and college should have an embedded programme of career education and guidance that is known and understood by pupils, parents, teachers, governors and employers.”

I could not agree more, but we are still some way off that goal.

Jo Cox: My hon. Friend is making a powerful, well informed and passionate speech. Does he agree that, unless we tackle some of the regional differences that hold back children in constituencies such as his and mine, any talk of rebalancing the economy will lead to nothing?
Dan Jarvis: Absolutely agree. In every respect, it is a great thing to be born in the great county of Yorkshire. That is something about which we can unite. Interjection. It is something about which many of us can unite. Mr Deputy Speaker. I have to admit to the House that I did not enjoy that privilege, but my hon. Friend makes an important point. For so many Labour Members—other Members can speak for themselves—the basic, fundamental principle that brought us into politics was that where someone grows up should not determine where they end up. That is the essence of this important debate.

Philip Davies: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need for better careers advice. Does he agree that it is also important for people to have realistic but inspirational role models so that they can see that there is a path to a better life and that they can achieve what they want, whatever their background? A good role model is a great way of demonstrating that to people.

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. One thing that I have observed about the culture in Yorkshire and the Humber is that people are often quite reticent about talking themselves up. We have a real responsibility to the next generation of talent. When I visit schools in my constituency, I make the point that people from Barnsley Central have gone around the world, achieved great things and shaped the world in which we live today. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we all have a responsibility in our communities to make the powerful point that the most amazing success stories have come out of our area, and we should never be shy about championing the success of people from our region.

I have reflected on the Gatsby Charitable Foundation’s career guidance report. It is also worth reflecting briefly on the recent report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility. That excellent report makes detailed comment about improving the transition from school to work for young people. One recommendation, that the Government should look closely at, is for Ofsted to place greater emphasis on the provision of careers education.

Graham Stuart: I chair the all-party group on careers information, advice and guidance. Schools are encouraged by the Government to work towards a quality in careers standard, but they are not obliged to do so. In a high-stakes accountability system, in too many cases they will not do the right thing until that is joined with the system. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should make it mandatory for every school to work towards that standard and maintain it?

Dan Jarvis: Absolutely agree, and I will be interested to hear what the Minister is able to say when he responds.

Finally, I want to talk about leadership. If we are to close the attainment gap, we will need brilliant headteachers leading teams of excellent, highly motivated teachers. If we look at the recent schools White Paper, however, we see that the Government show a dearth of ambition in that area. There is a chapter headed “Great teachers—everywhere they’re needed”, but despite that promising title, there is little in the way of proposals for how we can get more great teachers. Instead, the main focus of the White Paper is the plan for the forced academisation of every school, a divisive policy for which there is absolutely no evidence that it will improve standards.

On a more positive note, I was encouraged by the Government’s announcement in the Budget of a northern powerhouse schools strategy. A number of measures sounded promising, including additional funding being made available to support turnaround activity and the report on transforming education, which is to be led by Sir Nick Weller. Since then, however, I have been disappointed by the lack of detail that has been forthcoming. The schools White Paper did not mention the northern powerhouse schools strategy once.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen said, Yorkshire needs a strategy for improvement, similar to the pioneering scheme that we saw in London. I would like the northern powerhouse schools strategy to progress with the ambition of generating an improvement similar to the one seen in London. Sadly, we do not have enough information about the strategy to know whether that is what we are looking at. I ask the Government to provide more information to Members on the strategy, and also to publish the terms of reference for Sir Nick’s review.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker—I was encouraged by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on introducing the debate. It is quite clear from what she and other speakers have said that there will be a wide element of agreement throughout the House on this subject. I noted that she had one or two little political digs—that is fair enough, as even I have been known to criticise the Government occasionally—but she did say that there had been 30 years of neglect, which perhaps divides the spoils evenly between the various parties. I do not want to paint a particularly black picture, because I am always conscious of wanting to be something of an ambassador for my constituency. However, reading the comments of the Social Market Foundation, many of its points hit home. It states: “Regional disparities persist, with some areas such as…Yorkshire and the Humber…falling further behind and London’s performance surging over the last three decades.”

Those are not particularly encouraging points for our region.

I have read the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report. As Members will know, the commission is chaired by Alan Milburn, the former Labour Minister. One particular point hit home: “Social mobility for my generation speeded up in the 1950’s,”
due to the move
“if you like from blue collar to white collar”,
which drove demand for new skills. We seem to have
failed to deliver such new skills to many of our young
people. The move from blue to white-collar jobs has
been typical of many towns, particularly northern towns,
all of which tended to have a core industry. In the
Grimsby and Cleethorpes area it was fishing, down the
road in Scunthorpe it was steel and elsewhere it was
shipbuilding or mining. Those industries mopped up all
the young men coming out of school who lacked many
of the skills that are now essential even for much
unskilled work.

I have read other documents to prepare for this debate.
Interestingly, whether they are from a left or right-leaning
think-tank, a similar picture emerges. For politicians, it
is easy to get into a bit of a knockabout about academies,
grammar schools or whatever, but as I said, I think we
will achieve a certain amount of harmony tonight.

It is interesting to note that in North East Lincolnshire,
which makes up three quarters of my constituency, the
local authority was something of a trailblazer for
academisation. It was the Conservative-Liberal coalition,
of which I was a member, that encouraged and supported
that change. I should also point out that we were
couraged, cajoled and persuaded by the Labour central
Government to push our schools in that direction. The
academies we have established under Oasis, Tollbar, the
David Ross Foundation and other organisations have,
on the whole, been a considerable success, and we
should note the leading part that those organisations
have played.

Diana Johnson: The Labour Government pushed
academies for particular areas—the areas of social
disadvantage that we are talking about this evening,
where schools were not performing and needed a fresh
start. It was not about the academisation of the whole
educational establishment, which is what the Government
now seem to be proposing. Labour’s was a tailored
approach that, in some cases, was very successful.

Martin Vickers: It is because of the success of the
policy, which the hon. Lady acknowledges, that this
Government and the coalition Government have chosen
to expand it and to have more and more academies.

Melanie Onn: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that
the 100% academisation of secondary schools across
North East Lincolnshire has resulted in no material
improvement in GCSE results?

Martin Vickers: I would not necessarily agree with
that, because the league tables are only one measure of
success. The work of the various organisations that are
running the academies in North East Lincolnshire is
opening up further opportunities for our young people.

Melanie Onn: Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise
that the proportion of pupils achieving grades A to C
has reduced from 75% in 2012 to 57% in 2015? Those
are the figures for schools in Cleethorpes.

Martin Vickers: I take note of what the hon. Lady
says, but this is a much broader issue than just GCSEs.
Opportunities are opening up for our young people,
encouraged by some of the sponsors of the academies.

North East Lincolnshire has some excellent schools
and dedicated staff, yet, as the hon. Lady has just
pointed out, it still has some poor educational attainment.
I hope that in summing up, the Minister will give some
solutions to that conundrum.

Leadership has been mentioned. Sir Michael Wilshaw
has spoken of the “steady hand of leadership”. Governors,
headteachers, principals and chief executives are all
important parts of the mix in delivering our schools. In
days gone by, governors were often appointed by local
authorities. I remember serving on many school governing
bodies. Quite often, someone would say, “Such and
such a school needs a governor. Can you go along?”
When I replied, “I can’t. It’s a Wednesday afternoon
and I’m at work”, they would say, “It doesn’t matter.
Just turn up now and again.” We do not need that
approach any more. We need a much more professional
team of governors, because the role of the governing
body is much more extensive, and rightly so. Governors
are a crucial part of the leadership of our schools.

Just to be slightly contentious towards the end of my
speech, I will mention those terrible words “grammar
schools”. North Lincolnshire Council and North East
Lincolnshire Council are right up against the border of
Lincolnshire County Council, which still has selection
and grammar schools. The point I want to make is not
necessarily that those schools are excellent, although
places like Caistor Grammar School are indeed excellent
schools that rank very highly at national level. It is that
many parents in my constituency, and indeed in the
constituency of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby
(Melanie Onn), who are only in their 30s or 40s and
may be professional people, choose to go out of
the district to send their children to grammar schools
because that is what they think will bring academic
excellence. Given that they are 30 or 40 years old, they
will never have experienced grammar schools themselves,
but they still want to send their children to a grammar
school.

A Conservative Government should, above all, believe
in freedom and opportunity. If an institution wants to
convert into a grammar school or a chain of academies
wants one of its schools to look for academic excellence
and become a grammar school, I think the Government
should allow that. I went to a bilateral school, which
allowed a certain element of selection. The Government
might like to consider that as a compromise.

I reiterate that we have a dedicated team of teachers
in our schools in North and North East Lincolnshire,
and excellent leadership, but we need to get more and
better teachers—leading teachers—into our schools to
give our young people the opportunities that they deserve
just as much as those in more successful regions.

8.50 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure
to follow the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin
Vickers). In different but similar ways, we share some of
the same challenges when it comes to offering our
young people and children ambition for what they can
achieve, as often they do not have it locally on their
doorstep to reach out and touch. That is such an
important part of children’s aspirations—whether they
can see themselves in some of the jobs that others take
for granted. If one school in Don Valley ended up with
half a dozen Cabinet members, people would say it was a conspiracy rather than just an opportunity given to some.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) for securing this debate. I have been an MP living in Yorkshire and serving a Yorkshire constituency for almost 19 years. I also speak as a mum, as my children went to local schools in Doncaster. When I was a new MP in 1997, I remember there were dilapidated primary schools with outside toilets. It has to be said that the loss of jobs in mining and manufacturing cast a long shadow over children’s potential. Back then, it cut me to the quick to hear a headteacher question whether it was worth introducing computers to schools, as the jobs that used such skills were beyond pupils’ expectations.

It is of huge concern to me that, as well as my region having a high percentage of young people who are not in education, employment or training, Ofsted states that my region “lags behind the rest of the country in its task to prepare young people for the future.”

As my hon. Friend said, Yorkshire and the Humber has slipped over the decades from a hardly inspiring seventh out of 10 regions in 1970 to 10th out of 10 in 2013-14. In decades gone by, when manual jobs were plentiful, a 16-year-old could go straight from school to work without any or with only a few qualifications—it may have been to a low-paid job, but it was probably a job for life. That world no longer exists. There were better paid volume jobs in one industry that dominated the town economically and socially. We need the Government to understand post-industrial towns in Yorkshire and the north of England such as Doncaster—towns that globalisation seems to have passed by.

Education is a life-changing force. I know: it was for me. Too many children from backgrounds like mine—from ordinary working-class families—have no expectation of going to university or learning beyond 16. As someone who never knew my father and was the child of an alcoholic mother, school was all too often my refuge, a world I could embrace, from the subjects I loved to the activities such as sport, music and drama. By the time I was 18 I had lived away from home twice, during my O-levels and A-levels. Without doubt, my comprehensive girls’ school altered my path in life. It raised my aspirations, and, after attending one of the country’s first tertiary colleges, I went to university.

London and the south-east have seen results improve in recent years, but it is clear that Yorkshire and the Humber has, as Ofsted bluntly puts it, “persistently underperformed”. The truth is that the problem starts before children start school or even pre-school. Postcodes are a factor, but parents are the most important influence on their children. They shape their world, making many decisions—or not—every week that will have an impact on their child’s development. There is no such thing as a perfect parent, but confident and engaged parenting makes a difference.

The Government have continued a policy that started under Labour by offering free additional pre-school hours for two-year-olds; the offer is available for looked-after children, disabled children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. With the last group, I wonder what the parents are doing while their child is in nursery. That time would seem to be an ideal opportunity to support the parents in whatever activity is likely to help them and their child’s start in life. I understand that the take-up has not been as good as expected, and we must ensure that its provision and cost is making a difference.

Louise Casey is an old friend of mine, and I worked with her to tackle antisocial behaviour, and on the Respect programme, when I was a Home Office Minister. Social inclusion, family intervention, troubled family programmes—whatever the title under different Governments over the past 20 years, it is recognised that during the early years it is crucial to offset negatives with positives where we can. We must address how well early years or family interventions are working in and out of school. How can we share best practice and break down the barriers and the silo thinking that still exist among partner agencies?

Comparisons with similar neighbourhoods are another good way to show what can be achieved and leave no room for excuses. In 2015 in Doncaster, one in three children attended primary schools that were neither good nor outstanding. In Barnsley, however, 81% of pupils are in good or outstanding schools. I am pleased that Mayor Jones recognises the importance of leaving no child in Doncaster behind, and we are backing an education commission to address why Doncaster is at the bottom of the attainment league table—hard questions need to be answered. So much of education is out of the hands of local authorities, so who do I or concerned parents turn to apart from a regional schools commissioner?

For many children the move to secondary school is a key transition in which they either sink or swim. How hard must it be to move to year 7 if by age 10 or 11 a child cannot read and write well enough to cope, and ends up being pigeon-holed when long-term choices are made at 14? The Government should seriously consider earlier intervention, or even delaying the move to key stage 3 until every effort has been made to turn the situation around for those children.

As with primary schools, secondary schools in Doncaster must make more progress, with just over a third of students attending a good or outstanding school compared with 79% of pupils in Sheffield. The Government need to understand some of the difficulties that towns like Doncaster face. Not enough schools offer 14-year-olds diversity and a quality vocational equivalent to a more academic path. Short of modelling schools on the German system—I would prefer that to a grammar school system—I see no other way than expecting schools and other learning providers to collaborate to ensure that positive choices are not undermined by bad timetabling or lack of transportation. However, I cannot see that happening in the current fragmented environment.

Jo Cox: My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful and personal speech, which is a testament to her desire—and that of many children—to get on and achieve great things. Does she agree that although constituencies such as hers and mine, and many across Yorkshire and Humber, need specific localised interventions, that goes directly against the centralising competitive tendencies of this Government in education policy?

Caroline Flint: I agree with my hon. Friend. We cannot have everything defined by Whitehall, even in the shape of a regional schools commission, which is basically what this is.
The recent area-based review of further education colleges in South Yorkshire seemed to happen in total isolation given what was happening in school sixth forms, which makes no sense at all. A number of businesses are engaged in our schools, but I will return to what I said earlier: London has its challenges but it has its opportunities too. As an avid reader of the Evening Standard, I am jealous of the corporate and individual resources that have backed the various campaigns to get London reading, or get young people on apprenticeships. If someone wants to become an intern or gain work experience, whatever housing they live in, being in London has huge advantages—on that issue I have common cause with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). Provincial towns such as Doncaster and many others have to fight much harder to provide anything similar to transform young people’s aspirations.

We may have more teachers than ever before, but they are not always the right teachers in the right places. The Government have failed to meet their own recruitment targets for four years—was recently investigated by the Public Accounts Committee. One primary headteacher told me that a recent job advert she posted online joined 35 other adverts for primary school teachers locally. A secondary headteacher told me that another school in the region was offering a starting salary that they could not compete with, in order to hold on to an excellent Teach First graduate.

Because teachers do not have the same terms and conditions at academy schools, that can result in a form of poaching that does not help the schools that need the best teachers to get them. It does not surprise me that it is easier to recruit newly qualified teachers in big cities, because—let us be honest—there are often more exciting for young professionals than some of our towns. I want the Government to consider those barriers and seek to get more good teachers to our provincial towns where the need has been identified. The Government could recognise those shortages, look at the pattern, and offer new rewards or incentives for teachers to apply for jobs in those areas. This issue is important because life chances should not be determined by someone’s postcode or who their parents are, but in Yorkshire and Humber—and across the UK—there is clearly a hell of a long way to go.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest we keep speeches to eight minutes to give everybody a fair amount of time.

8.59 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). It was powerful not only in the content of its suggestions but in its description of the importance of education and its ability to transform lives when we get it right. It underlined why we need to get it right, which sadly we are not doing in too many ways, as demonstrated by the gap between north and south.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing this debate. Two years ago, I started a contribution in the House with the words: “Mind the gap”. Sadly, we are here again. Last time, I was talking about the Chancellor’s failure to rebalance our economy between the north and south—there has been no change there, despite the empty rhetoric about a northern powerhouse—but today we are discussing the wholly unacceptable fact that, whereas over 70% of pupils in London achieve five good GCSEs, the figure for Yorkshire and the Humber is just 63%.

Economic success and educational attainment are clearly linked. That was the conclusion of a study that has underpinned contributions from several hon. Members and it was the conclusion of Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty’s chief inspector, who, in a speech at the end of last year, said:

“There has been much talk about a ‘northern powerhouse’. To succeed, it will require astute leadership, complex regional alliances and billions of pounds spent on infrastructure. And what of education? All that money, all that commitment and optimism, will be wasted if the next generation is not educated sufficiently to take advantage of the opportunities presented by this initiative.”

It is not just that education drives economic success; economic success is critical to higher educational attainment. That point was made very clearly to me by the headteacher of one of Sheffield’s most successful secondary schools. It is in my constituency and is one of the top 100 in the country on GCSE results. His comments echoed the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley in an intervention. He said that “working with our outstanding sister school in London, I see a real difference in the level of aspiration held by the children and I think that this is an important factor. The children there are deprived but it is a different sort of deprivation. They are financially deprived but are surrounded by wealth and opportunities whereas in the North, entire communities have never really recovered from deindustrialisation.”

He is holding an “aspiration day” next month to do something about this but there is only so much he can do. The fact remains that there are far fewer skilled jobs outside London, far less investment, both public and private sector, and therefore much less opportunity. He estimates the number of children at his school with parents in professional occupations to be in single figures.

Yet rather than using the levers of public sector employment and investment pots to change this, the Government are moving in the opposite direction. They are starving local authorities in deprived areas of the money they need, in sharp contrast with wealthier areas; failing to come up with a coherent industrial strategy focused on the regions; and presiding over private sector jobs growth in London and the south-east at the expense of the regions. Indeed, they are adding to the problem by closing the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield and moving civil service jobs to London. We cannot separate the issue of our unbalanced economy from the imbalance in educational attainment. I hope the Minister will recognise that and, in responding, outline what joined-up discussions there are across Government to tackle the issue.

There are specific things that can be done to support schools in addressing the challenge of under-attainment. I was in touch with one of the primary heads in my constituency in advance of this debate—the head of one of the fastest improving schools in the country—and he made two suggestions for how the Government could act. I hope the Minister will comment on both. First, how will the new schools funding formula ensure a fair amount of time.

8.59 pm

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to improve attainment outside the south of England and those serving deprived communities? The early indications are that money might actually move away from deprived communities.

Secondly, the headteacher asked how we could alter admissions criteria to help disadvantaged children to access the best schools, given that people with more money are buying advantage by purchasing houses nearer the best schools, meaning that the gap, even within Yorkshire, is widening. We must act because it is simply not acceptable that, by virtue of growing up in Sheffield and not London, a child is less likely to do well at school.

What will not address the challenge of raising standards in our schools in Yorkshire and the Humber is, as others have said, the forced academisation programme. Academisation might be a useful distraction for the Government, but it is not an answer to underachievement. It is an issue on which I have received a lot of correspondence from constituents. The secondary head I mentioned earlier runs a very successful academy in my constituency. It is a great school and one that I am proud to work with, but the simple truth is that one size does not fit all.

My constituents have also raised serious concerns about teaching standards and conditions in a system that permits or even rewards the use of unqualified teachers; about the undermining of national pay structures; about the loss accountability, given the Government’s thrust towards multi-academy trusts to drive change; and about teacher morale, with further reorganisation to be forced on them. As others have said, there is no evidence that forced academisation will improve standards, and there is quite a lot of evidence to show the reverse. What it will be—the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) alluded to it—is a distraction, with time and resources taken away from the central task of improving the quality of our schools.

In the words of my constituent Kathryn:

“Schools and heads who have not chosen to become academies do not want it...The DFE does not have the capacity to convert those who have currently applied so why add an extra burden to a struggling department?”

What happened to the Government’s emphasis on freedom for headteachers? Another constituent, Jane, told me that she was leaving teaching, complaining that the Prime Minister

“talks of head teachers being in charge of academies instead of ‘bureaucrats’ from the authority getting in the way”,

yet she was

“not aware of outside control until we became an academy”.

We have already heard how, as things stand, Yorkshire and the Humber is losing out. This forced academisation agenda will only make things worse. Increasing numbers of Conservative Members and of Conservative councillors across the country are saying this, with even leaders of academy trusts saying it, too. I urge the Government to think again.

9.7 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I thank and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) for securing the debate. Along with the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I am happy to support her in this important debate. Indeed, it is good to see in their places colleagues of all parties representing our proud region.

I think you would probably agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is unusual to have a group of Yorkshire MPs debating something where Yorkshire is not performing well. We just have to think of the last Olympics, and just yesterday the Yorkshire pudding was crowned the best regional food in Britain. I gently say to Mr Deputy Speaker, a friend and colleague on the all-party group on rugby league, that the Lancashire hotpot came only 10th, which I think is rather unfair.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let me make a very clear point in gently reminding the hon. Gentleman that both Yorkshire teams are bottom of the league.

Greg Mulholland: We are not going to get into rugby league—otherwise I would have to remind Mr Deputy Speaker of what happened last season.

In all seriousness, it is appalling that educational attainment in Yorkshire and the Humber is the lowest in the country. To quote the report from the Social Mobility Foundation, our region has

“persistently underperformed compared to the national average”.

Even at primary school level, the report stated that Yorkshire and the Humber had

“disproportionately high numbers of low scoring pupils”.

I warmly welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) is now leading a commission for the Social Mobility Foundation, looking at inequalities in educational attainment. I hope that Ministers will take its conclusions very seriously and that it will lead to the collaborative working that other colleagues have highlighted. However, the simple fact of the current state of education seriously undermines the claims about the northern powerhouse. There cannot be a powerhouse in a region—there cannot be a powerhouse in a regional economy, in manufacturing and other industries, or in jobs—if there is failure, and what is happening now is a failure of education in our schools.

I must stress that my constituency contains some excellent schools which are performing extremely well. I am very lucky in that respect. I work closely with those schools, and I have to praise all the headteachers, governing bodies and staff who work so hard in them. Indeed, Leeds is doing better than other parts of the region in some respects, and last year Ofsted deemed its primary schools to be the best. However, Nick Hudson, the Ofsted regional director, pointed out in a letter that standards in reading, writing, maths and science were below the national average. So Leeds is doing well in terms of primary schools, although not so well in terms of secondary schools, but it is still not doing well enough.

This is not a party-political debate, but I am concerned about the direction of travel in the Department for Education. I certainly do not feel that what we have heard from the current ministerial team in the last year is what we need to hear. We have not been given the assurance for which we have asked, and which is required by the whole country, not just Yorkshire and the Humber, that the excellent pupil premium—which the coalition Government introduced to tackle a problem that is
clearly at the heart of some of the under-attainment in the region, namely the performance of pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds—will be continued and maintained.

We need to hear an assurance about school funding as a whole. According to the Institute of Education, there is a rise in demand for school places—there is certainly a huge rise in demand for them in Leeds—and a need for more teachers. That could lead to a crisis if it is not dealt with soon, but doing so will spread the funding further, and will therefore lead to a cut in the absence of further investment.

At this point, I must declare an interest. My wife is a qualified teacher, although she currently works as a teaching assistant because I am away and because of the demands on the family. I know from her school, which is also my daughter’s school, and from other heads, teachers, and teaching assistants in other schools, that there is no sense of anything resembling a collaborative approach on the part of the current ministerial team. Indeed, I am sorry to say that there is still real anger towards the Government, although perhaps a little less than there was. I am sorry to say that the name of the previous Secretary of State is still considered to be a dirty word by the people I know in the teaching profession.

The morale of teachers is of serious concern, and I do not think that Ministers take it seriously enough. The NASUWT surveyed 5,000 of its members, a very significant proportion, and found that 7% had “increased their reliance on prescription drugs”.

Teachers had turned to anti-depressants—10% said that they had gone to their doctors to obtain medication—while 14% had undergone counselling, and 5% had been admitted to hospital. Moreover, 79% reported feeling anxious about work, 86% reported having sleepless nights, and 73% said that they had suffered from low energy levels. There is no possibility of dealing with the current unacceptable level of attainment if teachers are not at the forefront, and are not feeling valued and supported.

The changes in standard assessment tests are creating an undesirable culture, not just among teachers but among our young people in secondary and, in particular, primary schools. The pressure that is being put on primary school pupils will certainly not drive up standards, and it is causing those young people to become stressed. I can tell the House this not just from the figures and surveys, which should be giving cause for concern, but as a father. I have a 10-year-old daughter, Isabel, who is in her all-important year 6. As a conscientious parent, I am having to tell her that she needs to take some time off and not do homework every single night.

I am also hearing from teachers in a number of schools that the league tables have a significant effect on morale, even when there are often good reasons for the results—for example, cohort issues resulting in a school not being at the top of the list. Teachers are also telling me that SATs results will be carried through into secondary schools, which will have a lasting effect on a pupil’s education. That is not what was intended—[Interruption.] The Minister is saying that that is not true. It is not what he intended, but it is what is happening. I am telling him this as a father and as someone who speaks to the people involved. This is not acceptable and it is not the way to drive up standards.

Similarly, we need change but we most certainly do not need a change to be introduced on the basis of some ideological drive or, frankly, of a gimmick in a manifesto from an election that took place a long time ago. The Government think that the answer is to turn all our schools into academies, and this has led to real anger and further damaged the morale of teachers and the teaching profession.

There are other issues relating to particular cohorts and groupings in our schools. One issue that certainly has resonance, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), is the need to do more to support those from certain ethnic minority backgrounds. I want to ask the Minister specifically whether he will consider restoring the ethnic minority achievement grant, which was designated to support ethnic minority pupils in dealing with certain issues in some of our constituencies. In parts of Leeds, as well as in other parts of Yorkshire and the Humber, we need to deal with particular issues in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. There are also real concerns about the funding for special educational needs provision, which continues to decline.

Melanie Onn: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that SEN children account for 65% of all exclusions across all school types?

Greg Mulholland: I do indeed. I was about to say that—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggested that Members should speak for up to eight minutes. The hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for 10, so I am sure that he must be coming to the end of his speech.

Greg Mulholland: Thank you for your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was about to say that pupils with special educational needs missed 8.2% of sessions, compared with 4.8% of those without SEN.

In conclusion, we need change. We need collaborative change: we need to work together in this House, with local authorities, with schools, with parents and with pupils, but that is not the approach being taken by the Government. I ask them to think again and to work with everyone here and everyone else I have just mentioned to turn around these figures so that we can see Yorkshire at the top of another league table in the years to come.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I should like to echo my colleagues’ congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox). This is exactly the kind of debate that we need to have in this Chamber, and exactly the kind of debate that we need the Government to listen and respond to. Along with everyone else who has spoken today, I am deeply concerned that when it comes to education, Yorkshire and the Humber lags behind the other areas of the country, but I do not see this simply as a Yorkshire and the Humber issue. As the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said, if children from our region are not allowed to reach their full potential, it will have a devastating economic impact on the entire country. That is why we need the Government to respond to this debate.

9.18 pm
Sadly, it is becoming more and more clear that a child’s prospects depend not only on their ability but on their economic circumstances and their postcode. The north and the midlands achieve persistently lower GCSE results than the south. As the report from the Social Market Foundation shows, in 2013-14, Yorkshire and the Humber had the lowest percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, at only 63% compared with more than 70% for London. The chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, commented in Ofsted’s most recent annual report that there is a “deeply troubling” north-south divide in secondary school performance, and that the consequences of failing to address it would be profound. Does anyone believe for one second that the disparity is down to the children’s ability?

Income inequality and deprivation of course play a huge part. The north and the midlands are more economically deprived than the south. In Yorkshire and the Humber, 19.9% of children are classed as being in poverty; that is significantly higher than the UK average. The SMF report clearly demonstrates the impact of deprivation on achievement at school. Only slightly more than 40% of children entitled to free school meals achieve five good GCSEs, compared with almost 70% of those not entitled. Furthermore, evidence shows that even the highest-achieving primary school leavers from economically deprived backgrounds are failing to reach their potential. Research from the Sutton Trust shows that one in three boys eligible for free school meals who got top marks at key stage 2 fail to achieve among the top 25% of marks at GCSE. That is more than double the proportion for those not on free school meals. For girls, the figure was only slightly better, at one in four.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that teachers in deprived schools are likely to be significantly less experienced than those in more advantaged schools. Teachers in the most advantaged 20% of schools have an average of 1.5 years’ more experience than those in the least advantaged. However, the underperformance of Yorkshire and Humber cannot solely be explained by economic deprivation. London has some of the most deprived areas in the country, yet academic achievement, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, soars above that of Yorkshire and the Humber.

The chief inspector of schools argued that there is nothing inevitable about the correlation between poverty and underachievement at school, pointing out that 84% of primary schools in the north and midlands are good or outstanding, which is virtually the same as in the south. In Yorkshire and the Humber, 80% of primary schools are good or outstanding, but only 66% of secondary schools achieve that rating. Indeed, 10% of secondary schools are deemed inadequate—another measure in which Yorkshire and the Humber sadly leads the field, or rather fails. While income inequality has long been recognised as contributing to underachievement at schools, we must acknowledge that geographic inequality is a crucial factor.

Successive Governments have not tackled the problem; indeed, it has got worse over the past 30 years. The SMF report states that where a child lives is a significantly more powerful factor in academic success for those born in 2000 than it was for those born in 1970. Yorkshire and the Humber has in fact fallen further behind, dropping from being the fourth-lowest performing area in 1985 to being the lowest in 2013. It cannot be acceptable for a child’s postcode to limit their chances in life in Britain in the 21st century. The Government must urgently tackle the problem.

Far from tackling inequality, the Government have instead overseen a crisis in education. Britain faces an overwhelming teacher shortage, rising class sizes and an exam and assessment regime that is in chaos. Capital spending on education has fallen by 34% in real terms under the Tories. The Government have missed their recruitment target for new trainee teachers for four years. The number of teachers leaving the profession ahead of retirement has risen by 11%. How can we seriously address inequality when the education system faces such strains? Rather than tackling the crisis, the Education Secretary berates children—sorry, I meant teachers; I do not know what she says to children. She berates teachers, accusing them of talking down their profession, but teachers are raising real concerns about the future of education in this country.

The Government’s much-vaunted White Paper contains not a single measure that will address any of the problems. Instead, it proposes the forced academisation of all schools, though there is no evidence whatever that it will improve standards. Indeed, the chief inspector of schools has made it abundantly clear that becoming an academy will not automatically lead to improvement, arguing that without strong teaching and leadership, standards will inevitably drop.

“whatever type of institution the nameplate on the door proclaims the school to be.”

It cannot be acceptable that children in Yorkshire and the Humber have their achievement limited because of their address. We need urgent action to ensure that all children are able to reach their potential. Instead, I am sad to say that we see a Government utterly unable to tackle the crisis they have created, seemingly oblivious to the problems we face, and completely out of ideas to enable all our children to flourish.

9.24 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) for securing this important debate, and the members of the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for it. This is vital time in which to discuss education and attainment in our region, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the subject again so soon after the Opposition day debate on the Government’s schools White Paper, which my colleague the shadow Education Secretary led in the Chamber last week.

Education is a subject close to my heart, just as it is close to the hearts of everyone in the Chamber tonight. I am the son of two teachers, and I was very proud of the part they played in a collective contribution to changing the lives of people in my home city of Leeds. Without the education I received at Cardinal Heenan Catholic High School in Meanwood in Leeds, I would not have had the skills or the opportunity to represent the people I went to school with.

This motion highlights the fact that our region of Yorkshire and the Humber was the lowest ranked in England in 2013-14 for educational attainment. As has been mentioned, the SMF has found that inequality between regions was the most important factor in
determining the educational attainment of students. Hon. Members who research the matter in the Library will find that in Yorkshire and the Humber 55.1% of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at A* to C, whereas the national average in state-funded schools in England was higher, at 57.3%. In Leeds East, the figure was 44.8%, below both the national average and the figure across our region.

Why is that? Is it because people in Leeds East are less able? Is it because people in my area are less ambitious, less hard-working or less aspirational? Not a bit of it. Economic circumstances are a key factor. In 2015, eligibility for free school meals was higher in Yorkshire than nationally, and it was higher in Leeds East than in our region. Let us be clear, because this is political, as everything is: the Conservative Government’s austerity agenda of cuts to welfare and holding down pay in the public sector, which is such a dominant source of employment in my constituency, damages not only people’s living standards now, but the life chances of their children.

As we have heard today, the Government would have us believe that forced academisation is a panacea that will deliver school improvement. The problem is that there is no credible evidence base that suggests that conversion to academy status improves pupil attainment in national tests or national exams, or leads to school improvements. Even the Minister for Schools has conceded that, saying: “This government does not believe that all academies and free schools are necessarily better than maintained schools.” On that at least, he is correct.

Reference has been made to two reports by the Sutton Trust on the effect of academisation on students from low-income backgrounds. Both found “very significant” variation in outcomes for pupils from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, both between and within academy chains. In 2013, only 16 out of 31 academy chains bettered the improvement achieved across all non-academised state schools by disadvantaged pupils in attaining five A* to C GCSEs including English and maths. The Sutton Trust concluded:

“Far from providing a solution to disadvantage, a few chains may be exacerbating it”.

I will not dwell on how talk of “chains” of schools, as though they were some sort of fast food outlet, offends me greatly, but these are schools and they should not be chains. My constituency has five secondary schools, with a mixture of secondary academies and community schools. Last year’s GCSE results show that the academies in my constituency were the bottom three of those five schools for attainment. That is just a snapshot, but it is worth noting. One academy is in special measures following an Ofsted inspection in December. Just 34% of its pupils achieved five A* to C-grade GCSEs last year, compared with 50% in 2012 when the school had a “good” overall rating. The Ofsted report found that the new principal, who has a record of turning around a poorly performing school in Sheffield, has begun “to tackle long-term weaknesses in the academy’s effectiveness.”

Another academy in my constituency, now in a local chain supported by Leeds City College, was transferred out of the E-ACT academy chain because of that chain’s “ineffective…intervention and support.” Perhaps that transfer was fortunate for the school, as E-ACT has recently scrapped all its governing bodies, cutting out parents and the local authority. In that sense, it is ahead of the game, as the Government are following it in that unjustifiable exclusion of local parents. A third academy transferred into the United Learning academy chain in 2012 when it was in special measures. Although it is performing better, I cannot help but note some of the concerns that others have about that chain.

We have work to do. I have already said that there is no evidence that academies perform better, and the facts on the ground in Leeds East support that view. The work before us is not helped by a serious funding shortfall. Leeds faces the prospect of a 5.2% real-terms cut in funding with the introduction of a new funding formula for schools. As we have heard from my colleagues today, it is clear that there is much to be learned from the London Challenge, which encouraged collaboration between schools and the sharing of good practice across local authority boundaries to improve all schools, not just those with the lowest attainment.

According to Professor Merryn Hutchings, lead author of the Department for Education’s “Evaluation of the City Challenge programme”, it is notable that the programme was comparatively cheap. Over three years, the funding for City Challenge was £160 million, which is considerably cheaper than the £8.5 billion reportedly spent on the academies programme over two years.

I have focused on secondary schools, but as this is primary school allocation day, I want to highlight the concern of Lucinda Yeadon, Leeds City Council’s executive member for children and families. She said that at a time when we are struggling to find new places for pupils, the forced academisation of primary schools means that the legal obligation on local authorities to provide more places while being stripped of the power to do so is “totally illogical,” and she is right. I conclude by thanking Councillor Lucinda Yeadon, all the wonderful teachers in Leeds and the local NUT and NASUWT activists—I know that the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is not so keen on those activists—for all the work they do.

I also thank Parliament’s education centre, and Mr Speaker for the support that he has given it. Without a doubt—I am sure that on this at least I do speak for many others in this place—one of our greatest pleasures is meeting children and young people from our constituencies. I love meeting Leeds school pupils who have travelled down to see Parliament, which of course belongs to them, and hearing their insightful, inspiring questions and discussions. Leeds and Leeds East have pupils with ability and potential; it is down to us as MPs to hold the Government to account and ensure that we deliver the education system that young people in Leeds East, across Yorkshire and across the country need and deserve.

9.33 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon). I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing the debate with the assistance of the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) and for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

I am not shy in being absolutely passionate about making sure that children in Grimsby have every opportunity available to them—the same opportunities
that are available to all children across the rest of the country. That is why it is so important that MPs from Yorkshire and the Humber are in the Chamber today, speaking with one voice in support of the children of our region.

The fact that Yorkshire and the Humber is the lowest-achieving region in the country should throw into question the Government’s revised funding formula announced in the autumn statement. I am sure the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) will disagree with me greatly, but I will continue regardless. Surely if there were a need to redistribute funding to rural areas, we would expect schools in the south-west or the north-west to be performing worse than those in our region. It makes a mockery of any claim from the Government to be raising education standards in towns such as Grimsby, Doncaster or Rotherham when they are shifting funds away from those towns. The plans currently out for consultation will result in north-east losing around £2.1 million, which is more than £100 per pupil each year. How can it be described as fairer when a town without a single good or outstanding secondary school loses out?

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not—time is rather short.

Many colleagues have talked about the shortage of teachers, partly because of the large number leaving the profession. More than one in 10 teachers quit in 2014, a 10% increase on 2011. That has been a recent issue for schools in Grimsby, where three of the four secondary school heads left their posts last summer. That level of leadership turnover has an impact on children’s educational experience. It disrupts continuity and makes young people believe that their school does not care about them. It gives them less incentive to invest in their school if they do not think the teachers and leadership are investing in it as well. It is an incredibly damaging message to send.

The problem of teacher flight is coupled with that of local schools struggling to bring teachers to the area, which has been mentioned. That is a particular issue facing coastal communities across the public and private sectors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen said, Teach First should be sending more teachers to low-achieving areas of the country. I welcome the national teaching service and urge the Government to hurry up and bring it to Yorkshire and the Humber.

I take this opportunity to commend Macaulay Primary School in my constituency, which I had the privilege of visiting recently, for meeting its own recruitment challenges with an innovative solution, which the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness will approve of—a “grow your own” approach. The school has been supporting its teaching assistants into teacher training schemes, enabling it to fill vacancies with teachers who already have a relationship with the children at that school, as well as experience in the classroom.

Teaching assistants are a huge resource for schools, but they are often undervalued and not used effectively. Unlike for teachers, there is no national pay structure for TAs, so when budgets are squeezed, those remaining often end up having to take on more work, which they are not necessarily qualified to do, for less pay. Research has shown that in many schools, TAs are not being used in ways that allow them to best improve students’ learning. The Education Endowment Foundation has called for closer working relationships between teachers and TAs, and for more training opportunities. Has the Minister considered the EEF’s report and a potential career path from assistant to teacher?

Unison has called for teaching assistants to be paid for 52 weeks of the year, rather than the current term time-only arrangement. Have the Government considered that for TAs who want to become teachers, so that they could spend their time out of the classroom working with teachers to better prepare for lessons and training to become qualified teachers themselves?

I feel well placed to comment on the Government’s recently announced policy of forcing schools to become academies, as all the secondary schools in my constituency have already made that move. That is quite a gentle description of what has happened. One problem I see is that different chains of academies do not seem to work together. To change that, I am trying to co-ordinate a meeting between the companies that operate in my town. Are the Government doing anything to encourage the sharing of best practice between local schools?

What we have seen locally is that schools that were performing okay before they became academies are still okay, but those that were underperforming are still underperforming. I do not put that down to any failure on the part of ‘teachers. The teaching staff I have met are incredibly dedicated, and every child I meet is happy to be in their school. That is a credit to all the people working in those organisations. The fact remains, however, that every secondary school achieved worse results last year than in 2013, and although two schools improved their Ofsted ratings, one school received a worse rating than the previous year, and the other still “required improvement”.

I am coming to the end of my allocated time, but I want to mention two more schools. The first is the Academy Grimsby, a 14 to 16 academy that was set up two years ago by a local further education provider. It allows students to learn skills for the engineering, care and digital industries among others. It was originally set up for hard-to-place children and has been incredibly successful at giving less academic students the chance to learn vocational skills early in life and a much greater chance of finding a job once they finish school.

The second school I want to mention is the Lisle Marsden Primary Academy, which I am due to visit on Friday. It is undertaking a literacy day initiative run by Pobble, which specialises in inspiring reluctant writers as well as stretching the most able readers through its literary programme, which is operating in over 300 schools across the country. Those are examples of schools really innovating to try to get the best, but we need the Government to step in and do more.

9.40 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing the debate, which has been excellent, along with the hon. Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland). It has shown the strength and passion of Yorkshire and the Humber MPs across the Chamber.
My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen made the case really well about the dangers of education becoming a postcode lottery. Sadly, the evidence suggests that children in the so-called northern powerhouse fall behind, which we definitely do not want to happen. She was right to emphasise the importance of teacher quality and to urge the Government to do more to address the teacher recruitment and retention crisis that we face. She was also right to welcome steps set out in the White Paper, such as the setting up of the National Teaching Service. She urged the Government to accelerate such actions and drew attention to the problem of Teach First retaining so many of its teachers in areas where they are perhaps less needed than they are in Yorkshire and the Humber. That is a challenge to the Minister and the Government.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who used to chair the Education Committee, made an interesting and informed contribution, as he always does, focusing on good leaders and good teachers being the key. He drew attention to the Hanushek research, which shows that teachers performing on the 90th percentile add an extra year’s learning compared with children performing on the 10th percentile. That reminds us of the need to do everything we can to get teachers to the high level of performance we need consistently across the country. He reminded us that the high-stakes accountability system sometimes creates perverse incentives, so more intelligence is needed in how we deal with those incentives so that we get the right teachers and the right leaders in the right places and deliver the right outcomes across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), talked about her constituency passionately, drawing attention to the underperformance of young people there but pointing out that it was not for want of trying. She drew attention to the enormous challenge that the city of Bradford faces. The word “challenge” came up again and again. We need to look at the London Challenge as an exemplar for tackling this issue. She said that if the northern powerhouse is to mean anything at all, it must mean that we invest in educational excellence and make sure that things are consistent across the country.

Some 91% of colleges in Yorkshire and the Humber are in post-16 provision in an area, which seems perverse. In a personal, passionate contribution, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) reminded us of the relationship between economic success and educational attainment. He talked about the imbalance that arises when jobs—whether private sector or public sector—move out of the north for various reasons. As those jobs move out, it is not surprising that the opportunities for growth, and the opportunities my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley talked about for things such as internships and work experience, also shrink. My hon. Friend also echoed concerns about academisation being a distraction, and he quoted people in his constituency with a lot of knowledge about the issue.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West talked about issues having an impact on the morale of teachers, as well as about the importance of teacher morale and the Government needing to do something about it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) reminded us again of the relationship between economic performance and educational attainment. Speaking with great passion and with great knowledge of his area and the performance of different schools there, he outlined his concerns about forced academisation.
My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby finished on a fantastic note, saying that it is important that Yorkshire and the Humber speaks with one voice. That is very much the case.

I hope the Minister will be able to give us a northern powerhouse schools strategy, to talk about what the Government are doing for parents, to talk about joined-up discussions of education and the economy, and to give us confidence about moving forward in Yorkshire and the Humber.

9.49 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): All in eight minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am delighted to be able to respond to what has been an excellent debate on educational standards in Yorkshire and the Humber. I spent five years of my secondary school education at comprehensive schools in Yorkshire: first at Roundhay School in Leeds and then a sixth form in Wakefield. My mother taught at Talbot Primary School in Roundhay, and my sister and brother both went to Harrogate Grammar School, which, despite its name, is an outstanding comprehensive school in Yorkshire.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) and for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on securing this debate. May I begin on a note of consensus? I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) that the work of academy trusts such as the David Ross Education Trust, of which I used to be a trustee, and the Ross Education Trust, of which I used to be a trustee, could be more important to me personally than ensuring that no child is left behind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) cited Eric Hanushek, who wrote the book, “The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth”, which makes the important point that knowledge is the key to the long-term prosperity of a nation. That is why our education and curriculum reforms are so important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) referred to some very good schools in his constituency, such as Beckfoot School in Bingley, which I visited with him in February. Some 46% of its pupils achieve the gold standard English baccalaureate combination of GCSEs.

In her powerful speech, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) was right to say that it is unacceptable for any child to start secondary school still struggling to read. Intervention should be put in place before those children leave primary school. Nothing could be more important to me personally than ensuring that we get reading right for all children in primary schools.

I say to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) that the work of academy trusts such as the David Ross Education Trust, of which I used to be a trustee, has done a huge amount to transform education in Grimsby and to provide greater opportunities for sport and the arts.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West referred to the Social Market Foundation commission on inequality in education. I know that the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), who launched that commission in January, will continue to champion the cause of reducing educational inequality throughout the country. As for the pupil premium, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the White Paper, which confirms the continuation of the pupil premium. It is, of course, closing the education gap, which the Government are sincerely and absolutely committed to closing.

Greg Mulholland: That is good news, but the question was whether it will have the same level of funding.

Mr Gibb: We have given a commitment both in the White Paper and in our manifesto, and we will come to the details very shortly.

Last month we published our White Paper setting out how we will seek to achieve educational excellence everywhere. As the Secretary of State set out, we must extend opportunity to every child, whatever their background. Access to an academically rigorous education in a well-run and orderly school should be seen not as a luxury, but as a right for every child.

The London Challenge focused on ensuring that the issue of the disparity in GCSE attainment between London and Yorkshire and the Humber. There is also, of course, a disparity within Yorkshire and the Humber, with performance ranging from 63.7% of pupils in York achieving five A* to C GCSEs, including English and maths—which is three percentage points higher than London’s 60.9%—down to 45.5% in Bradford, which is 15 percentage points lower than the London average.

In 2015, Yorkshire and the Humber had the lowest proportion of pupils from any English region reaching the expected standard in a year 1 phonics check. Some 74% of pupils reached the expected standard in Yorkshire and the Humber, compared with a national average of 77%, and compared with 83% in London boroughs such as Newham.

Yorkshire and the Humber have the second lowest proportion of pupils entering the EBacc combination of GCSEs: the figure in Yorkshire and the Humber is 35%, compared with 36.2% nationally. There is a similar disparity in terms of achieving the EBacc. Some local authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber, however, achieve above the national average for entering the EBacc, including York with 55.4%, North Yorkshire with 42.1% and Leeds with 40.6%.

We should celebrate the great improvements that have taken place in London, as hon. Members have done during this debate, but we should also acknowledge and celebrate improvements that the hard work of teachers, headteachers and governors has delivered throughout the country. Schools today are better than ever before, with 1.4 million more children in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010. In Yorkshire and the Humber, compared with 2010 there were 209 more good and outstanding schools in August 2015, meaning that more than 133,000 more pupils attend a good school today than in 2010.

The London Challenge focused on ensuring that there was collaboration between schools. Collaboration is the essence of multi-academy trusts, particularly for the spread of best practice. The argument is sometimes made, as it was by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen, that the Government were wrong not to roll out the London Challenge programme across the whole of England. What we have done instead is to build the most successful aspects of the challenge programme into our reforms. We have continued and expanded the
matching of failing schools with strong sponsors. We have increased the number of national leaders of education from around 250 in 2010 to more than 1,000 in 2015, and we have encouraged school partnerships.

A third of schools are now engaged in a teaching school alliance, and we have set out an expectation that most schools will form or join multi-academy trusts, given the benefits that they offer. In Yorkshire and the Humber, there are currently 186 national leaders of education and 58 teaching school alliances, and there is a higher level of participation by schools in such alliances in the region than there is nationally. High-quality sponsors can have a tremendous impact on underperforming schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes referred to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and I would argue that the most important recommendation in its report was the call for a zero-tolerance approach to schools in terminal failure. That is exactly what we have legislated for in the Education and Adoption Act 2016, which will ensure that regional schools commissioners have the power to commission the turnaround of failing and coasting schools without delay. Through the National Teaching Service, it is our intention that by 2020, 1,500 high-performing teachers and middle leaders will be placed directly into schools in areas of the country that struggle to attract, recruit and retain high-quality teachers. The national roll-out will begin in early 2017.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) mentioned the northern sponsor fund. I am delighted that Sir Nick Weller, the chief executive of the Dixons Academies trust, which has helped to improve results at several schools in Bradford, will be leading a report for the Government on how we can go further and faster to deliver a lasting turnaround in school performance in the north. Sir Nick’s work will, among other things, identify ways in which our current reforms can support improvements in newly identified “achieving excellence” areas across England—those areas of the country where we need to take specific action to raise academic standards. The White Paper identified areas of the country where low school standards are reinforced by a lack of capacity to deliver and sustain improvement. In those areas, we will work with local headteachers to diagnose the underlying problem and target our national programmes to help them to secure sufficient high-quality teachers and system leaders, sponsors and governors.

I have listened carefully to hon. Members and my hon. Friends this evening. As a Government, we are determined that every area and region of the country will have rising academic standards and ever-improving standards of behaviour. The whole objective of the White Paper, “Educational Excellence Everywhere” is to ensure that wherever a child goes to school, they can expect the same high standards. We want, and our reforms are intended to deliver, those same high standards throughout Yorkshire and the Humber, as well as throughout the country.

9.58 pm

Jo Cox: It has been an honour to lead and participate in this well-informed, passionate and compelling debate, to which Members from all parts of the House have made powerful contributions. There has been an enormous amount of consensus on many issues—not least on the tremendous contribution that headteachers and teachers make to the future of our children in Yorkshire and the Humber—and that is welcome indeed. With respect to the Minister, it is clear that we need far more detail from the Government, and far more ambition on a strategy to improve the life chances of children from Yorkshire and the Humber. Although he gave a compelling response, I do not think that his answer quite stacks up to the level of ambition for which there has been a united call this evening from all parts of the House. The action called for really must address this regional disparity. If we are serious about rebalancing our economy and ensuring that no children fall behind, we need to see more from the Government on this compelling issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that Yorkshire and the Humber was the lowest ranked region in England in 2013-14 for educational attainment; further notes that the January 2016 report from the Social Market Foundation entitled Educational Inequality in England and Wales found that geographical inequality was the most important factor in determining students’ educational attainment; and calls on the Government to take action to address the underlying causes of these inequalities as a matter of urgency and to set out the steps it is taking to ensure that children in Yorkshire and the Humber are equally likely to achieve good school qualifications as children in London.
Electoral Fraud: Tower Hamlets

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

10 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to raise the concern of many of my constituents not only about the breathtaking decision of the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police Service not to prosecute following the judgment of the election court in the case of fraud at the 2014 mayoral election in Tower Hamlets, but about the way that decision was communicated.

If I may, I will briefly lay out some of the background. There have been regular allegations about electoral fraud in Tower Hamlets at almost every election in recent years. Following the chaos at the 2014 mayoral election, especially at the count at the Troxy centre, many complaints were again registered. This time, however, there was a major difference. In the absence of prosecutorial action and to the embarrassment of local political parties, four brave citizens—Andy Erlam, Debbie Simone, Azmal Hussein and Angela Moffat—decided, as, for the petitioners, it involves a potentially devastating bill of costs. He also observed the misery that the petitioners faced, who would be portrayed as racists and Islamophobes, attempting to set aside the election...And so it proved. The Petitioners have been duly vilified—but they have hung in there.

No one suffered in this respect more than petitioner Azmal Hussein, whose efforts to highlight and bring to the attention of the public the financial affairs of THF—The London Borough of Tower Hamlets. I want to say a word in praise of Mr Hoar, who provided the legal representation for the four plaintiffs. I echo the sentiments of the judge, who said in his judgment:

"For Mr Hoar, this has been a complete tour de force. He accepted the case on the basis of direct access", as his four clients could not afford to instruct solicitors. Of his efforts, the judge said:

"By any standards this was a considerable feat and worthy of the admiration of the court."

After a trial lasting 30 days, with Mr Richard Mawrey QC sitting as a judge, on 23 April 2015 Lutfur Rahman was reported personally guilty and guilty by his agents of corrupt or illegal practices, of making false statements of fact about another candidate’s personal conduct or character, of administering council grants in a way which constituted electoral bribery and of spiritual intimidation of voters. He was also reported guilty by his agents of personation, postal vote fraud, fraudulent registration of voters and illegal payment of canvassers. That is quite a list.

The judge also stated that "the financial affairs of THF"—Tower Hamlets First—"were, at best, wholly irresponsible and at worst, dishonest.”

The judge’s observations indicated that he recognised that character assassination had happened not only during the election campaign, but in the court. In referring to evidence given by THF members about a woman who gave evidence against them, he said that "the three men were quite deliberately lying.”

In the end, the election of May 2014 was declared void, with Mr Rahman disqualified from holding electoral office for five years. The court judgment says:

"These penalties are entirely separate from any criminal sanctions that might be imposed if the candidate concerned is prosecuted to conviction for an electoral offence.

In an article in The Guardian, Dave Hill said of Judge Mawrey:

"He did not give Rahman a back alley kicking of the type that recur in the more gruesome East End mythologies, but he did dish out a legal equivalent.”

As I understand it, the level of proof required by the election court is equivalent to that in criminal law, rather than civil law. The judgment states:

"It is settled law that the court must apply the criminal standard of proof, namely proof beyond reasonable doubt."

It later says:

"Thus the court will apply a) the criminal standard of proof to the charges that Mr Rahman and/or his agents have been guilty of corrupt or illegal practices; b) the criminal standard of proof to the question of WHETHER there has been general corruption."

The plaintiffs have been seeking costs. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has recently confirmed that Mr Rahman is to appear before its disciplinary tribunal. At the very least, there are suggestions that he has been hiding his assets, offloading to his family or not declaring properties owned here and in Bangladesh. As was reported recently in the East London Advertiser, "The £500,000 legal costs of the original six-week election trial was awarded against Rahman,"
although, as the article went on to say, £3 million of property assets have been frozen. The four petitioners are still trying to recoup heavy financial losses from Mr Rahman.

There is talk of a property in Bow that is owned by Mr Rahman, although it takes some effort to get beyond the layers of complication in respect of his properties, with his wife claiming part-ownership and beneficial interest. There is also undeclared income to the taxman on two properties that they rented out. It seems that money and property are sloshing around, adding additional features to the catalogue of wrongdoing. Mr Rahman, meanwhile, has declared himself bankrupt.

On the question of property, the judge referred to a particular address, 16 Prioress House, and its place within this narrative of dodgy dealings. Two THF candidates had asserted that they lived at that address. The judgment declared:

“I am completely satisfied that neither of these two THF candidates ever resided at 16 Prioress House.”

It states that they were therefore “guilty of an offence under s 61”.

The judge drew a number of conclusions on the issue of grants, including, for the record, that “enormous sums of public money had been paid to organisations in excess of that which Council officers had recommended and, in many instances, to organisations that had not even applied for grants”.

The judgment states that “a total of 15 applications receiving aggregate funding of £243,500 did not meet minimum eligibility criteria and so were not scored by officers”, and continues:

“Further, 21 applications totalling £455,700, which did meet the minimum eligibility criteria, but did not meet the minimum quality threshold score of 40, were successful in the final awards.”

The judgment went on to say:

“By way of another example, grants totalling just under £100,000 were handed out to ten organisations, all Bangladeshi or other Muslim organisations, for lunch clubs when none of them had even applied for a grant.”

It states that “organisations deemed totally ineligible...found themselves the grateful recipients of tens of thousands pounds of public money”, and that “£352,000 was awarded without an open application process” from a fund called the “954 Fund”. It continues:

“Shadwell’s grant increased from £204,386 to £460,750”, meaning that it more than doubled. Subsequently, “Shadwell returned two THF candidates...Bow East, on the other hand, saw its grant reduced from the officers’ recommendation of £99,397—cut by roughly a third to £67,000.”

The opposite effect to what we saw in Shadwell is all too clear:

“Bow East returned three Labour Councillors”

We can do nothing but conclude that Tower Hamlets First candidates benefited from money that their party invested locally.

The judge’s conclusion? I quote:

“Was the making of those grants corrupt? Again, this seems inescapable.”

He observed that it was bribery “by any ethical or moral standards”, but posed the question, “is it bribery contrary to s 113 of the 1983 Act?”

In its formal conclusions the judgment says:

“The court is satisfied and certifies that in the election for the Mayor of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets held on 22 May 2014...the First Respondent Mr Rahman was personally guilty and guilty by his agents of an illegal practice contrary to s 106 of the 1983 Act...the First Respondent Mr Rahman was personally guilty and guilty by his agents of a corrupt practice contrary to s 113 of the 1983 Act...the First Respondent Mr Rahman was personally guilty and guilty by his agents of a corrupt practice contrary to s 115 of the 1983 Act.”

Scotland Yard dropped its investigation into electoral fraud after finding “insufficient evidence that criminal offences had been committed”.

How does that tally with the election court’s findings? Detectives launched their investigation after Mr Rahman was found guilty of corrupt and illegal practices. How can practices with such a description not be worthy of prosecution? I have written to the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner about these matters, and have secured a meeting soon with Commissioner Hogan-Howe, when I hope to raise these and other questions.

The police findings have led Mr Rahman’s supporters to claim that he has been proven innocent of all charges. Who can blame them? As pointed out by local Conservative Councillor Peter Golds, “if the police fail to prosecute, there are no convictions and therefore no fraud...Even a successful election petition can be swept under the carpet when the police do nothing.”

It should be noted that the judge paid tribute to Councillor Golds, by whom the petitioners “have been greatly aided”.

The Bangladeshi media in Tower Hamlets have reported events as anticipated. Mr Ted Jeory, a reporter of high reputation who has long taken an interest in these matters, says:

“The Bengali media failed miserably in their journalistic duty to hold the borough’s leaders to account. Instead of ‘without fear or favour’, there was far too much fear and they were full of favour. Lutfur...demanded almost nationalistic loyalty to his cause, and it was given. They did their readers and viewers a huge disservice.”

Mr Speaker, I hope you can imagine the consternation all this has caused in Tower Hamlets to all of our residents interested in democracy, regardless of their colour, religion or background.

On the various views of the court and its findings, I feel it is worth pointing out that, contrary to what Mr Rahman’s supporters have espoused, the judge was not interested in indulging in a wholehearted, blinkered condemnation of the former mayor. However, the judge highlighted the extent to which the former mayor’s supporters nursed and perpetrated the belief that they and their candidate were victims:

“In their minds, they were being targeted because they were Bangladeshis and Muslims: so their critics were necessarily racists and Islamophobes.”

Such swiftly dispatched gibes not only slander, besmirch and cause distress—as they are designed to do—to those innocent of such charges, but they devalue the terms and diminish the plight of those who experience and suffer real prejudice.
The election court says Lutfur Rahman is guilty, but the CPS and the MPS say there is not enough evidence. However, there are suggestions that other inquiries into aspects of fraud and corruption are ongoing. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined exactly what is going on. Which inquiries are still ongoing? Where do the plaintiffs stand in respect of recovering their costs? Where do voters stand in terms of having confidence in electoral arrangements in the future? The Government have appointed commissioners to rebuild the public's confidence that the system can protect against bribery and corruption, and is robust enough to prevent those who have contempt for our democracy from continuing to undermine it in the future. Can the Minister reassure us that the new Mayor, John Biggs, and the commissioners are on track to deliver?

With the greatest respect to the Minister, I had expected the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice to respond to this debate, or perhaps a Justice Minister. I received a nice letter from the Policing Minister who said that a Minister from the Department for Communities and Local Government would respond, but it is actually a Cabinet Office Minister. As he knows, I hold him in high regard, and I mean no disrespect. It does not matter to me—I want a Government response, and I am sure that he will be able to provide one. These are serious matters, so I hope that he will reassure the good people of Tower Hamlets that the authorities will defend their rights, ensure that their elections are not stolen again in future, and say that the petitioners will receive the costs to which they are entitled.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I hold the hon. Gentleman in equally high regard, and he was kind about me in his remarks. From the title of the debate, he will appreciate that this topic falls neatly between three different Departments; one could argue that parts of it should be responded to by the Department for Communities and Local Government, other parts by the Policing Minister, and those parts to do with electoral fraud by a Cabinet Office Minister. I am therefore wearing three hats and have three different sets of briefings, and I will endeavour to cover the entire waterfront. I am sure that we can address any follow-up questions that the hon. Gentleman has, and I will endeavour to cover all the issues he raised.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this subject. Not only is it important to his constituency and borough—it is undoubtedly crucial there—but it has resonance in many parts of the country. Thankfully, electoral fraud is not terribly common in Britain and we do not encounter it often. There is a steady trickle of problems with our elections, but it is only a trickle. As the old saying goes, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, and it would be entirely wrong for us to become complacent. The only way we can maintain an otherwise enviable, widespread trust in this country's elections is by taking problems such as those that occurred in Tower Hamlets extremely seriously when they crop up. We must ensure that there is no repetition, and that anybody thinking of misbehaving in the same way finds it incredibly difficult and is dissuaded from going down that route.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I put on the record my personal admiration for the heroism of those people who took this matter to the electoral court? Does the Minister agree that it would be a betrayal of their courage if the police, for reasons of political correctness, were not to follow through on what appears, in the case laid out by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), to be an open-and-shut matter of criminality?

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend anticipates my next remarks, because we all owe a debt of gratitude to the four petitioners. We have heard that they were pretty heroic in the way they pursued this matter. They were not dissuaded. There were plenty of points at which lesser people might have backed away, but they did not take those opportunities and they pursued the matter through thick and thin. On occasion what they had to put up with was pretty thick and pretty thin, yet they continued throughout. We owe them a debt of thanks, particularly those local to Tower Hamlets.

It was not just those four petitioners whom we must thank, however, because other people picked up the challenge. We must thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), who put the commissioners in Tower Hamlets in the first place, as well as the commissioners; the presiding judge, Richard Mawrey, QC; a number of other officials, including Barry Quirk; and local councillors such as Peter Golds for their assiduous and determined campaign. Many people rallied round the cause of democracy in Tower Hamlets, which is all to the good.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot comment on specific details of ongoing investigations. As an experienced parliamentarian and former Minister, he will understand the constraints of what I can and cannot say. He is, however, doing entirely the right thing. He mentioned that he was about to have discussions and meetings with Commissioner Hogan-Howe and perhaps others. I hope that they can provide him with further reassurances about what is going on with the investigations. I understand that there are still investigations into grant fraud, for example, in parallel with the ongoing investigations into electoral fraud. They perhaps cannot be made public, but he might be able to get further reassurances.1

I am sure the hon. Gentleman will also pursue, assiduously and determinedly, the point made by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) about the extremely trenchant criticisms in Richard Mawrey's judgment. While many people might have expected a prosecution to be straightforward, clearly there are different standards of proof, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and different levels of admissibility for evidence. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service need to make a judgment, but he will want to investigate the individual cases and allegations to find out what can be pursued. Local people in Tower Hamlets and the electoral community more widely will want to know how we can be sure that these sorts of cases are pursued in the strongest possible terms, whenever the evidence allows, so I would encourage him in those meetings and in pursuing those inquiries.

The hon. Gentleman asked where the plaintiffs stood in respect of recovering costs, and then gave at least a partial answer to his question by talking about the

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1.[Official Report, 12 May 2016, Vol. 609, c. 3MC.]
ongoing discussions and investigations in respect of the ownership of assets associated with former Mayor Rahman and members of his family. There have been press stories and reports of court judgments about what has, and has not, been found to be the property of either the former mayor or his family. I understand that that process is ongoing, and again I cannot comment much beyond that, but this is not a finished story, or a set of conclusions finally reached. The mills of both God and, in this case, the justice system are grinding slowly but, one hopes, exceeding small as well.

The hon. Gentleman asked how we might take forward the broader question of how electoral fraud can be made less easy to perpetrate, though it is not easy in the first place, and how we can ensure that the consequences of electoral fraud are clear, swift and unappealing to those considering undertaking it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar, the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, is working on a report on electoral fraud for the Government that I suspect will land on my desk with a satisfactorily large and weighty thud in the next few weeks or months, with a series of recommendations as to how we can tighten the rules still further.

I obviously do not want to prejudge my right hon. Friend's recommendations, but the hon. Gentleman might take forward the broader question of how electoral fraud can be made less easy to perpetrate, though it is not easy in the first place, and how we can ensure that the consequences of electoral fraud are clear, swift and unappealing to those considering undertaking it. My right hon. Friend and I, having been Secretary of State and, before he entered the House, the leader of a local council, will have observed the local democratic process up close and in huge detail, and will have seen its strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the parliamentary democratic process. I cannot think of anybody better placed to come up with trenchant and closely reasoned recommendations, and I look forward to receiving them. We will all want to read them and consider them in depth.

We will have to wait and see what my right hon. Friend recommends, but the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that my right hon. Friend, having been Secretary of State and, before he entered the House, the leader of a local council, will have observed the local democratic process up close and in huge detail, and will have seen its strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the parliamentary democratic process. I cannot think of anybody better placed to come up with trenchant and closely reasoned recommendations, and I look forward to receiving them. We will all want to read them and consider them in depth.

The hon. Gentleman’s final question was where the local righting of the ship had got to in Tower Hamlets. I have made inquiries of the Department for Communities and Local Government on where we have got to. The answer is, broadly, that huge progress has been made, but there is still further to go. I understand that the council has made some progress on key areas in its best value action plan—on procurement, property disposals, and elections management—and has made particular progress since the arrival of Mayor Biggs last June and the new chief executive officer, Will Tuckley, in October. There are still concerns, however, about delays in other intervention areas, particularly in respect of grants, communications and organisational and cultural changes, some of which take longer to bed in than others. Progress in those areas will need to be continued, as will close monitoring by the commissioners to make sure that the progress made is not eroded and does not start to flag.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will continue to monitor the position very closely and will not consider any variation to the current directions until there is sufficient evidence that the change has been deeply embedded and the key outcomes delivered. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would want those to be the main criteria. Given the seriousness and acuteness of the problems encountered in Tower Hamlets—he ably and lucidly summarised the worst of them, but where there were many others that he did not have time to go into—I am sure that he will applaud every move to make sure that there is no prospect of a recurrence, and that those standards are fully met before we get back to the widely wished-for normality in the electoral and registration arrangements there.

I hope that I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s questions. Where I have not be able to because they are the subject of ongoing investigations, he will, quite rightly—I applaud him for it—speak to the police, including the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and others. I hope that he will get the answers there that he cannot get here. If he pieces the different parts of the jigsaw together, I hope that he sees an optimistic picture, albeit one in which it cannot yet be said that the problem has been solved. At least progress has been made on a problem that is being solved, even if we have not quite reached the final destination.

Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 19 April 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

National Insurance Numbers (Other EU Nationals)

1. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): When HM Revenue and Customs plans to publish data on the number of active national insurance numbers used by people from other EU countries.

Mr Gauke: The Government are committed to providing data on active national insurance numbers used by people from other EU countries. HMRC is currently compiling that information and is working closely with the Office for National Statistics, which is reconciling the four main sources of international migration data. The data on active national insurance numbers will be published as part of, or alongside, the ONS’s publication. It is up to that independent statistics authority to decide when it is ready to make public the information.

Henry Smith: I have been asking HMRC for the figures since January. The British people have a right to know such facts, particularly in the context of the UK’s EU referendum debate. Will we know before 23 June how many foreign nationals from other EU countries have national insurance numbers?

Mr Gauke: It does take some time for HMRC to combine and match multiple datasets and hundreds of millions of lines of its own and the Department for Work and Pensions’ data. The intention is to publish the information alongside the ONS analysis. I note that according to its website the ONS plans to publish in May a note on migration incorporating the latest available migration data, and helping to explain further why the two datasets show different trends.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): What about the 3.3 million people—one in 10 of the existing workforce—who pay their national insurance and tax and whose jobs are linked to UK exports to the EU? Does the Minister agree that leave campaigners should not just cross their fingers and dismiss reality and that Members on both sides of the House have a duty to spell out the fact that leaving the EU would put real jobs at real risk?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Treasury analysis published yesterday that shows the various models and the consequences were we to leave the EU, including a permanent reduction in our GDP compared with what it otherwise would be and significant damage to productivity growth. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that point.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Do the Government welcome the opportunity to bring forward actual data without the need to project forward 14 years using techniques that have proved to be inaccurate every six months?

Mr Gauke: As I said, HMRC has gone through the data and will provide them to the ONS. It is for the ONS to decide the timing, but I have drawn the House’s attention to what it has said.

Returning to the Treasury analysis, it compares one scenario with other scenarios, and all three possible scenarios for leaving the EU would leave this country poorer than we otherwise would be.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The impact of EU membership on jobs is obviously significant. Will the Minister pass on my congratulations to the officials who did the useful analysis that was published yesterday? A regional breakdown on page 65 of the document suggests that 100,000 jobs in the north-east are dependent on EU exports. I had thought that the figure would be 140,000, so will he ask the officials to look at it again with a view to revising it up?

Mr Gauke: I will certainly take that representation on board. Of course, the north-east of England has the very large Nissan plant, which provides a significant number of jobs. The argument in the Treasury analysis is that we benefit from an open economy. If we leave the single market, we become a less open economy, which will have a cost to the British people in their living standards.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The disgracefully dodgy document published by the Treasury yesterday is, frankly, worthy of the children’s programme “Jackanory”. The immigration figures suggest that there will be 3 million more immigrants in this country by 2030, placing my hon. Friend in clear breach of the Conservative manifesto commitment to reduce immigration to tens of thousands a year. What is his response to that accusation?

Mr Gauke: The numbers are based on the ONS projection that was used at the last Budget. No account is taken of the achievements of the renegotiation secured by the Prime Minister. On the Treasury analysis, a large number of independent economic commentators have argued that it is broadly in the right direction. My hon. Friends who advocate that we should leave the EU should come forward with their own analysis, setting out exactly what model they would follow and what the economic consequences would be.

First-time Homebuyers

2. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to help first-time homebuyers.

Mr Gauke: The London and wider south-east economy is clearly going through a period of adjustment, and the Chancellor and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have brought forward measures to help first-time homebuyers, which the House will have heard about earlier today. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

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First-time Homebuyers

2. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to help first-time homebuyers.
The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): We are both building more houses and helping young families afford those homes. Some 400,000 new homes are being built over the years of this Parliament, half of them starter homes for first-time buyers. In the Budget I also launched the new lifetime ISA, so that young people no longer have to choose between saving for a home and saving for their retirement—we are going to help them do both. All this from a Conservative Government who support people’s aspirations to buy their own home and, in time, pass that on to their children.

Victoria Prentis: Following the promise of an extra £19 million from the Treasury to help make Bicester garden town a reality, will the Chancellor update the House on the other means he is using to encourage house building, particularly for first-time buyers?

Mr Osborne: I am delighted that we can support the community that my hon. Friend so ably represents in Parliament, and provide money for the upgrade of the M40 junction and a new secondary school to go with the new homes being built in Bicester. Of course that comes as part of a suite: we are investing in new starter homes and in shared equity products for people; our help to buy ISA has been used by hundreds of thousands of people; and the new lifetime ISA will also help young people. Those are all things we are doing to make sure this a home-owning democracy.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): But there is a problem, because the Office for Budget Responsibility says that lifetime ISAs will increase house prices, as they will increase demand and there is relatively restricted supply. Is the Chancellor confident that his measures to increase the supply of housing will mean that the OBR is able to revise that analysis—yes or no?

Mr Osborne: I agree that it is vital that we not only help people afford homes, particularly young first-time buyers, but build more homes. That is the plan we set out in the spending review: a big priority of the capital budget was the additional billions we will be spending on building homes—much more than was spent under the last Labour Government.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): How is having net migration of an additional 3 million people going to help first-time buyers find a home?

Mr Osborne: As I say, we have the products to help first-time buyers in this country afford housing, but I make this observation on migration: you cannot have a strong and successful housing market, and people getting on the housing ladder, unless we have a strong and successful economy. If we followed the prescription of the Labour Front-Bench team, of nationalising half the economy and imposing punitive tax rates, there would not be anyone able to afford any home in this country.

23. [904559] Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): Is it not the case that this Government’s lifetime ISA could help to produce, at maximum rates, a home deposit of up to £50,000, and, even at lower rates of savings, a deposit enough for a terraced home in Norwich costing £120,000?

Mr Osborne: The lifetime ISA will be a very popular and successful new saving product precisely because it does not require people to choose between saving for a home or saving for their retirement; they can do both. We are also now looking at ways for people to draw on their savings during their lifetime for particular emergencies, or for when they need bits of money, like they do in the United States with the 401(k) scheme. The lifetime ISA will be a radically new savings product, and it will do what we need to do in this country, which is build a savings culture.

Productivity

3. Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What assessment has made of recent trends in the level of productivity; and what steps he is taking to increase productivity. [904539]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): Productivity performance in the UK has been weak since the financial crisis, as it has been in all developed countries. The Government published their productivity plan “Fixing the foundations” last year. At the Budget, we announced additional reductions in corporation tax and business rates to incentivise investment, and gave the green light to infrastructure projects such as Crossrail 2 and High Speed 3.
Kirsty Blackman: The Scottish National party has continually argued that the UK economy is in dire need of investment to stimulate productivity. Despite the productivity plan, the Chancellor seems determined to persevere with policies that stifle productivity. What policies have the UK Government enacted that will encourage an increase in productivity?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady is right in saying that there is an issue in relation to productivity in this country, but there is an issue across all major developed economies. Over the past year, productivity growth in this country was about 1%, which compares with 0.9% across the G7. On specific measures, we have established the National Infrastructure Commission, protected science funding at the Budget and spending review, introduced the Housing and Planning Bill, announced the apprenticeship levy, which is coming in, and announced a £100 billion infrastructure programme over the course of this Parliament.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that, by being a member of the European Union, this country benefits hugely from a cross-fertilisation of good ideas across the European Union, the supply chain, and foreign direct investment at 50%? Our trade, too, also benefits from our being in the single market—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. No! The hon. Gentleman is very, very wide of the question. I have great respect for him. He has put his thoughts on the record, but they have absolutely nothing to do with the question on the Order Paper, to which the Chief Secretary will not therefore reply.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Minister? He cannot just hide behind what he claims to be happening in all advanced economies. We are performing worse than most, particularly France. Is the reason for that not to do with the lack of skills of our workers and the lack of good education in our country? Will the Chancellor’s silly policy on forced academisation help or hinder?

Greg Hands: We recognise that there is an issue with productivity, which is why we published the productivity plan, but in terms of growth, the UK was the fastest-growing major economy in 2014. Last year, we were in second place; this year we are also projected to be in second place, growing at a healthy rate. Therefore, with regard to growth, this country is doing very well indeed.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that £540 billion invested by foreign businesses in the UK over the past decade is vital to our future productivity, and that, if we left the EU, the uncertainty of our trading relationship with Europe and the world would put that investment in jeopardy?

Greg Hands: I agree with my hon. Friend. Leaving the EU would damage UK productivity. It has the potential to deny access, or to make access more difficult, to markets and investment. It is worth noting that the UK, with 28%, is the No. 1 EU destination for foreign direct investment, and a large part of that is to do with our status as an EU member.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): It was five years in office before we saw a productivity plan, and what happened last year? Productivity in the UK was 18 percentage points below the average for the rest of the G7. One sector that needs help is the UK steel industry. It needs more capital investment to be more competitive. How much money will the Government invest in steel in the next 12 months to improve productivity and save British jobs?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman mentions the figure of 18 percentage points, and I refer him to an earlier answer in which I said productivity has been a long-standing issue in the UK. In fact, the figure was 17 percentage points back in the 1990s. As he well knows, the action we have taken on steel includes securing state aid to compensate for energy costs, securing flexibility over EU emissions regulations, ensuring that the procurement rules can also allow social and economic factors to be taken into account, and continuing to tackle unfair trading practices. The Government have been very active on steel, and that has not ended today.

Tax Havens

4. Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What steps he has taken to reduce the number of tax havens worldwide. [904540]

5. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What his policy is on requiring multinational companies to disclose to the public the profits they hold in tax havens (a) in British overseas territories and Crown dependencies and (b) elsewhere. [904541]

7. Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to reduce the number of tax havens worldwide. [904543]

12. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What his policy is on requiring multinational companies to disclose to the public the profits they hold in tax havens (a) in British overseas territories and Crown dependencies and (b) elsewhere. [904548]

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The Government are leading the world in the fight against tax evasion and it was Britain that first demanded that multinationals publish, country by country, where they pay tax. Thanks to our leadership, that is now being taken up at a European level. Multinationals selling into Europe will be required to report the tax they pay, including in ultra-low tax locations. Britain has also got its leading allies to agree to share information on the beneficial ownership of companies. We are now seeking international leadership on a blacklist of tax havens, with punitive action against the jurisdictions on that blacklist. We want the rest of the world to follow our example; where we lead, others should follow.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Chancellor for that answer, but Conservative MEPs have voted six times on instruction from the Treasury to block EU-wide measures against tax avoidance. What action will the Chancellor take to get all Crown dependencies to establish a public register of beneficial ownership?
Mr Osborne: At a European level, we are now getting agreement to ensure that multinationals should disclose where they pay tax around the world, including in ultra-low tax jurisdictions. We have just agreed with our leading European allies, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, that we will exchange information on beneficial ownership. In terms of public registries, we are literally one of the very few countries in the world—one of only two or three countries in the entire world—to have committed to a public register, but we want all jurisdictions, not just our overseas territories but all the other advanced economies of the world, to follow our lead.

Neil Gray: Last month, I tabled a series of written questions about the tax gap resulting from individuals and businesses using overseas territories and Crown dependencies. All seven questions were grouped into one answer from the Financial Secretary, which basically said, “We have no idea.” Now that the Government have been shamed by the Panama papers into hasty action, will they finally rectify the extraordinary situation whereby the Government have no idea how much is lost to the Treasury in this way each year? Would a public register of beneficial ownership not help in this regard?

Mr Osborne: We have published more detail on the tax gap than the previous Government and we have shown that it is at one of its lowest levels in our history. This Government have collected £26 billion more than was being collected by a Labour Government in extra compliance.

Jonathan Reynolds: Tax havens are merely a symptom of a much wider problem, which is that too often the wrong values are at the heart of our financial system. There is too much greed. There is insufficient reciprocity. There is still too great a disconnection between the real economy and the needs of our society. Eight years on from the financial crisis, what is the Chancellor’s genuine assessment of how much has changed for the better?

Mr Osborne: That is a perfectly reasonable question, and it was well put. A huge amount has changed. There is much tougher regulation of the financial system, and we have better regulators. Banks are more on the case of bad action in their areas, but it is true that more needs to be done to create a proper culture in the banking system in which they treat customers fairly and seek to do the right thing. That is happening, and the banks that do it will get rewards from customers in the marketplace. Like other professions, the industry is seeking to improve its standards of conduct.

Tommy Sheppard: The Chancellor will be aware that the reporting requirements for private companies are a lot less stringent than those for publicly listed companies. Although the register of beneficial ownership is an improvement, we need to know not just who owns a particular company but how much tax they are avoiding. May I ask him what steps he will take with our overseas territories to ensure that this is rectified?

Mr Osborne: Of course, all companies have to pay their correct taxes, and we have taken action to ensure that. Country-by-country reporting is designed precisely so that people can see in particular where multinational businesses pay tax.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The recent information-sharing agreement that the Chancellor has just referred to could turn out to be a very significant step in the fight against tax evasion, and I support it. The public are right to be upset when businesses or individuals do not pay their fair share of tax. Evasion needs to be rigorously pursued, but does the Chancellor agree that when that is caused by tax avoidance, it is the job of Government to simplify the tax code and close the loopholes exploited by the avoiders?

Mr Osborne: I broadly agree with my right hon. Friend. I welcome the welcome that he gives to the agreement that we have with four other European countries on the exchange of information on beneficial ownership. We hope that will set an example that not just the rest of Europe, but the rest of the world will follow.

On tax avoidance, of course it is the responsibility of the House of Commons and the Government to try to make sure that the tax code and tax law are simple and do what is intended, but we are in a constant race, as has always been the case, against highly paid accountancy firms and the like, who design very contrived systems to avoid tax and avoid the intention of Parliament. There has been a significant development in our jurisprudence whereby the Supreme Court now takes into account the intention of Parliament, as well as the letter of the law. I think that is right, because as I say, there is sometimes a bit of an arms race in relation to the tax code, and the wishes of Parliament should be taken into account by our courts.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the agreement that he has just reached. Is it not the case that HMRC employs 26,000 investigators who work to stop tax evasion and avoidance, and that they have brought in more than £2 billion over the past six years from offshore tax avoidance? Does he agree that we should congratulate HMRC on doing the good job that its investigators are doing, and thank them for their work, and that anyone who criticises HMRC in that respect is just plain wrong?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the good work that HMRC does. It has never been popular to be a tax collector in any country at any point in history. HMRC is doing a good job in that respect. We are putting more resources in so that it can target particularly wealthy individuals who are evading tax. We now have 26,000 people employed by the Government to ensure that people comply with our tax laws.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on the work that he has done to close loopholes—more than any previous Chancellor—but does he recognise that a low-tax economy will attract wealthy people from all over the world to invest in our economy, create jobs and pay more tax, so the Exchequer draws more tax in the end?

Mr Osborne: I entirely agree. We as Conservatives believe that there should be low taxes, but taxes that are paid. That is the right approach. That is why we have reduced corporation tax, and why we are reducing income tax by raising the tax-free personal allowance. When we cut the top rate of tax, we collected more income for the Exchequer.
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): With the tax gap now at its lowest level on record, does the Chancellor agree that this Government have done much more to ensure that the taxes that are owed are paid than the Labour Government ever achieved?

Mr Osborne: My hon. Friend, who is an excellent Member of Parliament in the west of England, is right. We get lots of suggestions from the Labour party about what we should do about tax. Labour was in office for 13 years and had Treasury Ministers answering questions for 13 years. Not a single one of these things happened when they were in charge, and no one believes that if Labour were ever back in charge, it would be tough and take action.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Shall we bring the discussion back to today? In the Panama revelations about the behaviour of offshore companies, the Chancellor could not fail to notice the key role played in many of those deals by UK-headquartered banks and UK-based intermediaries. For example, HSBC and its affiliates created more offshore companies through Mossack Fonseca than any other bank. In view of the significant role played by UK banks, will the Chancellor support the new clause tabled by Labour to today’s Bank of England and Financial Services Bill, requiring British financial institutions to record the true owners of any companies or trusts that they work for? Will he also, like me, welcome the proposal from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for a register of the beneficial owners of property in the UK to tackle money laundering, often linked to tax evasion?

Mr Osborne: First, we are introducing a register of the beneficial ownership of companies and trusts that need to pay tax, and of course banks must therefore comply with it. Secondly, we are introducing—this will be in the Queen’s Speech—a new criminal offence of facilitating tax evasion, which will apply to the corporate sector in Britain as well. That is in addition to the criminal offence we have introduced that says ignorance is no defence when someone comes before the courts if it is found that they have been evading taxes.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Tax havens lead to a loss of revenue here as individuals can hide through opaque structures and businesses simply do not pay UK tax in respect of where economic activity takes place. Given the revelations from Mossack Fonseca, has the Treasury carried out a new assessment to calculate the scale and size of the revenue lost to the UK?

Mr Osborne: There are already a large number of ongoing investigations in respect of Panama, which we hope will lead to prosecutions, and the Government already had data on Mossack Fonseca. If there is additional information available in the Panama papers—despite our requests, the media organisations have not yet handed all that information over to us—we will act on it.

Stewart Hosie: Can I ask the Chancellor to be more assertive and to go much further? Mossack Fonseca is the fourth biggest such firm in Panama, and I presume that there are dozens, scores or hundreds of smaller ones, and there will be many, many more in other countries. The scale and scope of this are likely to be astronomical. He and the Government need to go much further. We need to have a much clearer understanding of the scale of this. I ask him to make all the representations he can to the Panamanian authorities and other jurisdictions where similar activities are taking place.

Mr Osborne: To be frank, representations are not going to be enough with some of these jurisdictions. That is why we want international agreement to a blacklist that jurisdictions will go on if they do not comply with the norms that we are establishing on transparency, exchange of information and the like. Once they are on the blacklist, they are subject to penalties and punitive action—sanctions, if you like—so that it is clear that they cannot carry on doing business in the way they have been. If the whole world comes around on that—there was welcome support for this British-promoted concept at the G20 last week in Washington—so that we get that blacklist and that punitive action, I think that we will help to solve this problem.

Mr Speaker: We have to move on—far too slow.

Corporation Tax

6. Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of which groups within the UK population will benefit from planned changes to corporation tax.

[904542]

13. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of which groups within the UK population will benefit from planned changes to corporation tax.

[904549]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Corporation tax cuts have been a central part of the Government’s economic strategy, and that strategy is working: there are 2.3 million more people in employment since 2010. The further cuts in the main rate announced at the Budget, which will bring it down to 17% by 2020, will benefit over 1 million companies, large and small. Lower corporation tax rates will support UK companies to invest and grow, creating jobs as they do so.

Mr Hanson: One of the justifications for the corporation tax cut was that businesses would pass it on to workers through the increase in the living wage. Evidence is now emerging that some companies intend to pocket the tax cut and squeeze conditions for their employees, so what steps do the Government intend to take to monitor that?

Mr Gauke: The cuts in corporation tax will result in greater investment in this country, and greater investment drives productivity growth, and productivity growth is what will drive higher living standards. Let us remember that it is this Government who have brought in the national living wage, and we have seen very large numbers of people see increases in their wages and salaries.

Justin Madders: Owing to changes in personal independence payments, people with disabilities are set to lose £1 billion at the same time as corporation tax is
being cut, so can the Minister honestly say that he is comfortable with prioritising big business over disabled people?

Mr Gauke: We are providing more support to help the disabled get into employment, but let me just make this point to the hon. Gentleman, and to the House: the way this country is going to be prosperous and able to afford good public services and support for the most vulnerable is by having a strong, growing economy, and competitive business taxes help us to have that strong, growing economy.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Federation of Small Businesses has said that the decision to further lower corporation tax to 17% is an important statement of intent and will provide a boost for the affected firms? Does he agree that that will help to further underpin the enterprising economy that we need?

Mr Gauke: I completely agree, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the comments of the FSB. The reductions in corporation tax will help small businesses and large businesses, and they will help to drive a competitive and dynamic economy.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is easy to trot out phrases such as “tax cuts for companies”, but it is vital that we have low corporation tax to attract investment into this country and to ensure that we have jobs here? The Chancellor has repeatedly encouraged companies to pass on tax cuts to workers, which is where they should go.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that. All taxes are ultimately paid by people, but business taxes that discourage investment discourage the economic growth we need in this country, and that growth is what this Government are determined to deliver.

General Anti-tax Avoidance Principle

8. Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): For what reasons the Government have not introduced a general anti-tax avoidance principle.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A general anti-avoidance rule was considered by an independent study group led by Graham Aaronson QC in 2011. The group recommended an anti-abuse rule for the UK because it felt strongly that it would strengthen and complement existing tools available to HMRC. The Government accepted the recommendation and introduced a general anti-abuse rule in 2013, striking the right balance between protection against avoidance and certainty for taxpayers.

Grahame M. Morris: One way to put an end to aggressive tax avoidance is a general principle—a principle, not a rule. I am sure the Minister understands there is a difference: people can find a way around a rule, but it is not easy to do that with a principle. Will the Government therefore back their public statements about tackling aggressive tax avoidance and legislate for a general principle of tax avoidance?

Mr Gauke: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the last Labour Government looked at this issue and declined either a general anti-abuse rule or a general anti-abuse principle because of fears of uncertainty. We believe we have got the balance right. However, alongside the introduction of the anti-abuse rule, we have brought in measures to deal with accelerated payments and promoters, we closed 40 tax loopholes in the last Parliament and we have announced 25 closures in this Parliament already. It is worth pointing out that avoidance is coming down.

Support for the Economy (South-west)

9. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of measures to support the economy in the south-west announced in the Budget 2016.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): We announced at the Budget an extensive package for the south-west covering both rail and road: a new marine hub enterprise zone in Cornwall, a £4.5 million boost for ultra-fast broadband across the region and, to top it off, a £900 million devolution deal with the west of England. The south-west will also benefit from the income tax cuts and business rate reductions announced in the Budget.

Scott Mann: One item that went largely unnoticed in the Budget was the £19 million for community land trusts in the south-west to mitigate the impact of second home ownership. How will that money be allocated? Will my right hon. Friend work with me and fellow Conservative MPs in the south-west to ensure that that money is put aside to help people to purchase plots and to help working people to get on?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right that we will be releasing £19 million for community-led housing in the south-west. I look forward to discussing with him how we might best approach that issue. We are also introducing a new right to build and reforms to planning, which will boost the custom-build sector in Cornwall and beyond.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Labour Government underfunded infrastructure projects in the south-west, resulting in lower productivity in the region and hence less of a contribution to the national economy than we should have had, but that it is this Government who are turning that around with their huge £7.6 billion commitment to infrastructure and connectivity?

Mr Speaker: Just as long as the Chief Secretary focuses on what this Government are doing. He does not need to burble on about the past.

Greg Hands: I welcome the opportunity to say something about what this Government are doing on infrastructure in the south-west. We have 35 projects in the infrastructure pipeline in the south-west with a value of £23.2 billion. At the Budget alone, we announced improvements to Exeter St David’s station, at Weston-super-Mare and at Cheltenham Spa station. I have already mentioned community housing. There is also a fund to provide more and better roads in the south-west.
Solar Power

10. Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the development of solar power.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): We are continuing our support for solar, keeping the small-scale feed-in tariff scheme open beyond January 2016, setting tariffs on a path to help transition the industry to a sustainable, subsidy-free future.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the Exchequer Secretary for that very short answer. Given that the EU’s VAT reform action plan will give Governments discretion in applying rates of VAT, including on solar power, will he confirm categorically to solar installers in my constituency that the UK has officially and permanently dropped the proposal to hike solar VAT to 20%?

Damian Hinds: The reduced rate of VAT remains in place on all 11 of the categories of energy saving materials. Following the decision by the European Court, we have consulted interested parties on the issue and, given the complexities involved, we are still considering the responses.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that about 90% or more of the solar-powered energy available in Britain has been put in place under this Government? Does he also agree that, in order for intermittent renewable power to provide a steady baseload, the investment with which the Government are supporting battery technology is absolutely key?

Damian Hinds: My hon. and learned Friend is, of course, right on multiple counts. Solar has been a great British success story; more than 99% of the installed solar PV capacity has happened since May 2010. He is also correct to say that the development of battery technology here and elsewhere is incredibly important for the future.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I am sure that the Exchequer Secretary will welcome the report published today by the Environmental Audit Committee, which finds that membership of the European Union has been overwhelmingly positive for the UK’s environment. Our Committee is also conducting an inquiry into the Treasury’s approach to sustainability and the environment. Will he encourage his colleague the Chancellor to come before the Committee to discuss the Treasury’s approach to solar power, offshore wind, waste and recycling policy?

Damian Hinds: I look forward to reading the hon. Lady’s report. The Treasury takes a balanced approach to making sure that we stay on target to meet our commitments. We are on target to meet our commitment of 15% of renewable energy by 2020, but we must do so in a cost-effective way, recognising that the subsidies to early stage technologies can only be paid for by taxpayers.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Exchequer Secretary join me in congratulating the UK solar power industry on being one of the top 10 in the world? It is larger than that in Australia and slightly smaller than that in Spain, despite having a rather less advantageous climate.

Damian Hinds: Indeed. Were it only the case that the sun would always shine. Under Labour, we had the highest dependency on fossil fuels in the G8 and the lowest contribution from renewable energy of any major EU country. As I said earlier, the deployment of solar power has been a great success story since 2010.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): One of the big things this Government could do to help solar and, indeed, all renewables is to remove the double charge on storage, whereby storage is charged when it takes on the power and charged again when it gets rid of the power and puts it back in the grid. Will the Treasury consider changing its approach and helping storage? It could do so with a stroke of a pen and it would make a huge difference. I urge the Treasury to stroke that pen and make sure that that change happens.

Damian Hinds: The tariffs are designed to make sure that there is a reasonable and appropriate return to investors. They have to be adjusted periodically when costs come down. Of course, one of the great parts of the success story of solar is the fact that costs have come down by about two thirds since 2010.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): According to the Solar Trade Association:

“The Government will be spending just 1% of new expenditure under the Levy Control Framework supporting solar power...yet mainstream analysts expect solar power to dominate future energy supply.”

With that in mind, will the Chancellor promise to do much more to ensure that Britain becomes a market leader in the industry, or are we going to let China take the lead yet again?

Damian Hinds: Britain does have a leadership position in the industry, but we need a balance. We need a portfolio of energy sources and to recognise the importance of baseload power. That is why the development of new nuclear is also so important.

UK-Iran Financial Transactions

11. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps he is taking to facilitate transactions between UK and Iranian financial institutions.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The Government fully support expanding the UK’s trade relationship with Iran. The Treasury is actively liaising with UK banks and industry bodies, to understand concerns and help re-establish financial channels between the UK and Iran.

Maggie Throup: Despite the improving diplomatic relations between the British and Iranian Governments, UK businesses still face significant barriers to completing legitimate banking transactions for trade purposes. Will the Minister look at what more can be done to help to facilitate financial transactions between UK and Iranian banks, so that the UK economy can begin to benefit from this new market?
Harriett Baldwin: Thank you, hon. Friend for her question. She is right that the situation with the payment channels between the UK and Iran is quite challenging, particularly because the US still has its primary sanctions in place. We have been speaking to banks at the highest levels. We have also been liaising with the US authorities to push for further clarity for UK banks. It is worth pointing out that some banks have a more extensive US business than others do, and that therefore it might be worth companies in my hon. Friend’s constituency and elsewhere considering switching to banks that have less exposure in the US.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Given the opportunities for British businesses in Iran as a result of the relaxation of sanctions, could the Treasury have a word with our friends the Americans to make sure that they do not seek to use their banking regulations to prevent some of the commercial deals that may flow to British companies as a result of that relaxation of sanctions?

Harriett Baldwin: Thank you, my right hon. Friend. I am right to highlight one of the key issues. I assure him that we are working at all levels in discussions with the US authorities to ensure that British companies selling to Iran are able to put that money into UK bank accounts.

Manufacturing Exports

14. Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What recent fiscal steps his Department has taken to support manufacturing exports.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): It is Export Week, and I can announce that UK Export Finance has provided more than £15 billion of support to exporters since 2010 and UK Trade & Investment has more than doubled the number of businesses that it helps to more than 54,000.

Marie Rimmer: UK industrial production and manufacturing output suffered sharp falls in February, and they remain well below 2008 levels. Meanwhile, the Office for National Statistics reported that house prices in London have reached an average of £524,000, which is 49% higher than their pre-recession peak and out of the reach of all but those who are on six-figure salaries or who have benefited from a trust fund inheritance. When will my constituents see the Britain held aloft by the march of the makers, and the economy rebalanced towards the north of England, as the Chancellor promised?

Harriett Baldwin: I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate to elaborate further on her question. I am sure that she and her constituents will welcome the fact that employment in the north-west is at the highest level on record; that more than 89,000 businesses in the north-west will not pay business rates; and that 360,000 people in the north-west will now benefit from the living wage.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): British exports to China have more than doubled since 2010, led by Havant-based manufacturers such as Colt and Lewmar. Will the Minister join me in congratulating those businesses, and will she encourage others to follow their lead by supporting and maintaining the Government’s pro-export policies?

Harriett Baldwin: It is wonderful to hear during Export Week about Colt and Lewmar, and their fantastic work exporting overseas. It is a key priority of the Government to continue to encourage more firms to export. In fact, we have ambitious aims to have another 100,000 businesses exporting over the life of this Parliament.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The current account deficit is at a post-war high of more than 5% of GDP, and 44% of our exports go to the European Union. It took Canada seven years to negotiate a free trade agreement with the European Union. Does the Minister agree that the last thing that exporters need, and the last thing that the one in 10 jobs that depend on our exports to the EU need, is the uncertainty that the referendum is bringing—and, indeed, that Brexit would bring—to them and to those jobs?

Harriett Baldwin: The last time I looked, I thought it was also Labour policy to have such a referendum, but I agree with the hon. Lady that it is very important that she and others get out the message about the value of exports and the importance for manufacturing of the UK’s membership of the single market. That is why I shall vote in the same way as her on 23 June.

Topical Questions

T1. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The core purpose of the Treasury is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the economy.

Rebecca Pow: The innovative Claims Consortium Group in Taunton Deane has just received an Investors in People gold standard award, one of only 300 companies in the UK to have done so. It began in a back bedroom in Milverton just a few years ago, and it now employs 300 people. Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only is Taunton Deane an excellent place to do business, as this company demonstrates, but so is the whole of the wider south-west, thanks to the infrastructure and connectivity injections this Government are giving it?

Mr Osborne: Let me join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Claims Consortium Group on its award. I am glad that it has been recognised for its hard work. She is absolutely right that Taunton, and indeed the whole of the south-west, is a great place to do business. We are now investing huge sums in the roads and railways, broadband and housing. Of course, without her I do not think we would be having the A358 upgrade. There is a general lesson, which is that when the south-west votes blue, the voice of the south-west is heard in Parliament.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): It is not just on tax that people are concerned about the behaviour of the super-rich and its impact on the economy,
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I hope that the Chancellor will join me in welcoming the action taken by shareholders at BP’s annual general meeting against the excessive pay awards recommended by the company’s remuneration committee. The chief executive’s pay in FTSE 100 companies has risen from 50 times the average employee’s in the 1990s to 150 times today. Will he support measures to tackle the remuneration racket? To many, an old boys’ network appears to operate to set each other’s pay. In particular, will he support the widening of shareholder representation and employee representation on remuneration committees?

Mr Osborne: It is absolutely right that companies and the shareholders who own those companies think about their pay policy, act responsibly and do not pay excessive amounts to chief executives who do not deserve them. It is this Government who introduced those shareholder votes—they did not exist under previous Labour Governments—and I am glad that shareholders are using the opportunity we have given them. I do not think, if this is what the hon. Gentleman is hinting at, that we should be putting trade unions on company boards, but I do agree that we should make sure that shareholders use all the tools available to them.

T5. [904531] Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Will the Chancellor update the House on any discussions he has had for a potential city deal for the Swansea Bay city region, and on what he can do to drive growth and create jobs in south-west Wales, particularly in my Gower constituency?

Mr Osborne: First, we are now in conversation with Swansea about what we can do for the city deal. We are of course acutely aware that we need to help the steelworkers in Port Talbot. We are working to achieve a sale of the site, but we are also helping those who have already been made redundant. We are also looking very closely in Port Talbot. We are working to achieve a sale of the site, but we are also helping those who have already been made redundant. We are also looking very closely at the tidal bay lagoon scheme and at whether we can create jobs in south-west Wales, particularly in my region, and on what he can do to drive growth and further jobs?

Mr Osborne: Small business is absolutely fundamental to the economy and to job creation. That is why we had such a big package in the Budget to help ease the burden of business rates and why we reduced corporation tax, which is paid by small companies that are in profit. We have also increased the annual investment allowance so that small businesses can invest in the future. To help them with the burden of the national living wage we have increased the employment allowance so that they can employ four people on the national living wage and pay no national insurance at all.

T4. [904530] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Panama papers unearthed an array of revelations, amid which was the exposure of the relationship between tax and land ownership. What steps are the Government taking to ensure transparency of land ownership across the UK?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): This Government are bringing in a register so that we will know the beneficial ownership of people or structures holding property in this country. We have not had that before, and we are making progress on it.

T7. [904533] Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): In the Budget, the Chancellor outlined measures on tax avoidance and evasion to bring in about £12 billion. How much more does he expect to bring in from the measures announced since, which we all welcome, to make every business in this land pay its fair share?

Mr Osborne: The Office for Budget Responsibility assesses and puts on the scoreboard the estimated revenue that we will raise from tax avoidance, but it will be around an extra £1 billion a year just from the measures in the Budget. In last year’s Budget after the election, we had measures to raise £5 billion from clamping down on aggressive tax avoidance and evasion. The fight continues.

T8. [904534] Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Following reports in this morning’s Daily Mail that energy firms overcharged customers by £130 for their energy this winter, does the Chancellor agree that Treasury cuts to incentives for building new renewable energy sources were another one of his bad ideas?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): As we covered earlier, the tariff system in place to encourage renewable energy has to deliver a balanced portfolio of energy, and it does so. Of course, we encourage energy firms always to pass price cuts that they benefit from on to their customers.

T9. [904535] Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): All 31 local firms that have reached the final of my Havant small business awards will benefit from the Government’s corporation tax cut. Will the Chancellor join me in congratulating all the finalists and confirm that the Government will continue to support small businesses across the country?

Mr Osborne: I join my hon. Friend, who is such an excellent voice for Havant in this Parliament, in congratulating the small businesses in the Havant

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Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Ministers will have heard the concerns of small businesses organisations about the change to quarterly tax returns. What are they doing now that that change is in place to monitor its operation and ensure that it does not become unnecessarily burdensome to small businesses?

Mr Gauke: Let me be absolutely clear with the House that we are not talking about quarterly tax returns. This is not about having to do a full tax return but about reporting; indeed, the purpose of the changes is ultimately to reduce the burden on businesses. It will start to be introduced in 2018. I hope that we will set out further information about the plans in the coming weeks. The intention is to ensure that we reduce the tax gap and, ultimately, help businesses to comply with the tax system.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank the Chancellor and the Economic Secretary for their good humour in their dealings with me over the past few days. This afternoon I will be moving new clause 9 to the Bank of England and Financial Services Bill. Are the Government now minded to accept new clause 9?

Mr Osborne: It is quite right that we take action against money laundering. That cannot only be done in this country— it needs to be done internationally. We should focus our effort, our resources and the force of the law where the risks are greatest. Like other Members of Parliament, I have been concerned that banks are at risk of going too far and being disproportionate when applying their rules to politically exposed persons in Britain, and their families in particular. I have written to the chief executives of the individual banks. My hon. Friend has worked with us on this issue and has tabled his new clause. We are happy to accept it because we are all trying to achieve the same goal.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee report issued last week highlighted the £16 billion of the tax gap that is tax fraud. The money brought into the Treasury for that has stayed pretty static, at 3% of total tax liability. Does the Chancellor think that there is more to be done, and does the fact that the number of the wealthiest individuals being investigated will increase from 35 to 100 by 2020 not demonstrate that he has missed an opportunity?

Mr Gauke: We are taking strong action on tax evasion and significantly increasing the number of criminal investigations—I understand that around 90 investigations into offshore tax evasion are currently ongoing. We announced in the Budget last summer an additional £800 million for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to support its activities, and through the common reporting standard—and ultimately through registers of beneficial interest—we are now getting access to much more information so that we can take on offshore tax evaders.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Quite a lot of people whom I would have called have toddled out of the Chamber. There seems to be a bit of a lack of stamina—very unfortunate—although not from Lucy Frazer.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the fairer funding consultation that has just closed. When taking into account figures for growth in pupil numbers, will the Minister consider the actual numbers for the new school year, rather than the previous one, to ensure that we have a truly fairer funding formula?

Damian Hinds: The national funding formula will address historical unfairness. As now, school budgets will be set on the basis of the pupil census in the October prior to the start of the funding year, giving schools the certainty they need. The Department’s consultation also proposes to include a new factor to recognise in-year growth, targeting funding to schools with significant increases in pupil numbers.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Nobody has ever accused me of a lack of stamina, Mr Speaker. Am I right and accurate in my assessment that LIBOR funds can be used only for charitable purposes and will not go to a Department?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): The question is, I hope, about Air Ambulance Northern Ireland, and I confirm that we are working with the charity and the Northern Ireland Executive on how those funds are delivered. They will go to the air ambulance charity, which I know will be broadly welcomed across all communities in Northern Ireland.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): In his document published yesterday, the Chancellor posed the question: “Is our national security best served by retreat from the world?” I hope that he is not foolish enough to suggest that those of us who wish the United Kingdom to leave the European Union want to retreat from the world, because the truth is far from that. We want the United Kingdom to break free from the sclerotic shackles of the EU and its superstate, and embrace the exciting world out there that befits the world’s fifth largest economy, a nuclear power, and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Mr Osborne: Of course I respect my hon. Friend’s views. We are having a referendum, and his vote and my vote count equally. I would make the point that our membership of the European Union enhances our national security—that point was also raised by the Secretary-General of NATO last week. Not one of this country’s allies or friends abroad are recommending that we leave the EU.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The number of people sleeping rough on our streets has doubled since 2010 and increased by 30% in the past year alone, which is a shocking indictment of Government policy and society as a whole. Will the Chancellor step in and intervene in the shambles that is the Housing and
Planning Bill, and ensure that support for homeless people such as hostels and specialist accommodation is protected?

Mr Osborne: In the Budget we provided more than £100 million extra to help with the problem of homelessness and the particular problem of rough sleeping. We have provided money for second-stage accommodation for people as they leave hostels, to ensure that they have secure accommodation to go to. I am always happy to listen to further representations or ideas from the hon. Gentleman or any other Member.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Treasury cannot even get its forecast for growth and the deficit correct for next year. Does the Chancellor realise that instructing his officials to produce a speculative report based on thoroughly tendentious figures about what might or might not happen in the event of Brexit simply belittles the reputation of the Treasury for economic competence and forecasting? Instead of relying on fear, why does he not give us his vision, compared with our vision of a free people in a free Parliament, controlling our own borders and leading the world towards free trade?

Mr Osborne: Our positive vision is that by being part of a reformed EU we can raise living standards, create more jobs and make sure that consumers have access to lower prices. We have set out in the Treasury analysis a range of possibilities for the alternatives that might happen if Britain leaves the European Union. All of them would make Britain permanently poorer, but if my hon. Friend and the leave campaign want to produce their own plan and their own analysis, then be my guest.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Last week, the Financial Secretary confirmed to me that details obtained from Crown dependencies and overseas territories and shared with the UK would not be passed on to other tax jurisdictions. If that remains the case, there is a real chance that the UK would be complicit in tax evasion. Will the Chancellor urgently review the situation to ensure that tax is paid where it is due?

Mr Gauke: It is the case that the Crown dependencies and overseas territories are, at our prompting, ensuring that they have got registers of beneficial interests. It is also the case that the UK is co-operating, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made clear, with other jurisdictions. I hope we move to a position whereby public registers are the norm, but even before we get to that point, clearly we will look at the opportunities for the information on the central registers to be shared among co-operative economies and jurisdictions.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I remember the good old days when the Chancellor regarded Treasury predictions as so discredited that he established the Office for Budget Responsibility instead. I cannot think what could have changed. The GDP projections in his dodgy dossier are predicated on breaking our manifesto commitment on immigration, while the cost implications of his new policy of mass migration for school places, housing, health and transport are not made explicit in the document. Why is that?

Mr Osborne: We are having a referendum, and people are going to take different views on the prospects of the United Kingdom as we go forward, but the public want facts and information. We have set out in the analysis produced by the Treasury what we think the likely impacts on the economy will be, and this analysis has now been supported by the London School of Economics. It gives out a similar message to that provided by the Bank of England on the economic shock that would come if we leave. Then there are bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and others saying a similar thing. The weight of evidence and the weight of opinion is clear: there would be an economic price if we left the EU. Some regard that as a price worth paying, which is a perfectly respectable argument, but it is not one that I agree with.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint colleagues, but we must now move on to the statement.
The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): With permission, I shall update the House on the current situation in Libya and on what the Government are doing to support the new Libyan Government of national accord.

Yesterday, I visited Tripoli; it was the first time that a British Foreign Secretary had done so since 2011. The fact that the visit was able to take place is a positive sign of the progress made in recent weeks, including in the security situation in and around the capital. During my visit, I met Prime Minister Sarraj and members of the Presidency Council in the naval base that has been the headquarters of the Government of national accord since they relocated to Tripoli on 30 March. I welcomed their commitment to representing all the Libyan people and the progress they have made in establishing the GNA as a Government of the whole of Libya.

I underlined to Prime Minister Sarraj the UK's support for the GNA as the only legitimate Government of Libya. They have the endorsement of the Libyan political dialogue and the majority of members of the House of Representatives. I believe the Libyan people want them to succeed. We look forward to the House of Representatives completing its formal vote of endorsement in line with its obligations under the Libyan political agreement.

I was encouraged to hear from Prime Minister Sarraj and his Ministers about the steps they are taking to assume control of Government Ministries in Tripoli. After five years of conflict following the overthrow of Gaddafi, the Libyan people are weary of fighting and eager for peace. They want a Government who will start to address the many challenges Libya faces. It is important that the international community works in partnership with the GNA as they continue to consolidate their position and take forward their work to meet the needs of Libyan citizens across the country.

In my meetings, I emphasised the need to keep up momentum on the political process and to deliver practical progress on the ground. I was encouraged to hear that a clear plan was being developed to address some of the immediate challenges: delivering security, tackling Daesh, restoring basic public services, countering people-trafficking, restarting oil production, and getting the economy back on track.

We agreed that delivering security was fundamental to improving the day-to-day lives of the Libyan people and creating an environment for economic reactivation. The security agenda must, of course, be owned and led by the GNA, but the UK, along with other European nations, stands ready to respond to requests from the Libyan Government for assistance in training the Libyan armed forces in order to improve their effectiveness in providing security and in the fight against Daesh. Prime Minister Sarraj and I agreed that we should continue to work closely to establish what those training and technical support requirements were, and what role, if any, the international community could play in helping to meet them.

A number of Members have speculated in recent days that the Government might be on the cusp of committing British troops to Libya in a combat, or combat support, role. I am pleased to have the opportunity to clarify the situation. I am clear about the fact that there is no appetite in Libya for foreign combat troops on the ground. We do not anticipate any requests from the GNA for ground combat forces to take on Daesh or any other armed groups, and we have no plans to deploy troops in such a role. I will, of course, keep the House informed of any plans that we develop in the future in response to requests from the Libyan Government, but the type of mission that we currently envisage would be focused on providing training and technical support, away from any front-line operations.

The Libyan economy is suffering from the effects of years of conflict and the impact of low oil prices. It is clear that the Presidency Council is focused on the immediate need to alleviate the pressures on ordinary Libyans, including those arising from the current squeeze on liquidity in the banking system, the shortfall in power generation and the shortage of basic commodities, as well as the slightly longer-term challenge of ensuring the effective functioning of the key state financial institutions—the Central Bank of Libya, the National Oil Corporation and the Libyan Investment Authority—and the challenge of rebuilding oil production and export capacity. As I said to Prime Minister Sarraj, the UK stands ready to provide whatever technical assistance it can with those issues, in all of which British companies have relevant experience and expertise to share.

As for the migration threat, there is clearly an urgent need to tackle the challenges arising from irregular migration and the organised criminal and terrorist networks that facilitate so much of it. In my discussions, I highlighted our desire to work in close partnership with the GNA to make progress on that issue, including progress in tackling the people-smugglers and traffickers. As part of that initiative, we should look at creating a package of support that could include extending the EU’s naval Operation Sophia and building the capacity of the Libyan coastguard to support, and eventually take over, the operation, but clearly such a package would be implemented only at the invitation of the Libyan Government.

Yesterday I announced that Britain would allocate £10 million for technical support to the GNA in this financial year, to be delivered through the conflict, security and stability fund. The package will support the strengthening of political participation, economic development, and the delivery of capacity in security, justice and defence. We will work closely with the GNA to ensure that that support is channelled into the areas where it can have the greatest effect.

After years of conflict in Libya, the formation of the Government of national accord and their arrival in Tripoli have the potential to mark a real turning point in Libya’s fortunes. The challenges facing the GNA should not be underestimated, and delivering the security and economic development that will allow the Libyan people to realise their country’s huge potential will not be an easy task to fulfil, but the UK, together with many of our international partners, stands ready to assist. It is in all our interests that Prime Minister Sarraj and his Government are able to re-establish security, re-activate the economy, and defeat Daesh in Libya as quickly as possible. I commend this statement to the House.
12.44 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of his statement. The situation in Libya over the past five years has been bloody and dangerous, and it is important to recall that it was Colonel Gaddafi’s brutal and violent response to the protests that erupted early in 2011 that triggered a civil war and United Nations Security Council resolution 1973, which authorised a no-fly zone and action to protect civilians. This House voted to support that action, but since Gaddafi’s fall, Libya has become a land of rival governments awash with rival militias. There is also the growing presence of Daesh and insecurity. Questions have been raised about the focus of this Government, and indeed of the international community, on what followed.

I join the Foreign Secretary in praising the enormous efforts of Libyan politicians, of the United Nations and of Special Representative Martin Kobler to reconcile the competing institutions and encourage them to form a single Government of national unity. I also join him in supporting UN resolution 2259, which has recognised the progress that has been made and called on member states to provide support to the new Government as requested.

We on this side of the House welcome the establishment of the Libyan Government of national accord led by Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj. As the Foreign Secretary said, they face a formidable task in ensuring security, restoring public services, building up the economy and tackling the threat from Daesh, but does he agree that their ability to do so will be determined by the extent to which they can gain support and consent right across Libya as they face the task of re-establishing governance in all parts of the country? Will he set out what assessment he has made of their capacity to do that, particularly in respect of the rival militias? Can he say anything more about the conversations he is having with our allies, including other EU Foreign Ministers, about what further steps could be taken to support stability and peace in Libya? Does he expect there to be a further UN Security Council resolution?

The United Kingdom Government indicated previously that they were not contemplating a British combat mission in Libya. Given the circumstances there, I think that that is the right approach to take, and I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for confirming again today that the Government have no plans to deploy British troops in such a role. Can he therefore give us a categorical assurance that, were that view to change, any proposal to deploy forces in a combat role would come before this House for a vote?

The Foreign Secretary has, however, spoken about the possibility of providing training for the Libyan military. Did Prime Minister Sarraj ask for specific types of technical or training support during their recent discussions? Does the Foreign Secretary envisage that any such deployment, should it happen, would take place in Libya, or might it involve providing training in a neighbouring country? Will he give an undertaking that he will come to the House before any such deployment takes place and seek its approval as appropriate?

On economic development, we support all efforts by the international community to assist the new Government in improving the lives of their citizens and getting the economy moving again, including through oil production. On migration, is further support being requested by the new Prime Minister, or is that being considered through the EU naval operation in the Mediterranean, Operation Sophia, to enhance Libya’s ability to disrupt criminal human smuggling and people trafficking? The people of Libya have suffered a great deal in recent years, and this moment is enormously important for their future. It is the responsibility of the world community to do all that it can to help the new Government to succeed.

**Mr Hammond:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his response. Let me join in his praise of UN Special Representative Martin Kobler—it was remiss of me not to give that praise myself—who is an absolute dynamo. Since he was appointed, he has literally been shuttling between the parties, groups and power brokers in Libya. It is very much due to his energy and effort that we have got where we are today.

There is a Government of national unity, but we should be clear about Libya’s historical context: it is a country that has traditionally had a high degree of devolution in its governance structure, which is often held together by a strong man at the centre. We now need to find a new model, under which the Government of national accord will be a national umbrella organisation, but Prime Minister Sarraj has made it clear that that will work only if municipalities are empowered and prepared to take on a significant degree of devolution. A devolved model is the only model that will work.

I also need to make it clear that the Libyan Government are in a very early stage of operation. At the moment, the Prime Minister and his Ministers are sitting in a naval base, physically separated from the civil servants who could support them. Yesterday, they retook operational control of three Ministries, which is a good step forward, but it will only be as they are able to re-enter the Ministries and regain working contact with civil servants that they can start to do some of the detailed work. That situation underpins and shapes my answers to some of the right hon. Gentleman’s questions, because he is absolutely right that the GNA can succeed only with the support and consent of the various factions in Libya.

Let me say one other thing by way of scene-setting. When I went to Tripoli yesterday, I was expecting to find the Government incarcerated in a heavily fortified military base, defending against all comers, but that is not the situation. The base is relatively lightly defended, and it was clear that the Prime Minister’s ability to operate there is based on the consent and acquiescence of the militias operating in that part of the capital. He is acutely conscious of the need to build a bottom-up consensus around his activities.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the European Union. I returned from Tripoli to Luxembourg last night, where there was a discussion at 28, including Defence Minister colleagues, about future support to Libya, looking at the possibility of extending Operation Sophia in a counter-migration role. No decisions were taken, but the matter is clearly high on the European Union’s agenda. The key will be to develop a package that also addresses Libyan top priorities. The Libyans are focused on migration, but it is in all honesty not their top priority. We have to create an environment in which delivering on Europe’s top priorities also addresses those of the Libyan people.
Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right that any kind of international support will be more effective if it is properly co-ordinated. The work of the European Union, the Libya international assistance mission—LIAM—and the UNSMIL planning cell, which is already in operation, should be and will be co-ordinated.

Let me be clear that any proposal to carry out airstrikes in support of a counter-Daesh operation absolutely would trigger the convention that the Government consult the House and allow a vote, through which the House could express its view on the proposed intervention.

I understand my hon. Friend’s concern, which he has expressed several times both in the House and in various newspapers, that the lines between what is a combat mission and what is a training mission could be blurred in situations such as Libya’s, but we are clear that we can make that distinction. I draw his attention to Afghanistan, which is a kinetic theatre if ever there was one, yet our training mission has been successfully conducted there for the past 15 months with great effect. In Iraq, we carry out training activities in an active war zone. There is a big difference between training and advising troops and engaging in combat activities.

The Government are extremely mindful of that distinction and of the obligations that they have entered into in respect of consulting the House.

Mr Hammond: It is very easy to sit on the Opposition Benches hurling stones, but I am afraid that the world is not a neat and tidy place, and we have to deal with the situations that present themselves. The hon. Gentleman talks about the humanitarian work, but I remind him that, when we intervened in Libya in 2011, it was to prevent an imminent genocide in Benghazi and that that successful intervention saved countless thousands of lives. Libya is a rich country, and we should not forget that—$70-odd billion-worth of Libyan assets outside the country are currently frozen by a UN Security Council resolution. This is about getting the Government in place and then releasing those assets so that the Government can function. Libya is not a country that
needs humanitarian assistance in the conventional sense. It needs technical support with good governance, and help to get into a position where we can release its assets to it to enable it to function.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the British ambassador. I join him in paying tribute to the work of our ambassador, who is currently based in Tunis. He came with me yesterday to Tripoli and it is his fervent desire, as it is mine and Prime Minister Sarraj’s, to reopen the British embassy in Tripoli as soon as we are able to do so. Unfortunately, the location of our current buildings in Tripoli is in a rather less secure part of town, so I cannot promise that that will be imminent, but we will keep the matter under constant review and do it as soon as we can.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether any training mission to Libya would take place on Libyan soil, and I have to say to him, yet again, that there is no training mission, there is no putative training mission and there has been no request for a training mission. I speak as a former Defence Secretary when I say that, if there is a request for such a mission, the military will clearly want to ensure that it is undertaken with the minimum risk possible to UK personnel. Therefore, their first preference would be to do it here, their next preference would be to do it somewhere in the region and their third preference would be to do it in Libya, if it is safe to do so. I assure him that we will spare no effort in trying to ensure that any support we do give to the Libyans will be delivered in a way that represents the least possible risk to the British forces delivering it.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): There can be no doubt that our intervention in Libya in 2011 has, as some in this House have suggested, been an unmitigated disaster resulting in many thousands of casualties, the establishment of Daesh and a vicious civil war. Looking forward, given that this country is at a tipping point of its involvement with Libya, given developments on the ground, what lessons can we learn?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend, as so often, asserts as fact that there “can be no doubt” on something that is deeply contentious, and I very much take issue with him. The situation in Libya is very difficult and the situation post-2011 was very messy, but countries in many parts of the world do not function as Britain or Switzerland do, and we have to deal with the real situation on the ground. We should look to the future. We should be positive about this potentially affluent country regaining stability and being able, once again, to function as an effective state, allowing the Libyan people to get on with their business. There is a weariness after five years and a growing sense that, if a properly devolved form of government can be established that co-opts the various militias and regional groupings, this can work.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the size of Daesh in Libya and its capability, and does he have any idea what its plan is? Is it going to sit tight or move outwards to try to expand into the rest of Libya?

Mr Hammond: Speaking from memory, I think that our current assessment—the last assessment I have seen—is that there are probably up to about 3,000 Daesh fighters in Libya, of whom a significant number would be foreign fighters. There is a generally accepted view that what Daesh is doing in Libya at the moment is very much a holding operation, seeking to hold an area of ground, possibly as a boathole if it finds that its freedom of manoeuvre and freedom to operate is coming under intolerable pressure in Syria. There are many pointers to the fact that now is the time to move against Daesh in Libya, while its presence is still relatively thin on the ground and while its operation is very much in a holding phase.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): One measure of success of the new Libyan Government will be the creation of a functioning economy and, as a step towards that, a functioning central bank. Can Britain play any role in helping them achieve that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and yesterday I offered Prime Minister Sarraj technical support in relation to the central bank, the national oil company and the Libyan Investment Authority. It is a tribute to Libyan resilience and ingenuity that international partners recognise the figures who have continued to run those institutions throughout this period of chaos over the past few years as technically competent and well motivated—they have been doing a good job. Prime Minister Sarraj has now brought the competing appointees—the eastern and the western chairmen of each of those institutions—together to work together and to seek to forge consensus on how the institutions can go forward as truly national institutions on a collaborative basis.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I was interested in what the Foreign Secretary had to say about the current state of Daesh, and how it needs to be contained now and not allowed to spread further. Are we talking to other allies, such as Jordan, about working on training deployments and training up troops? If we do not contain Daesh now in north Africa, it will simply be an expanding problem.

Mr Hammond: Yes, we are talking to other partners, such as Jordan, about how we can provide support to the Libyan Government. Of course other actors are acting independently; Egypt has a recognised vital interest, because of its long land border with Libya, and some of the problems Egypt has been facing in the Western desert are directly attributable to penetration from Libya. The House will recall the continuing issue of General Haftar, the commander of the Libyan national army. He is an important figure who commands significant military forces in the east but is unacceptable as a command figure to many who are supporting the new Government. That is one of the big challenges Prime Minister Sarraj is facing.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement and, in particular, the reassurances it contains about the use of British troops exclusively in training and mentoring, if that becomes necessary. Does he recall the disaster that was the training of Libyans in the UK? Will he assure the House that those mistakes have been noted and lessons have been learnt, and that, if he does intend to train Libyans in the UK, as his statement suggested, we will not make those mistakes again?
Mr Hammond: Yes, and we are not the only ones who had a poor experience with seeking to train Libyans outside Libya—the Italians and Bulgarians had similar experiences. Prime Minister Sarraj referred to that yesterday and is acutely conscious of what was not a very glorious episode in Libyan history. The situation on the ground has changed, but clearly we would look for the most effective location for any training. It is probably the case that that would not be in the UK, for climatic reasons as much as for anything else; we need to train people in an environment as close as possible to the one in which they will be operating. As I have said, there has been no request and there is as yet no plan, so I am afraid I cannot impart to the House any more information.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I welcome the progress that has been made but say that I am disappointed that more has not been offered to deal with the migration crisis? There has been an 80% increase in the number of crossings between Libya and Italy. This time last year, half a million people were waiting in Libya to get to Italy. As we know, the European Union is offering Turkey €3 billion to deal with the migration crisis and offering to enhance surveillance. What we need is permission to enter Libyan coastal waters in order to stop the people traffickers. Did the Foreign Secretary ask for that permission? When can we have that permission, so that we can deal robustly with people trafficking?

Mr Hammond: May I say to the right hon. Gentleman, whose question, I am sure, is well motivated, that he is approaching this in exactly the wrong way? We are not likely to get the buy-in we need if we, as a bunch of Europeans, go to Libya and say, “Here’s our priority agenda. What are you going to do about delivering it?” What we must do, and what I suggested to my European colleagues last night that we should do, is package the objectives that we want to achieve with the objectives that are priorities for the Libyans. That is the only way that Prime Minister Sarraj will be able to sell to the Libyan people a package that in any way questions Libya’s territorial sovereignty and that allows foreigners to operate in Libya’s waters. We must be acutely sensitive to the concerns in Libya about foreigners. I am in a rather strange position in that, on the one hand, I have one bunch of people in this House who are primarily concerned to ensure that we do not have any foreigners going into Libya, and, on the other, the right hon. Gentleman who is desperately keen to get some foreign naval forces into its territorial waters. The truth is that we must balance this very carefully and get a package that works for the Libyans as well as for the European agenda.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary speak in grandiloquent terms of Prime Minister Sarraj, a Government of national accord and even a House of Representatives. Any member of the British public watching “News at Ten” last night would have seen our Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister of national accord hooded up in a naval base, unable to leave because they control none of the country.Apparently, they now control three ministerial buildings in a country the size of western Europe. Can we have a reality check, please? Can the Government at last realise that their bid to undermine authoritarian leaders such as Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, who had a deal with the Italian Government to return migrants, and now Assad has just involved the region in death and destruction? Can we just learn the lessons, try and find strongmen, and do what the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee wants—and what we all want—and find a way of creating some kind of safe haven for migrants to be returned to?

Mr Hammond: The Chinese have a saying that a journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step. I urge my hon. Friend to view this process in that context. Self-evidently, I did manage to get out of the naval base in Tripoli yesterday and return to these shores.

My hon. Friend is being a little harsh on Prime Minister Sarraj and what he has achieved. There is a process going on whereby militias—who, only a couple of weeks ago, were threatening to shoot down any aircraft seeking to enter the airport in Tripoli bringing his Government back into the city—are now patrolling the streets outside that naval base and were present on the ground when I landed in Tripoli yesterday. They have recognised and given tentative consent to this Government process to go forward. Its success will depend on Prime Minister Sarraj making the right judgments and being patient enough to bring all the relevant parties with him as he develops a plan for his Government.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for an advance copy of his statement and congratulate him on his recent visit. Given the failure of the past two Labour Administrations to secure adequate compensation for victims of Libya-supplied Semtex in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland—at the same time America was able to get that compensation—will he now indicate that he will redeem this situation and place on the agenda of the Government of national accord and the Prime Minister that compensation will be a key issue that this Government will pursue with the new Administration?

Mr Hammond: I can confirm that it is already on the agenda. Prime Minister Sarraj is aware of our focus on this issue, but it is a question of timing. At the moment, the Government have not got access to the great majority of their ministries and civil servants. They do not have access to their assets, so it would be premature to make that the No.1 issue. However, this Government are focused on the need to raise and to resolve these issues at the right point in this progression, and Prime Minister Sarraj has already been notified that we will do so.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): We have seen a very thoughtful exchange between the Foreign Secretary and his shadow. Although there are flickers of optimism, the atmosphere remains very sombre, not least because, as other Members have pointed out, we have responsibility to a large extent for what has happened in Libya over the past five years. I say to my right hon. Friend, who has dealt with this whole issue of technical and other expertise very skilfully, that the British public would be very reluctant if there were any sense that our expertise was going into helping one side rather than another in what could still be a very bloody civil war. Although I appreciate that these are difficult things and that there are often no good guys on either
side, there must be an appreciation that that would be something that would cause angst to the public if we are to have a functioning Libya in the years ahead.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that. If only it were so simple as there being two sides; there are about 120 sides as far as I can make out. He is absolutely right. Of course we must ensure that our support is targeted at the Government of national accord. We have to look for bright spots. One of the positive things that I take from the situation in Libya is that, by and large, the different factions are not motivated by ideology, particularly by extreme religious ideology, as they are in some of the other conflict zones. A lot of this is to do with traditional money and power interests. It is about people wanting to protect their local fiefdoms and making sure that they and their communities get their share of the wealth of the state. Prime Minister Sarraj is going about this in exactly the right way. He is going with the grain of Libyan society, recognising that reality and trying to build a consensus mechanism around it.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): What guarantees can the Secretary of State offer that our key partners, particularly in Europe, have a coherent strategy on good governance and nation building as well as on the vital issues of migration and counter-terrorism? What reassurances did he get this week from the Government of national accord that they have a plan to broaden out what is essentially a UN-backed political deal, so it is not beholden, and therefore vulnerable, to the many rival regional factions?

Mr Hammond: The most effective step to broaden out the legitimacy of the Government will be the vote in the House of Representatives on the endorsement of the Government. The HOR is committed by the Libyan political agreement to do that, and we hope that it will happen very soon. On the question of our European partners, it is inevitably true that, for 26 of the other 27 EU states, excluding Ireland, migration is at the top of the agenda. It falls to me to urge them, as I urged the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, to accept that, if we want to make progress on the matter, we must try to set this in a context that makes sense not just to us, but to the Libyans.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I welcome the progress the Foreign Secretary has outlined and appreciate his point about the practical realities on the ground. With that in mind, the long-term prospects for Libya are clearly linked to its economic prospects, which are in turn largely linked to the prospects of its oil industry. What steps, at this early stage, are UK Trade & Investment and the British Government taking to ensure that UK industry can play its full part in bringing the Libyan oil industry back on to the global market?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Libya has Africa’s largest oil and gas reserves and a population of only 6 million, so, clearly, it is, in per capita terms, a potentially wealthy country. I am glad to report that British companies have traditionally played an important role in Libya’s oil and gas industry, and Prime Minister Sarraj specifically made the point yesterday that BP would be very welcome back in the country. I shall pass that on to BP’s management.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary has said that there is no appetite in Libya for foreign combat troops on the ground. Is there any appetite in the Libyan political system for foreign air forces or foreign naval forces operating in Libyan territorial waters?

Mr Hammond: On the latter point, we have already seen a clear wariness of any suggestion of foreign naval forces operating in Libyan territorial waters, even if the focus is counter-migration rather than counter-Daesh. I cannot rule out—it would be wrong to do so—any future requests for air or naval support for a counter-Daesh operation. I can envisage Prime Minister Sarraj, if his Government are successful, being able to muster enough ground forces to mount an attack on the Daesh stronghold around Sirte which, of course, is a coastal port. It is certainly the case that the Libyans will not be able to develop naval or air assets in any reasonable period of time to support such an operation, and it is quite possible that, from a military point of view, they would seek assistance from outside. Prime Minister Sarraj would have to balance that military imperative with the political issues that would arise if he were to request foreign assistance. There has been no such request and no discussion of such a request, but if it comes, we will consider it. If we think that the UK should participate in such action, we will come to the House and allow it to express an opinion through a vote.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A further 21 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and I am naturally keen to accommodate all of them. Brevity will assist me in doing so.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I know that I might be a lone voice, but I urge him to guard against parliamentary approval for every military intervention we undertake, which is out of keeping with an enemy that moves fast and that we need to go up against. May I ask the Foreign Secretary about a distinct strategy specifically to target Daesh, separate from but complementary to the wider diplomatic peace strategy? One can reinforce the other, but if we wait for the perfect political settlement before we start, we will be waiting forever.

Mr Hammond: I will treat my hon. Friend’s warning on the use of war powers with the importance it deserves. As he will know, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary published a written statement yesterday setting out the Government’s position. We must maintain the operational flexibility we need while ensuring that the House of Commons has proper involvement in any proposed combat deployment.

I am sorry; what else did my hon. Friend ask me?

Johnny Mercer: About targeting Daesh.

Mr Hammond: Before the formation of the Government of national accord, there was discussion among the international community about how we would deal with Daesh if there was no solution on the ground in Libya. We concluded that it would be pretty much
impossible for us to do so. I am very pleased that we now have a Government formed in Libya that we can support to do that job.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The UK’s past intervention in Libya has been an unmitigated disaster. The mess we have left behind has caused enormous reputational damage to the United Kingdom and that cannot happen again. Given that we are offering training and technical support to armed forces away from the front line, will the Secretary of State tell me what armed forces we will be training and supporting, given that Libya has myriad competing militias and groups?

Mr Hammond: Another assertion. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that it was not the view of the people I met yesterday that the intervention in 2011 was an unmitigated disaster. It has rid the country of Gaddafi and averted a genocide. He talks in the present tense about training support, and I say yet again that we are delivering no training support in Libya at present. If any request from the Libyan Government for training support were made, it would be for militia groups that had signed up to the Government of national accord’s security plan and were being incorporated into the Libyan security forces that will be formed from them.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Like the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), I was struck by the Foreign Secretary’s correct comments that we need to continue to move against Daesh in Libya. What discussions have been held with Gulf state nations about helping that effort?

Mr Hammond: We do, of course, have continuing discussions with all Gulf states. It is a well-known fact that both Qatar and the UAE have in the past been active in Libya, but it is also fair to say that all Gulf states have been somewhat distracted by the war in Yemen and have not, perhaps, played as active a role recently as they did earlier in the conflict.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Given the turmoil in Libya in the five years and one month since the House of Commons authorised action, does the Secretary of State regret having the UK acquiesce to transferring a mission that was designed under the responsibility to protect to avoid a genocide to one focused on regime change?

Mr Hammond: This was a complicated situation on the ground and, having embarked on the mission to protect the population of Benghazi against genocide and having had to follow where that took us to protect the population from the retribution that the regime was seeking to vent on it, we did what we had to do. I think we should be proud of having rid Libya of the tyrant Gaddafi, who had effectively dismantled the structure of government in Libya. That is why Libya has had its problems of the past few years—there was no government structure in Libya.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Deploying British troops to Libya, even in a strictly non-combat role, would add significantly to the demands already placed on them. Can the Secretary of State provide any clarity about how many troops would be necessary and when we can expect to learn from the GNA whether British assistance is required?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid that I cannot, really. I can give a personal view: I would expect that we would be talking about a training mission of the sort of scale of those that we are carrying out in other countries around the world. I therefore would expect there to be between tens and hundreds of trainers, not thousands of trainers.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary says that we must tackle Daesh, but Prime Minister Sarraj only operates with the permission of the militia. Does not the Foreign Secretary think that in certain circumstances some of the militia are aligned with malevolent forces, particularly in other parts of the country, and is he not concerned that the militia are at the heart of the Government and of the future process of government? Where will that leave Libya in the future?

Mr Hammond: I think that there is a misunderstanding about what the militia are. After 2011, Libya fragmented. Every city, every town and every region had its armed forces—armed men who were protecting their communities. That does not make them bad people. They are not extreme Islamists in most cases; they are simply people who have formed home defence units, and they are the only force on the ground. It is not possible to talk about raising new Libyan armed forces that will then take on all the militias—that would be a completely unrealistic project. The only way forward is to co-opt militias into a nascent Libyan armed forces, backed by a political system that is highly devolved and that assures them of autonomy and fair shares of Libya’s wealth for the communities they seek to back.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) about Libyan-sponsored IRA murder, not only in Northern Ireland but in England, including in this city, while I understand the Foreign Secretary’s comments about timing, given that there is an emerging Government in Libya and that we will at some point be releasing between £7 billion and £8 billion of frozen assets from this country alone, will he and his ministerial team continue to do all they can to get compensation for people and their relatives who have suffered for far too long?

Mr Hammond: Yes, the assurance that I gave to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) extends, of course, to the WPC Yvonne Fletcher case.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Last week, on the Floor of the House, with a note of urgent caution, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) reminded us of how missions change and about the impact on our armed services, who might have to make decisions on the hoof. I urge the Secretary of State to reflect on that debate and the participation in it.

We are consistently told in this Parliament that NATO is our primary model of defence, yet all we heard about in the statement was the European Union and Europe’s
role. I am grateful for the European Union naval deployment and other initiatives by our European partners, who are doing a great job, but if the Libyan Government of national accord makes a request, what role will NATO play in that, given the myriad other organisations and nations involved, from Jordan to Hungary?

Mr Speaker: May I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman submits his academic treatise to his PhD adviser?

Mr Hammond: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was all in favour of the EU doing more. We are very clear. NATO is our principal war-fighting alliance, but we are not talking about war fighting here. We are talking about stabilisation, training and rebuilding, and the European Union and bilateral arrangements delivered by other European countries are absolutely the right way to go about achieving that. It is not a role of NATO.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend and the whole House will recognise that a peaceful, stable and prosperous Libya is in the interests of the region and of Europe. Can my right hon. Friend flesh out for the House the timetable envisioned for EU discussions to continue and conclude, working closely with the Libyan Government to ensure a positive and proactive response?

Mr Hammond: That is a good question, but the timetable will have to be determined by what is happening on the Libyan side. At the discussion last night, we were clear that we needed to work up a European Union package. There was mention of Turkey earlier, and the way in which the EU has dealt with Turkey on migration has not escaped the Libyans’ notice, so there will need to be a comprehensive proposal. As soon as it is appropriate to make the Libyan Government aware of what such a package might look like, the ball will then be in their court to decide whether they wish to request support.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): When does the Foreign Secretary expect to receive the invitation to provide the support that he mentions? Will he elaborate on the specific mutual objectives and especially the timescales involved? Clearly our troops cannot be involved in open-ended support.

Mr Hammond: There is a spectrum here. In respect of the hard training of troops at infantry level, I think that we are quite a long way from any request to do that, if such a request comes at all. With regard to restructuring military command structures in a civilian-led Ministry of Defence, I think it is quite likely that we will be asked quite soon if we can give some advice about that, but we will probably give such advice from Whitehall.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): As part of my role in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I was in Algeria last week. The Algerian parliamentarians I met have much experience of bringing a country together after the dark decade, and they made it clear that they would like to help the Libyan Government through diplomacy in bringing together, as my right hon. Friend said, perhaps 120 different factions. I think the Algerians have a lot to offer and I know that my right hon. Friend has met the President. Will he ensure that offers of help through non-military intervention are taken as far as possible with the new Libyan Government?

Mr Hammond: I would be very pleased to hear that the Algerians wanted to provide assistance, based on their own experience of rebuilding a country after a bitter civil war, and I am sure the Libyans would be pleased to receive such an offer.

Mr Speaker: I trust that the Algerian parliamentarians felt suitably privileged to meet the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the £10 million for technical support that the Foreign Secretary referred to, in particular for security, justice and defence. Will he consider that those who have served in the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who have demonstrated substantial knowledge, experience and ability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia and Bosnia, should be part of the security training that will be offered?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. There has been an assumption across the House that any training that we give would have to be provided by UK military personnel. Some of what will be needed will be police training, and perhaps the PSNI in particular could make a contribution to that. It is also quite possible that some of the training—perhaps all training—will be delivered by contractors, and often ex-military personnel working for contractors, rather than by serving military personnel.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The main concern of my constituents in Kettering about Libya is that the country is the main and growing conduit for illegal immigration from safe and unsafe countries in Africa. If the Government of national accord in Libya are unwilling or unable to make this a national priority, and if my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is unable or unwilling to press the case for how important that is for us, what is the EU plan to prevent this year from being one of a disastrous set of circumstances in which we are about to experience a mass wave of illegal immigration very dangerously across the Mediterranean towards Italy?

Mr Hammond: To reassure my hon. Friend, the Libyan Government do understand the importance of that issue. They understand the importance for Libya because having organised criminal traffic across its borders undermines Libya’s sovereignty. They also understand the importance of addressing the issue for Libya’s relations with the international community. The point that I was making is that we must put this agenda in the context of the many other immediate challenges facing the Libyan people.

In answer to my hon. Friend’s second question about what the EU is doing in the meantime, EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia—the European naval operation in the Mediterranean—is designed to intercept people seeking to migrate on an irregular basis into the European Union from Libya.
Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime estimated that the illegal migrant trade is worth $255 million to $323 million a year, so the £10 million is a hugely welcome contribution towards stopping that awful trade. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that it will also help to plug that gap in Libya’s economy so that its purpose will be positive?

Mr Hammond: As I have said before, Libya is potentially a rich country. It has significant oil and gas wealth and significant assets, so if the Government can get their assets unfrozen, they will not lack cash. The £10 million is a UK technical assistance fund. It will fund experts, the commissioning of studies and advice to the Libyan Government in the areas that I outlined.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the entire region of the Fezzan to the south of Wadi al Shatti is something of a black hole. We do not have a good idea of what is going on there, but we do know that instability and the ready availability of arms have created a threat to the whole of sub-Saharan and west Africa, not only from Daesh, but from Boko Haram, who have armed themselves from the Gaddafi arsenals. Can my right hon. Friend update the House about what the Government are doing to tackle that threat to sub-Saharan and west Africa from Libya?

Mr Hammond: The Libyan Government are acutely aware of the threat to their sovereignty from the porosity of Libya’s borders to the south and south-west. I am speculating, but that could be one of the areas where the international community is asked for technical support in the future. This is a very, very long border in an unpopulated area that is ideally suited to policing by technical means, rather than by border guards on the ground. My hon. and learned Friend will be reassured that Prime Minister Sarraj stated to me very clearly yesterday that although his Government are in Tripoli and the world is focused on Tripoli, he is acutely conscious of the fact that this must be a Government for the east and south of the country, as well as a Government for the west.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): May I press the Foreign Secretary further on the question of where Libyan personnel might be trained in future? He will recall the unhappy saga in 2014 when some 2,000 Libyan personnel were trained at the Basingbourn barracks in Cambridgeshire. That ended very badly, with a series of violent sexual assaults in my city of Cambridge when many of the people who support the Government. But at the moment the Government do not have an alternative, and the effectiveness of the petroleum guard force and of the LNA in stemming Daesh attacks is an important part of the Government’s arsenal of defences. In the medium term, however, they will have to get all those units under some form of effective central control.

Mr Hammond: That is exactly what we are doing. It has taken a regrettably long time to get from the end of the campaign in 2011 and the overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi to the point where the Libyan people are now seriously starting to seek to rebuild their democracy and their economy, but they are now looking to do so and we will be there to support them.
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The idea of Daesh being present in Libya is worrying enough in its own right, but the prospect of them moving their operational headquarters from Iraq and Syria to Libya should be deeply worrying for us all, especially the Secretary of State. What discussions has he had with his Libyan counterparts and with those countries neighbouring Libya on stemming the flow of Islamic militants into the country?

Mr Hammond: I have had discussions with the Libyans and with the Egyptians and Tunisians, who are very concerned about this. The problem is that the principal route of access into Libya for Daesh militants appears to be by sea, and the Libyans are struggling to control that route with their current resources.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): We know from experience elsewhere that in fledgling democracies and troubled states that are rife with armed groups, corruption and conflict often become drivers for each other. We also know that refuge routes are being sought through Libya. In that context, is the Foreign Secretary right to minimise the relevance of a humanitarian and civil contribution, at least in the medium term?

Mr Hammond: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that Libya is not a poor country. There are tens of billions of dollars of Libyan assets owned by the Libyan people and available to the Libyan Government once the UN decides to unfreeze them, so I do not believe that Libya needs humanitarian support in the conventional sense. What it absolutely needs is technical support to build the governance structures that will allow the UN to release its own money to it.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Can the Foreign Secretary say something about the use of embedded troops in any future military operation? I appreciate that there is no immediate prospect of that—he has been very clear about that—but would the House be consulted on any British military personnel being embedded within the armed forces of other nations?

Mr Hammond: The statement that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary made yesterday clarified that point. Where troops or personnel are embedded in the military forces of other nations, they are treated as being part of those forces for operational purposes; they are not covered by the commitment we have made to come back to the House. It would be absurd if a British pilot embedded in the US navy, for example, maintaining our carrier base skills ahead of the commissioning of our own carriers in 2018, had to be the subject of a debate in the House of Commons because of some decision taken by the US Government.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): In answer to a question last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said that the Government would facilitate a visit of UK victims of terrorism that involved Semtex to Libya in the near future. Now that the Foreign Secretary has gone there, is there any timescale for when we can expect such a visit?

Mr Hammond: I do not think that the conditions would be right for such a visit right now, and I cannot see exactly what the point would be at this stage. Once the Government of national accord are established in their Ministries, with access to their records and their competent civil servants, and once our ambassador is back in Tripoli, I will certainly be prepared to see what we can do to facilitate such a visit.
1.47 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Treasury questions earlier today, a Minister, whether advertently or inadvertently, besmirched the work of the House of Commons Library. Given that the researchers in the Library are independent and impartial and their work is greatly valued by Members on both sides of the House, and given that, as servants of the House, they cannot come into the Chamber to defend their work, how can we put on the record that Members of Parliament of all political persuasions value and respect their work?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I would not seek to comment on the merits or demerits of a particular report. Suffice it to say, however, that I think the House of Commons Library service is held in universal esteem. I have always had the highest regard for the professionalism, competence, intellect and analytical skill of those who work in the Library service. Indeed, when I was first elected I was told, before employing researchers, first to see and realise the benefits that the Library service can bring. I was told that 19 years ago. It was true then, and it is true now. I am sure that nobody would want to suggest otherwise.

1.48 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the labelling of farm produce sold in the UK to include country of origin and whether produced in accordance with designated animal welfare standards; and for connected purposes.

Today I am arguing for more transparency—farm-to-fork traceability—to enable the British consumer to make a more informed decision about what they are buying. Currently we have a confusing mixture of voluntary standards bolted on to EU legislation, with some products offering greater clarity of origin and production standards than others. It took the Europe-wide scandal of horsemeat finding its way into our food chain to jolt the European Commission into action. That scandal was a big wake-up call for the meat industry EU-wide.

The UK is already implementing new EU rules on country-of-origin labelling for unprocessed pork, lamb and poultry. I stress that that meat is unprocessed, because there is a whole other confusion surrounding imported meat that is processed into, for example, sausages in the UK and then labelled as a British product. However, that is a can of worms for another day.

Although there are now better rules on labelling and the traceability of meat products, the same is not true for milk and milk used in dairy products, and that must change. Our British dairy farmers are having a tough time of it, and milk prices are very low. With Britain operating under current EU rules, we cannot unilaterally bring in mandatory country-of-origin labelling. To do that, we would need to get agreement from the Commission, but so far the Government have not been able to convince the Commission to agree, which is regrettable.

Currently the Commission favours only a voluntary code on dairy products. A May 2015 EU report covering dairy indicated that it was felt that introducing such a measure would prove costly and bureaucratic. However, our own Farming Minister has said:

“I do not accept the Commission’s argument that it would be too complicated and too difficult to do this on dairy products. It might on some dairy products, but on butter, on cheese, on some of the staple dairy products you could deliver country-of-origin labelling relatively inexpensively...The commission is very resistant to going this way, so we are not going anywhere fast on this agenda”.

Dr Judith Bryans, chief executive of Dairy UK, has said:

“There is obvious consumer demand for clearer information on the country of origin of food products as illustrated by the existing rules for fresh meat within the Food Information to Consumers Regulation...A mandatory labelling system would help the UK dairy industry showcase its products and reassure consumers on their provenance.”

There we have it: clear mandatory labelling is what our Government want. It is in the interests of British farmers and the British consumer.

The Government have said there is great potential for significant long-term growth in the UK dairy sector, with the global market expected to grow at more than
2% a year for the next 10 years. Globally, in or out of the EU, our dairy farmers should therefore have a bright future.

In its farm gate prices report in March 2016, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said:

“It is unacceptable that consumers cannot buy British in confidence and could be misled as to country of origin when they are buying food from their supermarket. It is essential that labelling on produce is improved.”

I wholly agree.

For consumers who care deeply about animal welfare, we also need clearer labelling covering animal-rearing processes. Consumers do care about how animals in the food chain are cared for during their short lives. There are specific EU requirements on the keeping of calves, pigs, laying hens and broilers. The EU banned conventional cramped cages for laying hens in 2012, and it specifically phased out the use of individual stalls for pregnant sows in 2013. Those appallingly stressful stalls keep pregnant sows caged, usually on concrete, so they cannot move about. Such stalls cut farmers’ costs, but they were banned for cruelty reasons in the UK in 1999. They were specifically banned in the rest of the EU from the start of 2013.

Shockingly, more than two years on from these stalls being banned on cruelty grounds, six EU countries are still officially non-compliant with their own key welfare standards. Such wilful non-compliance cuts costs for the farmers involved, but it perpetuates misery for animals. The consumer absolutely has a right to know that a cheap cut of pork on a supermarket shelf has been produced in banned conditions.

Dr Joyce D’Silva, ambassador for the campaign group Compassion in World Farming, has said she believes the countries failing to comply were France, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Finland and Slovenia. She has said:

“It is appalling that the European Commission has failed to enforce this law... The whole point of an EU-wide ban is to ensure it is a more level playing field”—a level playing field on the cost of pork production and on animal welfare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who co-sponsored the Bill with other hon. Members, and who is Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, accused the European Commission in October 2015 of “prevaricating” and of giving European farmers an “unfair advantage” by allowing them to flout an EU ban on sow stalls. That unfair advantage is bad for not only the pig but pig farmers, because it has led to 60% of our pork being imported, undercutting our farmers.

If the British consumer wants to be sure that the pork on their plate is cruelty-free, clearer mandatory labelling is the answer. Currently there is only one EU-wide system of compulsory labelling on animal welfare, and that is for table eggs. The EU has been slow in obliging other member states to adopt higher welfare standards. Perhaps that is why the EU strategy does not plan to extend welfare labelling beyond eggs. If it did, it would certainly shame some key EU countries over their unacceptable animal farming practices. The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation has said,

“As demand for livestock products continues to surge, particularly in developing countries, the importance of ethically sourced food becomes more important than ever as more animals are farmed.”

This country already has a voluntary scheme that demonstrates clear labelling and animal welfare—the Red Tractor scheme. It demonstrates that food is high-quality British produce and that it has been farmed, processed and packed in the UK. It is the largest food-assurance scheme in Britain. It ensures that food is traceable and safe to eat and that it has been produced responsibly.

Our farmers are doing the right thing, and they deserve our support. It is not right or fair that other European countries can dodge important animal welfare issues, hide anonymously behind inadequate labelling and at the same time undercut our farming industry. If British consumers were made aware of the lower welfare standard operating in many European countries, I believe they would choose to buy British and buy compassionately.

By bringing in the Bill, we will know where our milk has come from and where an animal was reared. Importantly, we will also know how well it was treated. By championing a robust, sustainable, compassionate British farming industry, we are delivering jobs and prosperity and ensuring our own food security. I believe that is what the British public want, and I would like our Government to bring in a Bill to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Mrs Anne Main, Martin Vickers, Andrew Percy, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, William Wragg, Mr David Nuttall, Stephen McPartland, Bill Wiggin, Neil Parish and Mr Nigel Evans present the Bill.

Mrs Anne Main accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 161).
Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 12

APPOINTMENT OF FINANCIAL CONDUCT AUTHORITY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

“In Schedule 1ZA to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (the Financial Conduct Authority), after paragraph 2 insert—

2A (1) The term of office of a person appointed as chief executive under paragraph 2(2)(b) must not begin before—

(a) the person has, in connection with the appointment, appeared before the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons, or
(b) (if earlier) the end of the period of 3 months beginning with the day on which the appointment is made.

(2) Sub-paragraph (1) does not apply if the person is appointed as chief executive on an acting basis, pending a further appointment being made.

(3) The reference to the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons—

(a) if the name of that Committee is changed, is to be referred to that Committee by its new name, and
(b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, is to be treated as a reference to the Committee by which those functions are exercisable.

(4) Any question arising under sub-paragraph (3) is to be determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.”

(Harriett Baldwin.)

This new clause provides that the term of office of a person appointed as chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority (otherwise than on a temporary basis) must not begin before the appointment is made. It also provides that the appointment should be confirmed.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.57 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment (a) to new clause 12, after paragraph 2A(1)(b) insert—

“(1A) If, before the term of office has begun, the Treasury Committee reports to the House that the appointment should not be confirmed, the Treasury shall not continue with the appointment unless the House of Commons resolves that the appointment should be confirmed.”

Amendment (b) to new clause 12, at end insert—

“In Schedule 1ZA to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, in paragraph 3(1), at the end insert”, except in the case of the chief executive of the FCA, who shall be appointed for a reappointable term of five years.”

New clause 1—Chief Executive of the Financial Conduct Authority—

“(1) Schedule 1ZA of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 2(2) insert—

“(2A) The Treasury shall not appoint a chief executive without the consent of the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons.”

(3) After paragraph 4(1) insert—

“(1A) But a chief executive appointed under paragraph 2(2)(b) is not to be removed from office without the consent of the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons.”

(4) After paragraph 27 insert—

‘References to Treasury Committee’

28 (1) Any reference in this Schedule to the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons—

(a) if the name of that Committee is changed, is to be treated as a reference to that Committee by its new name, and
(b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, is to be treated as a reference to the Committee by which those functions are exercisable.

(2) Any question arising under sub-paragraph (1) is to be determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.”

New clause 2—Composition of the Court of Directors of the Bank of England—

“In Schedule 1ZA to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(1) Schedule 1, Part VI to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) Any question arising under sub-paragraph (1) is to be determined by the Speaker of the House of Commons.”

New clause 3—Change in title of the Bank of England—


New clause 5—Sterling Central Bank—

“The Bank of England is renamed the Sterling Central Bank.”

This new clause would change the name of the Bank of England to reflect its position as the UK central bank and the UK’s shared currency.

New clause 6—Membership of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England—

“(1) Section 13 of the Bank of England Act 1998 is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of subsection 2(c), add “of whom one each must be nominated by the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.”

This new clause seeks to ensure representation of the four nations of the United Kingdom on the Monetary Policy Committee.

New clause 7—Objectives of the Monetary Policy Committee—

“After subsection 11(a) of the Bank of England Act 1998 there is inserted—

“(b) maximum employment, and.”

This new clause would expand the mandated objectives of the Monetary Policy Committee to include maximum employment.

New clause 8—Bank of England Accountability and Devolved Legislatures—

“(1) Schedule 1, Part VI to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of subsection 3(c), insert “of whom one each must be nominated by the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.”

This new clause would require the Governor of the Bank of England to appear before the economic committees of the devolved legislatures of the UK at least once a year.”

New clause 13—Freedom of Information—

“(1) Schedule 1, Part VI to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of subsection 3, insert “of whom one each must be nominated by the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.”

This new clause would require the Governor of the Bank of England to appear before the economic committees of the devolved legislatures of the UK at least once a year.”
Amendment 6, in clause 9, page 7, line 19, at end insert—

'(6A) The Comptroller may enquire into the Bank's success in achieving its stated policy objectives but shall not enquire into the desirability of such objectives having been set.

(6B) The Comptroller shall submit reports arising from the exercise of his powers under subsection (6A) to the Treasury Committee of the House of Commons (or any successor committee exercising the same or equivalent functions).

(6C) The Comptroller shall lay before Parliament, and publish, each report arising under subsection (6B) promptly unless, in the opinion of the Treasury Committee, publication of a particular report would be likely materially adversely to affect the stability or functioning of the UK's financial or banking system.'

Amendment 7, in clause 11, page 12, line 2, at beginning insert

"Subject to section 7ZA(6A) of the Bank of England Act 1998;"

Government amendment 3.

Harriett Baldwin: I would like to start by emphasising that the Treasury Committee is an esteemed Committee of this House and provides exceptional scrutiny of the Government and their regulators. Through its programme of pre-commencement hearings, it questions appointees to several posts before they start work. After appointees have started, they can expect to appear regularly before the Committee, and the public can expect the Committee to hold appointees firmly to account.

The Government welcome that scrutiny of appointees—it is a critical democratic function. That is why we have tabled new clause 12 to ensure in statute that the Committee can start, they can expect to appear regularly before the Committee, and the public can expect the Committee to hold appointees firmly to account.

The Comptroller shall lay before Parliament, and publish, each report arising under subsection (6B) promptly unless, in the opinion of the Treasury Committee, publication of a particular report would be likely materially adversely to affect the stability or functioning of the UK's financial or banking system.

Harriett Baldwin: I am speaking very narrowly to new clause 12. I am sure the Treasury Committee and other Committees will look at the issue again. I expect that motion and, should it result in a vote, they will respect the decision of the House. We will also seek an opportunity to alter the legislation governing appointments to the FCA chief executive officer, to make the appointee subject to a fixed, renewable 5-year term. This would not apply to Andrew Bailey, who I recently announced as the new head of the FCA, but would first apply to his successor.

I believe that these changes will reinforce the Treasury Committee's important scrutiny role.

Additionally, it does not stop there—"I will seek, in a future Bill, to make a change to the legislation governing appointments to the FCA CEO to make the appointee subject to a fixed, renewable 5-year term. This would not apply to Andrew Bailey, who I recently announced as the new head of the FCA, but would first apply to his successor.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): It would be helpful if the Economic Secretary could assure the House that that future Bill will be introduced sooner rather than later.

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the shadow Chancellor welcomes Government new clause 12 and the news that we will carefully consider the earliest possible opportunity for doing that, following today's debate.

As the letter states, should the Treasury Committee follow the pre-commencement hearing with a report recommending that the appointment be put as a motion to the whole House, the Government will make time for that motion and, should it result in a vote, they will respect the decision of the House. We will also seek an opportunity to alter the legislation governing appointments to the FCA chief executive officer, to make the appointee subject to a fixed, renewable, five-year term. I can confirm that Andrew Bailey, the new CEO of the FCA, has been appointed to a five-year term that can be renewed, so the agreed process will first apply to his successor. The agreement is the right way to reinforce the crucial scrutiny role of the Treasury Committee.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful to the Economic Secretary, who is being extremely generous with her time. What she has said is extremely welcome and a significant step forward. Will she explain why the Chancellor thought it better not to insert it in the Bill, but to make the arrangement through an exchange of letters?
Harriett Baldwin: We tabled our new clause on Thursday and, as I have said, there have been further discussions with the Chair of the Treasury Committee. I am delighted to be able to announce the result of those discussions today.

I also want to take a moment to address the question of dismissals of the FCA chief executive. I can confirm that the Government do not have the power, except in very limited circumstances, to dismiss the chief executive of the FCA during his or her term of office. I refer the House to paragraph 4 of schedule IZA to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which applies to the chair and the external members, as well as to the CEO, and states:

“The Treasury may remove an appointed member from office…on the grounds of incapacity or serious misconduct, or…on the grounds that in all the circumstances the member's financial or other interests are such as to have a material effect on the extent of the functions as member that it would be proper for the person to discharge.”

The lawyers are clear that the only reasons the Treasury can dismiss an FCA chief executive are incapacity, serious misconduct and conflicts of interest. I hope that offers the House considerable reassurance.

Mark Field: It is worth saying a little about what happened in relation to Martin Wheatley. Although he was not technically dismissed, his term was not renewed. The situation was straightforward. In July 2015, it was announced that his term would not be renewed in March 2016. As a result, he left his office six months early. I accept that that may have been a mutual decision between the Treasury and Mr Wheatley, but it certainly gave the impression, at least, that, even if it was not a fully fledged dismissal, it was a non-renewal, and, ultimately, the exit from office came six months before the end of a fixed term.

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend has stated the facts about the term of office to which Martin Wheatley was appointed and the fact that the Government chose not to renew it. It is appropriate to pay what I hope is a cross-party tribute to the excellent work of the acting chief executive, Tracey McDermott, who stepped into the role at that time. She has carried out the role for almost a full year in an absolutely exemplary fashion.

Unless there are any further questions on the new clause, I am going to move on to the amendments relating to devolution. I am inviting interventions, but there are none.

The next set of amendments, which stand in the names of the hon. Members for East Lothian (George Kerevan), for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), force us to ask exactly who the Bank works for. The answer must be the entire United Kingdom. Indeed, that is emphasised in the Bank’s mission statement, “to promote the good of the people of the United Kingdom by maintaining monetary and financial stability.”

To fulfil that mandate, the Bank of England goes to great lengths to ensure that it has a comprehensive understanding of the economic and financial situation across all corners of the United Kingdom. The Bank has a network of 12 agencies, which are located across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England. Each year, those agents undertake some 5,500 company visits and participate in panel discussions with approximately a further 3,500 businesses. In that context, imposing a requirement to have regard to regional representation on the court is unnecessary. A comprehensive framework for regional information-gathering already exists.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Economic Secretary inform me who the Welsh representative is, because I have absolutely no idea who represents Welsh interests at the Bank of England and I am Plaid Cymru’s Treasury spokesperson?

Harriett Baldwin: I will make sure that that person makes him or herself known to the hon. Gentleman with the greatest of speed. It is important to point out that the agents do not engage with us as politicians. The agent for the west midlands and Worcestershire is very engaged with my local businesses, but I as a politician have never had a meeting with them. That is how it should work.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I realise that the Economic Secretary is trying to be helpful, but does she not recognise that there is a strategic difference between the process of information-gathering through the agents and that of policy-making through the bodies of the Bank itself? That is where we are asking for representation.

Harriett Baldwin: I will get to that point later in my remarks. As always, I seek to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman, so I hope that he will enjoy those remarks when I get to them.

We believe that it is unnecessary to impose the requirement in new clause 2 to have regard to regional representation on the court, which is effectively the board of directors of the Bank of England, because of the comprehensive framework for regional information gathering that already exists. In addition, if we found a candidate with the perfect profile to serve on the court, but we insisted on downgrading them because they lived in an over-represented part of the country, that would not be the best way to produce an effective court.

I have been clear that in setting both monetary and financial stability policy, the Bank must take into account economic conditions in, and the impact of policy decisions on, every part of the UK. Monetary and financial stability policy must be set on a UK-wide basis. None of the 65 million people whom this House represents would be well served if, for example, different capital requirements applied to banks in different parts of the UK. Of course, monetary policy must be consistent. It is completely impossible to set different interest rates in different regions, so monetary and financial stability are, rightly, reserved policy areas.

The men and women who make up the Bank’s policy committees must have their decisions scrutinised, but since policy must be set UK-wide, this Parliament must hold them to account. This Parliament holds power over reserved matters, which these issues rightly are, and the Members of this Parliament represent people from every part of the country on an equal basis. Likewise, Ministers, who are accountable to the House and who hold their positions with the support of a majority of the House of Commons, must be responsible
for making the external appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee, each member of which is responsible for considering the impact of their policy decisions on all 65 million people in the UK.

We also return to the question of the Bank’s 300-year-old name. It is important to recognise the reputation associated with a name built up over such a long period. During that time, the Bank has come to be globally renowned as a strong, independent central bank. We should not underestimate the importance of that. International confidence in the Bank of England helps to support international confidence in our economy and currency.

I turn to the monetary framework. The Government amendment in this group is modest. The Bill reduces the minimum frequency of Monetary Policy Committee meetings from monthly to at least eight times in every calendar year, and our amendment adjusts the reporting requirements of the Monetary Policy Committee to match.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Minister moved on very quickly from the matter of the name. I just want to clarify whether the Government have a view on changing the name of the Bank of England to reflect the fact that it is the Bank for all the nations of the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding the fact that in normal, everyday parlance it will, I am sure, still be referred to as the Bank of England, its long and proper title surely should reflect all nations of the United Kingdom.

Harriett Baldwin: I respect and pay tribute to the fact that the Bank of England was founded by someone from Scotland, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that this is an historical anomaly. I would be the first to accept that the monetary policy of the Bank of England is set for the whole United Kingdom. That does not mean to say that we will accept the new clauses that would change the name of the Bank of England, because we think that its name has been well established over 300 years.

Mark Field: I think that the Treasury is right, in this instance, not to change the name. The Bank of England has a brand. I do not need to give a history lesson to the nationalist Members, but the Bank of England was founded in 1694, which was before the 1707 and 1800 Acts of Union that might—for two of the three other parts of the United Kingdom, at least—otherwise have had an impact on its initial name. Its brand is important, and I hope that those from the other parts of the United Kingdom will not feel as though their interests are being downgraded simply because they do not appear in the headline name, not least for the reasons that have been set out. It is important that we recognise that the Bank acts for the entirety of the United Kingdom, and that it therefore pays great attention to the voices of those in all parts of the United Kingdom, not just England.

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, and on that point I hope that the support of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for the united nature of our kingdom means that the Scottish National party has moved on from the discussions of last year in which it wanted to break up the United Kingdom. I hope that the party will accept the settled will of the Scottish people to continue to benefit from monetary policy that applies right across the country.

2.15 pm

Jonathan Edwards: Further to the points made by the Minister and the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), the new clause tabled by my colleague the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) will address the issue that they spoke about. As a keen cricketer, I know that the official title of the governing body is the England and Wales Cricket Board, but it is named “England” for all promotional purposes. Even if we accept the well-intentioned new clause tabled by my colleague from the Scottish National party, the Bank of England will still be known, in promotional terms, as the Bank of England.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman tries to tempt me down the path of comparisons with sports teams, but I decline to be tempted. The Government amendment is modest: the Bill reduces the frequency of MPC meetings from monthly to at least eight times in every calendar year, and the amendment will simply adjust the reporting requirements of the MPC to match.

New clause 6, tabled by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, suggests that we give the MPC a second primary objective of maximising employment. We conducted a comprehensive review of the monetary policy framework in 2013 and concluded that a flexible inflation targeting framework offered the best approach. Employment is already explicitly part of the MPC’s objectives. Its secondary objective is “to support the economic policy of Her Majesty’s Government, including its objectives for growth and employment.”

The most recent MPC remit letter summarised the Government’s economic policy as being “to achieve strong, sustainable and balanced growth that is more evenly shared across the country and between industries”.

George Kerevan: I thank the Minister for her forbearance in giving way again. She is taking refuge in the Bank of England’s existing mandate, a mandate that all Members, on both sides of the House, know has long since become redundant. The inflation target has been dead in the water for years and years, because inflation is nowhere near 2% and is not likely to be for a long time. Implicit in the new clause is the fact that we are seeking about for other policy measures to replace the 2% inflation target. Will the Minister address the question of what future targets the Bank of England should have to address the needs of a deflationary era, rather than the inflationary era of the last 20 years?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. There are many opportunities in Parliament, in the scrutiny of the Bank of England by the Committee of which he is a member, to ask those important questions. The Government choose to use the mechanism of the letter process and the remit. The hon. Gentleman and I are both old enough to know how inflation has changed over the years—[HON. MEMBERS: “Surely not!”] I know; surely we are not. We should all welcome the significant lowering of inflation expectations, and we should all remember how important it is that we continue to ask the Bank of England to keep inflation under control, so
that we never return to the kinds of impoverishing inflationary policies that so harmed people—particularly the poorest and oldest in society—during the 1970s.

Price stability must have primacy, because we judge that having a single lever aimed primarily at a single objective is the best way to make sure that the inflation target is credible. That, in turn, anchors all-important inflation expectations and helps us to keep inflation under control. Our system has shown that it produces good labour market outcomes. Despite global uncertainty, we have record numbers of people in work, an unemployment rate that is at its lowest in a decade, and a claimant count that has not been lower for more than 40 years. Moreover, targeting low inflation ensures that hard-earned wages are not eroded by inflation.

**Mark Field:** I must confess that I entirely agree with what the Minister is saying about inflation. I, too, am old enough to remember what inflation was like, particularly in the 1970s. However, it seems to me that the Bank of England's sole monetary policy lever is to say that we must keep the inflation rate down. Surely we must recognise that inflation has now been well below the 2% target for a long time. I accept that we should never believe that inflation, and all the distortions it makes in our economy, has been entirely vanquished, but should there be a different inflation target, or a different set of remits for the Bank of England, to recognise that it should pay attention to other aspects of the economy in its monetary policy?

**Harriett Baldwin:** My right hon. Friend, who is an extremely wise and knowledgeable person—I will not refer in any way to his age—highlights an important point. He also emphasises the behavioural characteristic of the recession effect. Inflation is well below the 2% target today, but only during the lifetime of the last Parliament it was above 5%. Even during the six years that I have been a Member, we have tested the parameters of the inflation target. I do not think there is any need for us to make any changes to that target this afternoon.

I will conclude by speaking briefly to amendments 6 and 7 and new clause 13. The first part of amendment 6 states:

“The Comptroller may enquire into the Bank’s success in achieving its stated policy objectives but shall not enquire into the desirability of such objectives having been set.”

The Bill, as drafted, will already have that exact effect.

The second part of amendment 6 directs how the Comptroller and Auditor General should submit his reports. Parliament has delegated to the Comptroller discretion over the content of National Audit Office reports and the timing of their publication, and it is important that this independent officer of Parliament is able to use his judgment on how Parliament and the public are best served. The National Audit Act 1983 provides that the Comptroller “may report to the House of Commons the results of any examination”.

Once he has reported to the House, it is open to any Committee of this House to inquire into matters on which he has reported. There is an in-built incentive for prompt publication as it mitigates the risk of the report’s conclusions being overtaken by events.

Amendment 7 would disapply restrictions in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 on the disclosure of specially protected information in relation to reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Information is specially protected under these rules if it is held by the Bank for the purposes of monetary policy, for financial operations supporting financial institutions in maintaining financial stability, or for private banking purposes. Similarly, new clause 13, in the name of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), would remove three corresponding exclusions in the Freedom of Information Act 2000. I hope I can persuade the House that each of the three categories of protected information is entirely sensible.

The first category applies to the Bank’s monetary policy functions. How we communicate monetary policy is extremely important. It moves markets in substantial ways and every detail of the published minutes is scrutinised for predictions of future changes. Managing disclosure while making sure information is presented in a timely way is vital. That is why the original legislation creating the Monetary Policy Committee in 1998 set out the full range of disclosure requirements, including publication of the minutes and of a quarterly inflation report. Since then, the Bank has implemented the recommendations of Governor Warsh’s review of MPC transparency.

Through the Bill, we are supporting full implementation of the recommendations of that review.

The second exclusion applies to “financial operations intended to support financial institutions for the purposes of maintaining stability”.

Hon. Members will understand that if the Bank has to extend emergency liquidity assistance, very careful communication is a critical element of preserving stability. Any covert assistance will be reported privately to the Chairs of the Treasury and Public Accounts Committees, while broader liquidity schemes for institutions, such as the special liquidity scheme and the discount window facility, may be announced to the markets.

Finally, the Bank’s very limited private banking services are excluded from FOI requests. We often forget that the Bank of England also provides private banking to customers. As I am sure hon. Members will agree, it would be entirely inappropriate to subject ordinary bank customer information to disclosure.

**Richard Burdon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I rise to speak to amendments 6 and 7 and new clause 12 on the appointment of the FCA chief executive.

I came to the House ready to speak in support of new clause 1, which seeks to give the Treasury Committee a formal role in the appointment of the chief executive of the FCA. In my view, new clause 1 is better placed to guarantee the competence and independence of the regulator than the new clause in the name of the Chancellor, which in our original reading of it did too little to change the status quo. New clause 12 was tabled in response to the new clause tabled by the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie). We had a similar debate in Committee on an amendment about the appointment process for the chief executive of the Prudential Regulation Authority.
Since 2008, Select Committees have routinely held pre-appointment hearings for a number of public appointments, and some candidates have not been approved. The coalition Government developed the scrutiny agenda when the Chancellor agreed in 2010 to the Treasury Committee having a power of veto over appointments to the Office for Budget Responsibility. The Public Accounts Committee has a veto over the appointment of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee and the Financial Policy Committee of the Bank of England are made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and are then subject to a confirmation hearing by the Treasury Committee. The Treasury Committee has powers over the chair and board members of the Office for Budget Responsibility, an arrangement that the Chancellor told the Treasury Committee he would put in place “because I want there to be absolutely no doubt that this is an independent body”.

The Minister will be aware that, when it examined the proposals for the future FCA in 2013, the Treasury Committee made a number of recommendations on the accountability of the new body to Parliament, including that the legislation should provide that the chief executive of the FCA be subject to pre-appointment scrutiny by the Treasury Committee. I recall that the Treasury Committee was disappointed by the Government response, particularly in view of the deficiencies in the accountability mechanisms for the Financial Services Authority.

As we have heard, the view of the Treasury Committee was set out in the Treasury Committee Chair’s letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 26 January, following the appointment of the current PRA chief executive, Andrew Bailey, to be the next leader of the FCA. In that letter, the right hon. Gentleman set out his Committee’s view that it should have a veto over the appointment and dismissal of the chief executives of both the FCA and the PRA. Indeed, the letter said that the FCA’s chair, John Griffith-Jones, told the Committee, when he met its members on 20 January, that there was merit in that proposal.

In Committee, I flagged up this matter and said it would be helpful to know whether the Chancellor had shared his thinking on such calls to extend pre-appointment hearings and the power of veto to those two positions. Now we have had his reply. It was in the Minister’s ring binder. As she said, it was “exciting” to hear the contents of it, and we got a fantastic insight into the fireside exchanges within the Government. Labour Members believe that the Treasury Committee should have greater authority over the future of financial regulation in this country.

On Government new clause 12, it is unclear what would happen in the period between the appointment of the chief executive and him or her appearing before the Committee. Would they be left in limbo, or would they in fact be settling into their new post? Would we be disappointed—in practice, would it simply be business as usual, with the Treasury Committee not given the power that we all believe it deserves? We do not believe that simply requiring any new chief of the FCA to appear before the Committee within three months of appointment delivers anything particularly new. It is reasonable to expect that any new postholder would appear before the Committee within that timeframe in any event, whether or not that appearance was codified.

2.30 pm

With regard to new clause 12, however, I am pleased to note the exciting news—the Minister herself has called it that, as have I—that by means of the Chancellor’s letter the Government have communicated that they accept the broad thrust of the proposals put forward by the Chair of the Treasury Committee. I also note and welcome the Minister’s commitment today to introduce the relevant legislation, in her own words, sooner rather than later. I politely suggest that the changes be introduced in the Finance Bill shortly—that is an opportunity not to be missed.

I turn to Labour’s amendments 6 and 7, containing measures that we have tabled after they were discussed in Committee, and new clause 13, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). Each of those measures, in its own way, addresses the crucial issue of the need for transparency and openness in the Bank of England. The National Audit Office’s power to investigate the Bank has been subject to discussion at each stage of the Bill in both this House and the other place. The Comptroller and Auditor General was clearly concerned about proposals in the Bill that would have allowed the court of directors a veto over the new powers for the NAO. I am pleased to say that there has been clear progress on the issue as the Bill has proceeded through both Houses in particular, the veto was removed in the other place. As hon. Members will recall, in response the Government proposed a memorandum of understanding between the Bank and the National Audit Office; I understand the draft of that has been welcomed by both sides.

Opposition amendments 6 and 7 seek to extend and clarify the powers of the comptroller to inquire into the Bank’s success in achieving its policy objectives. We believe that that does not encroach beyond the boundaries of questioning the merits of policy decisions, but would assist the National Audit Office in ascertaining whether the Bank is delivering value for money.

**Mark Field:** I have a brief question on amendment 6. Although I accept that transparency and openness are the spirit of the age and we cannot necessarily move entirely against that—[Laughter.] We do our level best some of the time. I am sure that the Treasury will be at the vanguard of this. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, at times of great difficulty, when there are issues about the stability or functioning of the UK’s financial banking system, it would be appropriate not just for the Treasury Committee but for the Treasury itself to have some say in suggesting when openness should not be fully fledged? The safeguards that he has put in place in the amendment refer only to the Treasury Committee; does he not see that there might be instances when Ministers rightly have concerns about issues of stability that should be protected from open transparency at least for a time, although there could then be a move to make the minutes and other things more open at some future point, once the particular threat had passed?

**Richard Burgon:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It may be that transparency is the spirit not just of the age but of the future—we shall see. I draw his attention to the wording in the amendment: “The Comptroller shall submit reports arising from the exercise of his powers under subsection (6A)”. It is not a completely open-book policy.
On new clause 2, which is in the name of the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), Labour sees merit in the proposal for wider geographical representation on the board. In Committee, we tabled an amendment making the case for amending the composition of the court to ensure that different stakeholders were represented, including having dedicated places for customers and practitioners.

Similarly, we support new clause 13 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland. She has a long track record in campaigning for greater transparency in financial services, and her new clause suits well with our amendments, as it seeks to empower the National Audit Office further by making the case for greater powers for freedom of information requests.

I now turn to new clauses 3 and 5, put forward by the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru respectively. Both new clauses would change the name of the Bank of England. In fact the SNP was so keen to discuss its proposal that it tabled it twice. We discussed that measure in Committee and it is before us again. It seeks specifically to have the name of Scotland, as well as those of Wales and Northern Ireland, as part of the title of the Bank. The SNP has now been joined by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who has taken a different tack and removed all national names; his new clause would mean that the name of the Bank referred solely to the currency—for the avoidance of doubt, that is sterling, not Stirling. We were happy to support the SNP’s proposal in Committee, recognising as it does the unifying role of the Bank—that has been expressed again today—as one which services all parts of the United Kingdom, and we will support it again.

New clauses 6, 7 and 8 and Government amendment 3 have a number of merits. New clause 7, in the name of the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), sets out a new mandated objective for the Monetary Policy Committee to include maximum employment. New clause 6 proposes the nomination of representatives on the MPC from the devolved authorities of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and new clause 8 argues that the Bank should be more accountable for its decisions to those same bodies.

The Labour party has established a review into the mandate of the Monetary Policy Committee under former MPC member David Blanchflower. We have said previously that we will look at a wide range of ideas, including what can be learned from the US Federal Reserve. That will include considering the importance of growth, employment and earnings in the MPC’s deliberations. Indeed, on new clause 7, David Blanchflower has himself written in City A.M.—the favourite publication of the Labour Front-Bench team—that he will consider the issue of maximising employment in his review. He is also looking at the structure, size and, crucially, gender balance of the MPC, optimal policy rules, asymmetrical targeting and the relationship with fiscal policy, as well as the frequency of the MPC’s meetings.

Therefore, although we welcome the proposal for the Bank to report to the devolved authorities, we will not support the new clauses on the MPC today. We see merit in them as part of an ongoing debate, but look forward to considering and sharing the results of David Blanchflower’s review in due course. With that, I draw my comments on this group of measures to a conclusion.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): First of all, that was a very good speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on covering quite a lot of ground in a good deal of detail—and with a sense of humour, which I enjoyed. I was also pleased that he got in one or two points—it saves me the trouble—about the OBR and its importance as a precedent for what we are discussing today.

I will also say—although only in a sentence, otherwise I am sure that I will get told to be quiet by you, Madam Deputy Speaker—that this is a very good Bill. In many respects, it implements a good number of the wider objectives for Bank of England scrutiny and accountability for which the Treasury Committee has for many years been pushing. I thank members of the Treasury Committee in the previous Parliament and in this one who have pressed for these measures vigorously. It shows that things can be achieved if one persists.

I am grateful to the Minister for her assistance over a number of days, and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who followed up a telephone conversation last night with an exchange of letters. We have now reached an agreement on how to proceed, so I will not need to press new clause 1 to a Division.

Following the exchange of letters, most of the objectives that we sought through new clause 1 are provided for, and it is worth going through the key points, which the Minister effectively clarified by reading out the Chancellor’s letter. First, appointments will be made in a way that ensures that the Treasury Committee can hold a hearing in good time. Before the appointment is formalised, the question of whether there is a pre-commencement or pre-appointment hearing is, in my view, a distinction without a difference. Secondly, if the Committee disagrees with the appointment, it will report that to the House, and, if they choose, the Government must find time for a debate on the Treasury Committee’s report. That debate will be on a motion to accept the conclusion of the Committee. The Government will then have to vote it down. The Government further agree that they will respect the decision of the House once that vote has been taken.

Thirdly—this point has already been raised—at the earliest opportunity, the Government will amend legislation to ensure that future appointments of the chief executive of the FCA are made on a fixed renewable five-year term. I expect that legislative change to take place in the next parliamentary Session. I am not sure that the proviso would satisfy the long title of a Finance Bill but, if it does, I would expect the Government to include it in that Bill. I also recognise that the Chancellor could not fully commit over the phone that the change would take place in the next Session, since he will have had no opportunity to secure an agreement on the legislative time from his Cabinet colleagues. I expect, however, that he will do that as soon as possible. It will be a pretty small, self-contained Bill. The fourth point, which has not been mentioned so far, is that it is the Chancellor’s clear view—I am not in any way misrepresenting him—that the arrangements that are being put in place should be the permanent method of appointment, rather than something that will just disappear with this Chancellor or, indeed, the helpful Minister at the Dispatch Box, however supportive she may be of the proposals.
Why has the Treasury Committee devoted so much time to this issue? I have a specific and a general answer to that. On the specifics, there have been widespread concerns that the independence of the FCA has been compromised by the circumstances of Martin Wheatley’s departure, and by other apparent interference in the FCA’s work by senior Treasury officials, and perhaps Ministers. We explored those circumstances through cross-examination in Committee and found no such evidence. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) got right to the point when he said that the appearance or perception of interference none the less remains. That perception makes it harder for regulators to do their job, so it had to be addressed. Bolstering the perceived independence of this key appointment, and ensuring that the individual cannot easily be removed by the Treasury, seemed crucial to the Committee.

Mark Field: For the record, I do not think there was any undue interference from the Treasury, and I am happy that Andrew Bailey is taking over—he will be a good chief executive. None the less, there was that perception within the square mile and we must hold that fairly close to our hearts.

May I also say how much I approve of the Treasury accepting the guts of new clauses 1 and 9? It is greatly to its credit that we have not had to go through the House of Lords, because it does a discourtesy to this House when such changes are made through amendments in the House of Lords, rather than being part and parcel of discussions in advance of Report.

2.45 pm

Mr Tyrie: One other issue is the apparent statutory protection against dismissal, which came into question as a result of Martin Wheatley’s departure. Whatever the reality, the current statutory protection appeared inadequate, which was perhaps because he was appointed only for a three-year term. Five years—a goodly and longer term—will provide more protection. To put it even more simply, the changes rectify in another way the risk of arbitrary dismissal. For example, if the Treasury Committee strongly supports keeping the incumbent after four and a half years, it can make that abundantly clear in a report and recommend to the House of Commons that any other candidate is voted down. So in practice, with the letter, we already have the protection that we wanted.

The FCA needs a strong and demonstrably independent chief executive, accountable to Parliament. It endured a difficult birth and struggled to emerge from the rubble of the failed FSA. Some of its best staff have been poached by the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Bank and the private sector, and it has been hitting the headlines for all the wrong reasons, not least with the breach of its own listing rules, which wiped 20% off the share value of the life assurance sector. With what will amount to a requirement for parliamentary approval of future appointments or dismissals of the FCA chief executive, the incumbent will now be in a strong position to resist pressure from Ministers and officials, and their authority will be bolstered.

The fact that this is a non-statutory change—unlike new clause 1, which would have been in the Bill—does not perturb me a great deal. Any attempt by the current or future Chancellor to circumvent these arrangements is likely to lead to a complete collapse of trust between the Treasury Committee and the Government, and I do not foresee that happening.

Mark Field: Does my right hon. Friend have some small concern that if a measure is not included in the Bill, no precedent will be set? To return to an earlier exchange that I tried to have with the Minister, that might give the Treasury licence to take this as a sui generis case, rather than recognising that the Treasury Committee should perhaps have a more important role in approving the appointments of a number of senior figures in the financial services firmament.

Mr Tyrie: That argument can be turned on its head. One can argue that this sets a precedent that is more easily rolled out, without the need for statutory change, to other bodies. In the Treasury field, we now have a statutory double lock for the appointment and dismissal of the head of the Office for Budget Responsibility, which was recently found to be of some use following controversy about alleged interference in the production of the forecast—again, we did not find any evidence of that, but the perception of it might have weakened the OBR. We have a requirement for a resolution of the House prior to the appointment of the chairman of the Office for National Statistics, and now we also have these arrangements. So we have a battery of different arrangements on which to draw.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on achieving this great success for parliamentary scrutiny, and I suggest that it is better to proceed in a non-statutory way. Bringing statute into the proceedings of the House always presents longer term problems, and setting a non-statutory precedent has lots of advantages.

Mr Tyrie: I always like listening to my hon. Friend, who is a member of the Treasury Committee and, of course, a constitutional expert. It is certainly true in this place that a good deal of quasi-constitutional change, which is what we have here, tends to take place gradually and often due to the development of informal arrangements. I think that that is all to the good, which is what I think my hon. Friend is saying.

Helen Goodman rose—

Mr Tyrie: Everyone is trying to pile in, whereas I am trying to get to the end of my speech. I was almost there a minute ago, but I give way.

Helen Goodman: Does the right hon. Gentleman not feel the slightest hint of disappointment in the intervention by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) because it was surely a historic first that he signed a new clause to amend the British constitution?

Mr Tyrie: Of course my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), as a great and learned constitutional expert, will explain this apparent contradiction to the House in, I hope, a lengthy disquisition in a few minutes’ time.

I really am trying to conclude, but I have just one more point. It is essential in a 21st-century democracy that appointees to an increasing number of quango positions—this was the general point I said I would
Refer to earlier—should be forced to explain their actions before Parliament and also should feel accountable to Parliament. To achieve that, the means of their appointment and their protection from dismissal are relevant, and that is why a change such as this can offer us something.

Over decades, successive Governments have offloaded their responsibilities to quangos, leaving the public with the sense that nobody is ultimately democratically accountable for anything. I believe that accountability for decisions that were formerly taken directly by Ministers, but now sit with unelected appointees in quangos, needs thorough scrutiny and cross-examination, and that is what we have been trying to do in the Treasury Committee over the past few years.

The agreement with the Chancellor is a sizeable step in the right direction. Of course, in an ideal world, I would like access to the statute book to write exactly what, on behalf of the Treasury Committee, I feel should be on it. However, we live in the real world, and I am very happy with this exchange of letters and grateful to Ministers for their agreement. I shall not press new clause 1 to a Division today.

George Kerevan: I agree with the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) that there is a lot to be commended in the Bill, although some of the good things, as with new clause 12, were pushed on the Government. I also think that there are still some negative aspects to the Bill, which brings me to a conclusion—[Interruption.] As usual, it will be quite a long conclusion!

The Bill began as a tidying-up operation, which is why it was launched in the House of Lords. It was seen to be about just tidying up a few things, making a few additions and changes to the Financial Services Act 2012. As the Bill proceeded through its various stages, however, the more it became apparent that it exposed a whole series of issues in the financial regulatory system that were not fit for purpose.

We have convinced ourselves—or at least the Government have convinced themselves—that bar a little tidying up, all has been done to resolve the crisis of 2007, but that is not true. What we discovered time and again as the Bill proceeded were issues with the operation of the Bank of England and issues with the functioning of the regulatory bodies and how fit for purpose they are. Furthermore, new issues have emerged only in the last few weeks regarding tax havens. All those problems have appeared. I do not see this Bill putting the problems away and putting the issues to bed. Rather, we are seeing the start of a whole series of pieces of legislation coming into force until we get it right. Far from it being a tidying-up operation, we have started something new.

I am speaking to new clauses 2 and 3, which stand in my name and those of my SNP colleagues. I believe they get to the nub of the issues we are facing as a result of what has been uncovered. In the last 20 years, and more particularly in the last 10, the Bank of England has acquired an extraordinary range of new powers. I do not mean just forecasting or supervising powers over banks, because fundamental policy levers for running the whole economy have been transferred from this House and the Executive to the Bank of England itself. This began with the transfer of powers over interest rates to the Bank of England in 1997, along with the power to set the exchange rates, which no one seemed to notice at the time. This gave the Bank de facto control over our external sector. More recently, of course, with quantitative easing, the Bank has forced interest rates down to the zero band. If monetary policy cannot be manipulated, what else can be done? Gradually, the Bank has been given powers over large swaths of fiscal policy.

Nowadays, the Bank of England even operates our housing policy, as housing determines the whole direction of economic growth. In recent weeks, the Bank has been deciding between buy for let or buy for homeowners. Micro-decisions have been transferred, and my worry is that we have crossed a line of accountability with respect to the Bank of England. This is not a criticism of individuals working for it or indeed of the Governor of the Bank of England, for whom I have high regard. Gradually, however, we have allowed it to take over from this House far too much of the operational policy that directs the economy.

That is why I am happy to support new clause 12 as a step forward in beginning to redress the balance of accountability. New clause 12 and the Government’s acceptance of the general line of march from the Treasury Committee means that we are beginning to move to the point where key members of the regulatory regime can be confirmed in their appointments by this House.

We now have two precedents in that direction, with the Treasury Committee as a servant of the House confirming the appointment of the director of the Office for Budget Responsibility and now the head of the Financial Conduct Authority. That is the line of march, but I want to put on record, however, that SNP Members view this as a down payment. We are moving in a direction where the Governor of the Bank of England and all the key members of the regulatory agencies have to be confirmed by this House. I know that will take a long time and that there is always a struggle—sometimes gentle, sometimes not—between the Executive and the House over who has the real say. What we are seeing is a move towards more democratic accountability being held by the House, which I welcome.

Let me move on briefly to new clause 2, which takes this process a little further. Given the policy direction and powers that now lie with the Bank of England, we have to make sure that its committees and, above all, its Select Committee means that we are beginning to move to the point where key members of the regulatory regime can be confirmed in their appointments by this House.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. Does he agree that it must be significant that the economic performance of the peripheral areas of these nations is also peripheral?
3 pm

George Kerevan: I could not agree more. In fact, if we look at the long history of the regions and nations of the United Kingdom—Scotland, Wales, the north of England and Northern Ireland—we see that they have suffered a deflationary cycle since the second world war, because from 1945 onwards, by and large, interest rates were set to control inflation that was triggered by the City of London and over-lending by the City of London. As a result, the north-south divide became a deflationary line, with the nations of the north, and the regions of the north of England, suffering high interest rates. Although those rates were not germane to their economic problems, for most of the post-war period UK interest rates have, on average, been set at a higher level than those in the rest of Europe, simply in order to control and curb over-lending by the City of London, which has resulted in deflation in the industrial regions.

I consider that that might have been mitigated to some extent if there had been broader representation of the nations and their industries on the leading bodies of the Bank of England, and, although I know that the Executive will challenge my proposal, I think we need to move in that direction. I remind Members that the court of directors is not the institution of the Bank that actually makes monetary or fiscal policy. It has oversight over the whole of the Bank’s operations, in the sense of giving value for money, and, above all, ensuring that there is no group-think between the different committees that make operational policy. I therefore think that, at that level, we need to begin the process. At that level, we need wider representation on the court.

Surprisingly—and I raised this in Committee—such representation already exists to a small degree. Since world war 2, traditionally, there has always been a trade union representative on the court of the Bank of England, and there still is to this day. Even the Government—indeed, successive Governments—have recognised that there can be wider representation on the court, including wider social representation. However, when I asked Ministers whether, if they were rejecting the notion of a court with a wider representation of the economy and the community, they were going to remove trade union representation, there was a deafening silence, and that is why I am putting the question again today. Those who accept the principle that there should be trade union representation—and there should—ought to widen that principle, and that is what I am asking for now.

We tabled the new clause carefully in order not to suggest that the court should be federal or too detailed, with someone representing this and someone else representing that, but simply to suggest that a balance was needed. As anyone who has sat on the board of a company will know, the first thing that one must do when creating a board is ensure that there is some representation of different skills and different interests, so that the board’s members can act as a collective. My point is that the court, and to some extent, I think, the new policy committees of the Bank of England, do not act as collectives. They are in danger of adopting silo thinking, and, ultimately—because of the power that we have given to the Bank of England—they are also in danger of beginning to act with the kind of hubris that central banks begin to wield when they are given too much power. They begin to think that they know everything when they do not. We need democratic accountability in the Bank of England, and we need it not in the sense in which the Bank understands it, but in the sense in which the nation, and the nations of the UK, understand it. That is why I will press the new clause to a vote later on.

We have made some progress with the Bill. I fear that that progress has consisted mostly of discovering more about what we need to do to improve the regulatory structures of the economy, but at least more is out in the open, and the debate is more open. Where do we go next? Where we go next is towards more accountability. The Bill makes a down payment on that accountability, but it does not finally deliver it. That is where we go next.

Helen Goodman: Obviously, in the new landscape of the City, the head of the Financial Conduct Authority holds an extremely important post, and the question of who fills that post is therefore vital. I am extremely pleased about the change that was agreed this afternoon and announced by the Minister at the Dispatch Box. It opens up the process, it gives the Treasury Committee a proper role, and it will, we hope, reinforce the independence of the person concerned.

Another person with considerable independence is, of course, the Comptroller and Auditor General. I am pleased, too, that we have moved away from the idea that the court should decide which part of the Bank’s homework the Comptroller and Auditor General should be allowed to mark. There is clearly a parallel with the CAG’s role in respect of the BBC. On Second Reading, we asked Treasury Ministers to publish the memorandum of understanding. They have now published it, and it is an extremely useful document, which sets out, in advance, an agreed framework for the CAG’s remit. That will prevent ad hocery, and will also prevent both the reality and the possible perception of political interference, or inappropriate avoidance of scrutiny of certain areas of the Bank’s work.

New clause 13, which stands in my name, would make the Bank of England subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It seems to me that, as the Bank is a public authority which is fulfilling public policy purposes, the case for covering it does not really need to be made; it is the case against its being covered that needs to be made. The Minister made some important points about why she was not minded to accept the new clause, and I want to respond to what she said. She singled out three areas in particular: monetary policy, financial operations, and private banking.

I am not entirely sure of all the details of the 2000 Act, but we all know that local authorities are FOI-able. Equally, we all know that when we submit freedom of information requests to local authorities, we are not able to see the personal reports on individual members of staff in those authorities. The Act does not give access to that kind of personal information, and I should have thought that the same approach would exempt the private banking work of the Bank of England.

As for monetary policy and financial operations, I do not believe that my new clause would run into those parts of the Bank’s work, because they would still be protected by section 299 of the Act. That section states:

“Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice...”
of the United Kingdom or any part of the United Kingdom, or...the financial interests of any administration in the United Kingdom, as defined”.

blah blah blah. I should have thought that as long as we were not amending section 29, we would be able to protect the areas about which the Minister was particularly concerned.

I was alerted to this matter by a letter from the Governor, which the Minister herself waved at us in the Chamber last June, about the sale of shares in the Royal Bank of Scotland. I am sure that the Minister remembers the occasion well. In his letter, the Governor said that “it is in the public interest for the government to begin now to return RBS to private ownership”.

Writing that letter was not part of the Governor’s role on monetary policy, financial policy or prudential policy; it was an intervention in Government policy at the Chancellor’s request on the issue of a share sale.

When the Governor appeared before the Treasury Committee, I asked him whether he would share the analysis that underlay the letter that he had written. He refused point blank to do so. I am not going to read out the full exchange that I had with the Governor on that occasion, because I went into the matter in detail on Second Reading and it has now been placed on the record twice. However, I really feel that in refusing to provide that underlying analysis, the Governor is evading public scrutiny of what is a perfectly proper matter for the public to understand.

The Governor also said in his letter that “a phased return of RBS to private ownership would promote financial stability, a more competitive banking sector, and the interests of the wider economy.”

In fact, none of that is true. It will not promote a more competitive banking sector. We are hoping that the Comptroller and Auditor General will, in his separate audit of the RBS share sale, secure that analysis. However, there should be a more straightforward way of dealing with this. The share sale is a particular issue and the Comptroller and Auditor General always looks into share sales, so we might get at the truth on this one occasion, but I am sure that there will be other similar loopholes.

The topicality of seeing this analysis was further underlined last week by the interview in the Financial Times given by Sir Nicholas Macpherson on the occasion of his retirement from the Treasury, in which he described the sale of more RBS shares as “tricky”. He went on to say that there was a judgment to be made over whether to sell further shares below the 2008 purchase price. These are not straightforward matters; they do not fall within the normal remit of the Bank of England and they are of public policy significance. They are but one example of why it is appropriate for the Bank of England to be subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

Jonathan Edwards: I rise to speak to new clauses 5 to 8 in this group, which are in my name. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be glad to hear that I will be as brief as possible, because I am desperate to get to the third grouping so that we can have a vote on those amendments.

My new clauses aim to achieve two things: first, to secure justice for my country in the formulation of monetary policy; secondly, to help monetary policy formulation better to reflect the fiscal reality of the evolving UK. They are probing amendments, and I wish to draw the Government’s attention to them again as these are important points that the Government should go away and look at before possibly coming back with their own proposals, given the relatively light legislative programme before the House these days. I was glad to hear that Labour was holding a review into these issues, and I look forward to reading its findings, although it would have been handy if the review had been prepared in advance. We could then have discussed those issues in this debate on the legislation.

The first of my new clauses proposes a change to the name of the central bank. We in Plaid Cymru believe that the Bank of England’s name should be changed. It is the UK's central bank, and it is time that was reflected to a greater degree, not only in its name but in its structures and practices. It is an undoubtedly contentious issue for me as a proud Welshman that the central bank that decides monetary policy in Wales is named after another country. The Bank of England was created in 1694, before the present British state was constructed. Wales was annexed in 1536, Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1801. The central bank was therefore created to serve a political entity that consisted only of Wales and England. I suppose the fact that Wales was omitted from its title reflects the inferior status that my country enjoyed in 1694.

Many of those present will have heard my schoolboy hero Sir Ian Botham on “The Daily Politics” yesterday, saying of the EU referendum: “England is an island and we should be proud”. I was going to say “If only”, but I thought I might get into trouble. That dubious geographical knowledge reflects an error continually suffered by the other nations of the UK at the hands of those who use “England” to mean a larger entity. It is an injustice that persists in cricket, Wales being denied a national team in its own right. Similarly, the other nations of the UK are denied recognition when it comes to the central bank. If the British state is a partnership of equals, all its institutions must reflect that reality, including perhaps the most important institution underpinning its financial system: the central bank.

3.15 pm

My suggestion is that our central bank be called the “Sterling Central Bank”. This would reflect the fiscal and political reality we live in, and it would show that those in this place genuinely believe in the respect agenda and a partnership of equals. I notice that the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) has tabled a similar amendment to the same effect, and I will of course vote in favour of it, if he is minded to press it to a Division.

New clause 6, in my name, seeks to ensure representation of the four nations of the United Kingdom on the Monetary Policy Committee. Measures relating to major fiscal levers flow from the Treasury in London to the devolved countries—measures relating to corporation tax being devolved in its entirety to Northern Ireland, to full income tax devolution to Scotland, and to partial income tax devolution to Wales. Even though I believe that we should have a symmetric devolution of powers, the trajectory is clear none the less.
Fiscal responsibility, when combined with a genuine no-detriment fiscal framework, increases the political accountability of the devolved Governments to their respective electorates and, critically, incentivises those Governments to boost economic performance in order to invest in public services. The co-ordination of monetary and fiscal policy is vital in any economic policy. Obviously the central bank is independent, but there is undoubtedly co-ordination with the Treasury, as would be expected. Similar protocols and links need to be developed with the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Exchequers. The national Parliaments should nominate a member to serve on the MPC to ensure that those involved in interest rate setting have an understanding of economic conditions and events in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

George Kerevan: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that in the United States, the central bank is called the Federal Reserve for the very simple reason that it is appointed federally, and the interest rate setting committee is a federal committee? The principle is therefore well established in other jurisdictions.

Jonathan Edwards: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on that point. I also agree with the points he made earlier about the north-south divide and the impact that monetary policy has had on that reality. It is no surprise that the UK is the most grotesquely unequal state in the EU in terms of geographical wealth, and one of the main reasons for that is that for far too long monetary policy has been determined in the interests of a very small part of it—namely, the square mile just down the Thames.

All current MPC members are either Bank staff or in one of the four positions nominated by the Treasury. Fittingly, there are four countries in the UK, which makes the MPC ripe for modification to ensure that all nations are represented when it comes to the highly important task of deciding interest rates. I am also interested in the emerging debate on changing the MPC’s remit with regard to setting interest rates. New clause 7 seeks to expand the mandated objectives of the MPC to include maximum employment. It is already specifically charged with keeping to an inflation target of 2%. Other central banks, such as the US Federal Reserve, to which reference was made in my exchange with the hon. Member for East Lothian, have a dual mandate that goes beyond inflation. In 1977, the US Congress amended the Federal Reserve Act 1913 and mandated the Federal Reserve to target long-term moderate interest rates and, critically, maximum employment. I heard with interest the Minister’s point that the Bank does consider the Government’s employment target, but there is a difference between that and a mandate for maximum or full employment.

New clause 8 seeks to improve the Bank’s accountability to Wales and the other devolved Governments. The British state is changing rapidly as powers and responsibility flow from Westminster to the devolved Administrations, although the pace is perhaps not as quick as those like me would want. We are not privy to the meetings between Treasury Ministers and the Governor and his senior team, but we can safely assume that they are frequent. On top of that, the Governor and his team meet the Treasury Committee at least five times a year. As I mentioned a moment ago, fiscal powers already exist in the devolved nations, with more planned, so I hope that the Bank and the Treasury agree that it is in their interests to strengthen relations with the devolved Governments and Parliaments. I am not aware of any formal structures for meetings between the Governor and Ministers of the devolved Governments, or for scrutiny of the Bank by the devolved Parliaments. In the interest of mutual respect, those structures need to be formalised.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I thought that I would come along to listen this afternoon, but I was stung into action by the Minister’s peroration, in particular her comments on new clauses 2 and 3.

Tommy Sheppard: Does my hon. Friend share my sense of regret and bewilderment that the Government can so casually dismiss the proposal to amend the long name of the Bank of England? Does he agree that it is disingenuous of the Conservative Government to talk about a respect agenda that embraces the contributions of all the United Kingdom’s nations when they refuse to recognise those contributions at the first opportunity, and state that only England should be in the name of this most significant institution?

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Indeed, it is particularly apposite that he makes that point now, because as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) pointed out, the Bank of England is a very different kind of bank from a few short years ago. It has a much more political role than it did, and it makes decisions that have a wider impact than before. Its name surely now needs to reflect the impact of its decision making.

The second reason why my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is entirely correct is because of the changed political climate in the UK. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made similar points about the need to recognise the role of Wales. This is important. It is not a flimsy point; it is fundamental for people who want to see an important central institution that has proper regard for all the nations that it seeks to serve. A short while ago, I was looking at a list of the court of directors of the Bank of England. Looking at the representation provided by its 11 members, one would be inclined to rename it “the Bank of the City of London”, because there is little proper representation for the UK’s nations and regions.

I enjoyed the analogy the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr made with cricket. It is not a subject in which I can claim particular expertise. [Interruption.] Or interest? No, I have some interest in it. The hon. Gentleman pointed out that there is the England and Wales Cricket Board. One Mike Denness, born not far from where I was born in Scotland, was the captain of the English cricket team some years ago; again, I am showing my vintage.

We must have proper regard to all the nations represented in the United Kingdom. I was stung by the Minister’s comment that the Bank of England represents the whole of the United Kingdom, the implication being that it had always done so, but I do not think that is at all true, in terms of its policy making. The hon. Member
for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian made the telling point that the Bank has had undue regard for one part of the UK. Many commentators would say that the interest rate setting policy of the Bank of England pre-2008 paid undue regard to the City of London and surrounding areas, and too little regard to the north of England, the Scottish economy, the Northern Ireland economy and the like.

That leads me nicely on to new clause 2 and why there should be representation for the nations and regions that make up the UK on the Bank of England’s court of directors. A short time ago, I had a quick look on the internet to see who these esteemed figures are, and unless I am proven to be incorrect—or the internet is incorrect—one is also a non-executive director of the Financial Conduct Authority. Such interlocking directorships do not serve economic policy and the financial sector well. Do we have such a tiny pool of appointable people that bodies with such an important relationship to one another have to be represented by the same directors? That is not a sign of strength in our appointing arrangements, but a position of extreme weakness.

Why are these things important? My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian mentioned a word that has cropped up many times in Committee discussions: he talked about the importance of avoiding group-think. Many studies show it to have been part and parcel of the flawed decision making that contributed to the crash in 2008. If we want to avoid group-think, we need people who are willing to think differently and to ask the critical questions, and we need a chairman willing to seek out those with alternative views. I do not see that happening today.

Some years ago, I was sitting within the confines of a company that was considering a large proposal. A paper was presented, and the chairman quickly went around all the directors asking for their thoughts. Every single person around the table immediately said, “I think this is a really great paper and we should go with it.” The chairman, being extraordinarily wise, said, “I am extremely uncomfortable that we have an immediate consensus, so I am going to postpone this discussion until our next meeting. I want you to go away and generate some alternative, critical views.” That is the wise course of action; it is about not being sucked into group-think. For all those reasons, new clause 2 deserves the support of all those who do not want to replicate the mistakes of the past.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Like many others in the Chamber and, as is clear, in the Treasury Committee, I welcome the progress made on the Bill but have serious concerns about it and, in particular, its role in the systematic gradual compromising of the independence of the two key regulators, the FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority. Further to the Minister’s announcements in her opening remarks, which were touched on by many in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), I welcome the Government’s determination that more oversight is needed on the appointment of the chief executive of the FCA by the Chancellor. However, I have concerns about the new procedures, as announced. Until this legislation is in place, this is very much open for debate and I sincerely hope we will debate it thoroughly, in the way described by my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin).

Another consideration is this: if the Treasury Committee recommends the appointment to be put forward as a motion to the House, the Government could simply whip votes to approve the Chancellor’s appointment. Select Committees provide substantially more apolitical deliberation of key specialised issues. For that reason, a direct Treasury Committee veto of the appointment needs to be considered.

3.30 pm

Issues around Treasury Committee approval are even more pertinent given the controversy surrounding the appointment of the newest chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, Andrew Bailey, which was touched on by the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie). Before his appointment, Mr Bailey was the deputy governor of the Prudential Regulation Authority. Mr Bailey’s move between the two regulators, at the recommendation of the Chancellor, raises questions about whether a revolving door policy may exist. As many in this Chamber learnt in the wake of the 2007-08 financial crisis, separation of Church and state is of paramount importance when it comes to regulation of the banks. I fear that the current Conservative Government are ignoring that critical point.

One may wonder about the motivation of the appointment of Mr Bailey as chief executive of the FCA, given that his predecessor, Martin Wheatley, was allegedly forced out of the job by the Chancellor for reportedly being perceived as too tough on financial institutions. A lighter-touch approach to regulation could mean that selling Government shares in Lloyds Banking Group and Royal Bank of Scotland would be, shall we suggest, less troublesome for the Chancellor, particularly given the recent capping on losses from the mis-selling of the pay protection scandal.

As I have previously said in this Chamber, the Chancellor stated in the 2016 Budget that he expects the Government to be able to sell their share in RBS for £25 billion, despite the fact that the bank arranged £9.3 billion in high-yield energy loans between 2011 and 2014 alone and the fact that its share price currently stands at roughly half of what was paid for it by the taxpayer in 2008. Clearly, the Chancellor faces serious challenges.

Two clauses in the Bill as outlined are particularly detrimental to the maintenance of the independence of regulators from Government influence, which is well covered by Members in this House. In part 2, clause 18 states that the Treasury is required to make recommendations for the FCA regarding economic policy as it pertains to the advancement of the objectives of the regulator at least once per year. Similarly, in part 1, clause 13 states that the Treasury can at any time—even though it is required to do so at least once per year—make recommendations to the Prudential Regulation Committee regarding economic policy as it pertains to the objective of the PRA, which is the maintenance of stability within the financial sector.

Although those recommendations made by the Treasury to the regulators are not binding, it is clear that they increase the level of political involvement in the function
of the regulators, which at their inception were intended to be independent of political influence. Given recent speculation that the FCA bowed to political pressure when it abandoned a probe into banking culture in the UK at the end of 2015, these two clauses, and the greater political influence on the independent regulators they entail, are concerning to say the least. In particular, the requirement in clause 13 that the Treasury make recommendations at least once a year to the PRC creates a greater onus of responsibility on the Treasury to remain aware of systemic risks in the financial system. I fear that, given the track record of this Government, they may well be asleep at the wheel when it comes to management of systemic risk.

As I have mentioned previously in this Chamber, during the debate on the 2016 Budget, this UK Government have thus far failed to address a source of substantial systemic risk inherent in the financial system and the wider economy—that of leveraged lending to the oil and gas sector by British banks and US banks active in the UK market, and the slice and dice repackaging of these loans into derivative products, such as collateralised loan obligations, which are then sold to investors.

Numerous publications have warned that, with the stagnating price of oil at the moment, that structure poses serious risk, with the Financial Times reporting in December 2014 that “there is a stark parallel with the US property market collapse that heralded the start of the 2008 global financial crisis and upended banks along the way.”

There are already signs that the first dominoes may be falling, as default rates on these high-yield loans are rising at a startling rate. Wells Fargo announced just this month that 57% of the loans in its energy portfolio were categorised as at risk of default. As Wells’ energy exposure stands at $42 billion, $24 billion, based on that figure, is at risk of default. UBS analysts have since put a sell notice on Wells’ stock.

Notably, it is reported by Lynn Adler at Reuters that in the United States the Federal Reserve has stepped up its review into lending which could lead to systemic risk, due to concerns about leveraged lending in the oil and gas sector. The systemic risk involved in such lending has been ignored by the Conservative Government here, however.

Political influence on the regulators was a key factor, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath earlier, in the failure of the regime to protect the financial sector and the wider economy from the systemic risk that led to the 2007-08 financial crisis. The Government have already demonstrated that they are unable even to acknowledge systemic risks that are apparent to so many in the industry today.

In a final point on the composition of the court of directors of the Bank of England, if the Government truly believe in one nation Conservatism, new clause 2, as tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian, should be incorporated into the Bill. Finally, the Bill, as outlined, has serious potential to weaken the UK regulatory regime and compromise the independence of the regulators, bringing us back to a system wherein banks are seen as too big to fail—otherwise known as business as usual.

Harriett Baldwin: In responding to the debate, I will perhaps leave aside the comments of the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell), as I do not recall him participating in the debates on Second Reading, in Committee or earlier today, and his speech did not reflect the full view of other parties in this House that the Bill is a very good Bill, in the words of the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

I want to respond to some of the points raised in the debate and, in particular, to put on record how pleased I am that everyone welcomes Government new clause 12, which is supplemented by the text of the letter from the Chancellor to the Chair of the Treasury Committee that was sent earlier today and that I read out in my opening remarks. This has been an important opportunity to put on record how our amendment recognises the important scrutiny role of the Treasury Committee.

I would also put on record the important role of this House in scrutinising the Executive. This is another opportunity for us to emphasise the importance—the necessity, even—of preserving the independence of the FCA chief executive’s operational role, apart from Government. Our amendment reaffirms that commitment to continued independence of the FCA. It is vital consumers and firms know that regulatory decisions are being taken in an objective and impartial way. The FCA is an operationally independent regulator and must carry out its functions in line with the framework of objectives and duties established in statute and the independence of that chief executive is protected by statute, with clear provisions requiring the terms of appointment to be such that the appointee is not subject to direction by the Treasury or any other person.

Throughout their appointment, the FCA chief executive is scrutinised on an ongoing basis to ensure their continued independence. It was notable that in the course of the debate nobody could point out anything as regards the allegations made in the press about operational interference. I look forward to seeing the Treasury Committee’s report, because I know that it has carried out a thorough investigation into the matter.

Our new clause ensures that the Treasury Committee will always have time to scrutinise an appointee before they get their feet under the desk. I have also put it on the record that the legislation is very clear that once they are appointed the Government absolutely cannot dismiss an FCA CEO except in the limited circumstances set out in statute. I will not read out paragraph 4 of schedule 1ZA to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, but I referred to it in my opening remarks and reiterate that it applies not only to the CEO but to the chair and the external members.

We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) about his reaction and his decision to withdraw his new clause 1. He asked whether he could expect legislation in the next Session outlining the five-year term. As he knows, he has our commitment to find an early opportunity to put that into legislation. He is aware of the strictures that exist in relation to writing round and getting Cabinet agreement, but he has that commitment now from the Dispatch Box. He asked whether the legislation is permanent—a good question. It is possible that legislation becomes permanent, but it is also possible for a future Government, a future House of Commons and a future Treasury Committee to change legislation.

Mr Tyrie: I am grateful to the Minister for what she says. The clarification that I seek relates not to legislation, which stands or falls like any legislation, but to the
arrangement. Is it intended that the arrangement between the Treasury Committee and the Chancellor, put in place in the exchange of letters today, will be permanent?

**Harriett Baldwin**: The Chancellor has many powers, but not necessarily the power to ensure permanence, which is a very long time. I can assure my right hon. Friend that it is the Chancellor’s intention that that remain the case for the length of time that he is able to exert power and influence over the matter. I hope that answers the question in the spirit in which it is asked.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) asked me to confirm that the NAO can look at the Bank’s success in meeting its objectives, but not necessarily at the desirability of those objectives. I have already said that that is exactly what the Bill achieves. The arrangements set out in the Bill have been agreed by both the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Governor, and the terms of reference have been made available to the House. The CAG is content that the scope of his powers is appropriate and the Bank is content that they do not go too far.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Bank should have practitioner representation. The Prudential Regulation Authority has a practitioner panel, which ensures that the interests of those who must put the PRA’s rules into practice are communicated to the PRA. That panel includes representatives of banks, insurers, building societies and credit unions, among whom the hon. Gentleman’s new favourite publication, *City A.M.*, is widely read. Consumers also have an input through the FCA consumer panel, which has a statutory right to make representations to the PRA.

Speaking to her amendment, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked about the Bank of England and the extent to which it is subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It is thanks to this Bill that the Bank is subject to the FOI Act. There are three specific limited exclusions from the Act as it applies to the Bank and, as I explained earlier, those are entirely sensible. The Bank of England is not alone in having particular elements of its work carved out from the Act. Other organisations to which specific exclusions apply include the Verderers of the New Forest, *S4C* in Wales, the Competition Commission and the BBC.

On the hon. Lady’s question about the Governor’s analysis supporting selling RBS shares at prices substantially above the price at which the shares are trading today, the Governor has explained that his analysis is based on commercial confidentiality obtained as part of the Bank’s work. Other organisations to which specific exclusions apply include the Verderers of the New Forest, *S4C* in Wales, the Competition Commission and the BBC.

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The hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) said that there was a lot to be commended in the Bill. He asked about the range of expertise and perspectives on the court. He raised an interesting philosophical question, which is that in the past the court has been a much larger organisation, with 19 members—unwieldy, in the Treasury Committee’s view—but that it should represent the views of the entire UK. All members of the court should consider the whole UK, rather than acting as a representative of a particular part. He seems to have forgotten our exchange in Committee, when we talked about the trade union representation of the court and I assured him that we have said nothing during the passage of the Bill that would change the post-war reality.

3.45 pm

Each of the committees of the Bank of England will have a strong external representation, and no external member will be able to serve on more than one of the policy committees at the same time. That answers some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) about group-think. By legislating for clear decision-making procedures for each of the committees and providing that the statutory duties and responsibilities granted to them can be exercised in no other way, we empower the varied perspectives of the external members on each. All that adds up to a set of protections for external input and oversight that mitigate the risk of just one view emerging from the court or any of the Bank’s committees.

In answer to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), if he wants to get in touch himself—I hope that he will take the opportunity to do so—the Bank’s regional representatives in Wales are Agent Steve Hicks and Deputy Agent Ian Derrick.

**Jonathan Edwards**: The Minister will have heard today the heartfelt concerns of representatives from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland about the accountability of the central bank to the devolved Parliaments and Governments. Will she at least commit to a Treasury report on that, or will she request the Bank of England to produce a report on how it aims to improve its financial accountability and its relationship with the devolved Parliaments and Governments?

**Harriett Baldwin**: I think that there are a range of different ways in which that can happen, particularly now that the Treasury Committee in this House has a member from Scotland, and of course we all welcome the fact that the very coins in our pockets are minted in the great country of Wales.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr identified the Federal Reserve as an example of a central bank that adopts a dual mandate. US policy makers have judged that that is right for them. We believe that the primacy of price stability is important for anchoring inflation expectations, and we are joined in that belief by other central banks, including those in Canada and New Zealand and the European Central Bank.

I am pleased to have had this opportunity to respond to a range of issues raised in this part of the debate. I commend the Government’s new clause to the House and hope that it will agree to include it in the Bill.

**Question put and agreed to.**

New clause 12 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

**New Clause 2**

**Composition of the Court of Directors of the Bank of England**

“In making nominations to the Court of Directors of the Bank of England, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must have regard to the importance of ensuring a balanced representation from the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.”

(George Kerevan.)

**Brought up, and read the First time.**

**Question put.** That the clause be read a Second time.
The House divided: Ayes 246, Noes 303.

**Division No. 238**

**AYES**

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**NOES**

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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows
Question accordingly negatived.
that contain references to PEPs.

Member States are required to implement to combat money-
means regulations transposing into UK law measures that EU
as follows.

Financial Conduct Authority—

(a) reasonable regard and due prominence is given to—
(i) Preambular (33),
(ii) Article 13(2),
(iii) Article 15, and
(iv) Article 16 and Annex II;

(b) clarity is achieved with respect to the meaning and interpretation of “prominent public function” in the context of money-laundering;

(c) reasonable regard and due prominence is given to Article 22 which recognises that a PEP may have no prominent public function; and

(d) any interpretation of “adequate” Article 20(b)(ii), and “enhanced” in Article 20(b)(iii) takes account of, and gives due prominence to, the provisions in Article 13 on risk sensitivity.

(2) The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(3) After Part 20A insert—

“PART 20C

MONEY LAUNDERING

333U Anti-money laundering: guidance

(1) The FCA must, prior to relevant regulations coming into force, issue guidance to regulated entities on the definition of one or more categories of “politically exposed persons” (“PEPs”).

(2) Guidance under subsection (1) must include, but need not be limited to—

(a) a requirement to take a proportional, risk-based and differentiated approach to conducting transactions or business relationships with each category of PEP that may be defined; and

(b) specified categories of persons to be—
(i) included and
(ii) excluded

from any definitions of PEPs.

(3) The Secretary of State may, by regulation, make provision about—

(a) the guidance issued, amended and/or reissued under subsection (1);

(b) arrangements for complaints about the treatment of individuals by regulated entities to be received, assessed and adjudicated by the FCA, where—
(i) a person was treated as though he or she was a PEP (and he was not),
(ii) a person who is a PEP was treated unreasonably in disregard of guidance under subsection (1), particularly in regard to specific elements required under subsection (2)(a), or
(iii) a person was refused a business relationship solely on the basis of that he or she is a PEP.

(c) circumstances in which—
(i) compensation payments are to be required from, or
(ii) financial penalties are to be imposed on regulated entities where complaints under paragraph (b) are upheld.

(4) For the purposes of subsection (1), “relevant regulations” means regulations transposing into UK law measures that EU Member States are required to implement to combat money-
laundering (or subsequent regulations amending those regulations) that contain references to PEPs.

(5) The power to make regulations under subsection (3) is exercisable by statutory instrument which may only be made after a draft of any such instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.”—

(Mr Walker.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 10—Debt management plan charges—

(1) The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 137FBB insert—

“137FBC FCA general rules: debt management plan charges

(1) The FCA must make general rules in relation to debt management plans.

(2) The rules must specify that—

(a) if a majority of creditors agree to a creditor fee arrangement, then all creditors shall be bound by the arrangement;

(b) a creditor fee arrangement may subsequently be varied by the agreement of a majority of creditors; and

(c) a creditor fee arrangement and any variations must take the form of a written contract executed by a majority of the creditors and must be distributed to all creditors upon completion.

(3) In this section—

“creditor fee arrangement” means an arrangement whereby the fees incurred as part of the debt management plan are paid by the creditors, calculated either as a fixed amount, a percentage of the amount owed to them or a combination of a fixed amount and a percentage; and

“a majority of creditors” means a subset of creditors where the amount owed to them is more than half of the total amount owed.”

New clause 14—Combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements—

“(1) Section 3B of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulatory principles to be applied by both regulators) is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of subsection (1) insert—

“(i) combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements.

(1A) (a) in observing principle (i), the regulators must undertake, in consultation with the Treasury, an annual review for presentation to the Treasury into abusive tax avoidance, including measures to ascertain and record beneficial ownership of trusts using facilities provided by banks with UK holding companies or entities regulated by the Bank of England or the FCA, control of shareholders and ownership of shares, and investment arrangements in an overseas territory outside the UK involving UK financial institutions.

(b) in this section “beneficial ownership of trusts” includes ownership of any equitable interest in a trust including being an object of a discretionary trust, power of appointment or similar arrangement as well as any vested interest under a trust;

(c) “control of shareholders and ownership of shares in companies using facilities provided by banks with UK holding companies or entities regulated by the Bank of England or the FCA” shall include control by any person with control over a voteholder in a company as defined in Part VI Official Listing s.89F of the FSMA (2000) as applied mutatis mutandis to this context, whether directly or indirectly, and whether alone or in concert with some other person.”
Amendment 1, in clause 24, page 20, leave out lines 5 to 10.

Amendment 8, page 20, line 10, at end add

“and insert—

‘(6) Where the authorised person mentioned in subsection (5) is a relevant authorised person, as defined under section 71A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, subsection (5)(d) does not apply and subsections (7) and (8) do apply.

(6A) If the FCA satisfies itself that a person (P), who is a senior manager in relation to a relevant authorised person, is guilty of misconduct by virtue of subsections (5)(a)-(c), then P shall be guilty of misconduct, subject only to subsection (8).

(6B) But P is not guilty of misconduct by virtue of subsections (5)(a)-(c) and (7) if P satisfies the FCA that P had taken such steps as a person in P’s position could reasonably be expected to take to avoid the contravention occurring (or continuing).”

Amendment 2, page 20, leave out lines 22 to 27.

Amendment 9, page 20, line 27, at end add

“and insert—

‘(6) Where the PRA-authorised person mentioned in subsection (5) is a relevant authorised person, as defined under section 71A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, subsection (5)(d) does not apply and subsections (6A) and (6B) do apply.

(6A) If the PRA satisfies itself that a person (P) who is a senior manager in relation to a relevant PRA-authorised person is guilty of misconduct by virtue of subsections (5)(a)-(c), then P shall be guilty of misconduct, subject only to subsection (6B).

(6B) But P is not guilty of misconduct by virtue of subsections (5)(a)-(c) and (7) if P satisfies the PRA that P had taken such steps as a person in P’s position could reasonably be expected to take to avoid the contravention occurring (or continuing).”

Amendment 10, in schedule 4, page 62, line 2, leave out paragraph 18.

Mr Walker: New clause 9 is designed to prevent the restriction or withdrawal of banking services from perhaps tens of thousands of people. Those people include soldiers and others serving in the armed forces, judges, civil servants, trade unionists, and local councillors and their officials. Those people, along with their families and associates, are deemed to be “politically exposed persons” for the purposes of the fourth money laundering directive, which is due to be transposed into UK law by no later than June 2017.

The scope of new clause 9 is straightforward. It is designed to ensure that when that money laundering directive is transposed into UK law, reasonable regard is given to the parts of the directive that deal with proportionality. The new clause makes it clear that prior to the enactment of the directive, the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 will be amended so that the Financial Conduct Authority will be required to publish clear guidance to the banks defining what it deems to be proportionate. New clause 9 also makes regulatory provision for PEPs who believe that they have been treated unreasonably by their banks to ask that their case be adjudicated by the FCA.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the new clause. I understand from what we heard during today’s topical questions that it is likely that the Government will accept it, so he is obviously in the right area. Is he worried that banks are acting in advance of the measure and that there is quite a lot of evidence that they are already gathering information about ordinary, law-abiding members of the public and using it as an excuse to restrict their banking activities?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Banks are de-risking very aggressively at the moment and we need to inject some proportionality into their actions. I believe that the new clause will go some way towards achieving that.

New clause 9 inserts into the Bill a process of adjudication. If a politically exposed person believes that they are being treated unfairly—being denied access to banking services—they can take their concern or complaint to the FCA, which can then adjudicate. The FCA can decide whether banks are interpreting the directive over-aggressively and, if they are, levy a fine on them for doing so. The new clause has nothing to do with reducing accountability; it is about increasing proportionality, which is the right thing to do.

Why is new clause 9 needed? It is needed because it is clear that in interpreting the fourth money laundering directive, banks are making no distinction, when determining who is a politically exposed person, between PEPs drawn from the corruption hotbeds of Nigeria, Russia and parts of the subcontinent, and those drawn from developed democracies such as ours that have high levels of scrutiny and accountability.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): May I put on record the thanks of all of us in the House to my hon. Friend for his diligence, focus and tenacity in bringing this massively important issue to the attention of the Government and for what we hope will be a satisfactory conclusion today? Does he agree that the collateral damage of some of the precipitous action of the banks has been a big impact on people’s families and, as a corollary, their future credit worthiness?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As I said, the banks have acted very aggressively, and I shall return to that point in a few moments.

May I thank the Economic Secretary for her time and patience in dealing with this matter? I have been speaking to her about it for four months, and I admit that I have got a little over-excited on occasions. However, she has always maintained high levels of good humour and patience, for which I thank her. It is important to put that on the record.

At this late stage, without the intervention of new clause 9, the directive risks blighting the lives of decent people. They are not just people working in public life and service but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) pointed out, their partners, spouses, children, parents, siblings and in-laws. The directive is not proportionate.

Even more worryingly, the directive covers the close associates of politically exposed persons. I am aware that one such close associate is a member of the press lobby. He had some problems with an individual savings account and was subject to close questioning by his bank. When he asked the person on the other end of the phone why the bank was conducting itself in such a way, the response was, “Because we understand that you are an associate of the Prime Minister.” Even the media are caught up in this directive, or rather the banks’ de-risking in preparation for its introduction.
The Financial Action Task Force, whose guidance underpins the directive and is repeatedly referred to in it, states:

“For close associates, examples include”—
the House needs to listen carefully to this because it is quite an odd paragraph—
“the following types of relationships: (known) (sexual) partners outside the family unit (e.g. girlfrienfolds, boyfriends, mistresses); prominent members of the same political party, civil organisation”—
that could be the National Trust—
“labour or employee union as the PEP; business partners or associates, especially those that share (beneficial) ownership of legal entities with the PEP, or who are otherwise connected”. My fear is that, without clear Government-backed FCA guidance, as provided for in new clause 9, the banks, in their rush to de-risk, will continue to draw on the work of the Financial Action Task Force. The Financial Action Task Force states in paragraph 37 of its 2013 guidance:

“there should be awareness that middle ranking and more junior officials could act on behalf of a PEP to circumvent... controls. These less prominent public functions could be appropriately taken into account as customer risk factors in the framework of the overall assessment of risks”. Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): The case that my hon. Friend makes is overwhelming. Will he tell the House whether he is aware of anyone who is opposed to what he is trying to do?

Mr Walker: I am sure that there will always be people who are opposed to what I am trying to do. That is the nature of society—we live in an open society in which people have different points of view on many issues. The fourth money laundering directive should be about capturing bad people in its scope, not capturing all people. If everyone is thought of as bad, it is very difficult to identify who is actually breaking the law. We want to go after the law breakers, not those people who, by accident, are described or identified as PEPs by the banks to take what seems to be decisive action against a group of people who are quite easy to target, and that banks will be less keen to take that action against a group of people who are harder to track down?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know the fondness of the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for live music, and it is a fondness that I share, but there are limits.

Mr Walker: I thought that rather complemented the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly)—it was almost like an opera singer opening his lungs. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Forget people serving in public life; let us think about those who have left it. Without the protections and guidance in new clause 9, ex-Army officers, ex-judges, ex-trade union representatives, ex-community leaders, volunteers and ex-members of political parties, and former Members of Parliament could be denied the opportunity to serve on charitable and company boards because their presence would confer the status of politically exposed persons on the rest of the board. That status is best avoided by individuals who are not yet stigmatised. If conferred, such a status could lead to a withdrawal of the relevant charity or company’s banking services. This is not supposition and I am not making this up. Along with the restriction of banking services, the closure of personal accounts and the blackballing of family members, it is happening now. In accepting new clause 9, the Government will enshrine in an Act of Parliament that banks have a legal duty to act proportionately and in accordance with FCA guidance, and that is the correct thing to do.

4.15 pm

New clause 9 is not about protecting politicians. Politicians are politically exposed people, but I understand that even a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury has had difficulties with this issue. Although the rights of politicians and their families are no less deserving of respect than anyone else’s, this is about protecting the banking, financial and future employment rights of the many thousands of people whose names appear in the civil service year book. It is about protecting the rights of military personnel who serve our country, committed council officials who serve their community and trade unionists, council officers and leaders, Assembly Members and Members of the Scottish Parliament, Assembly Members and Members of the Scottish Parliament, they are, in the main, not bad people indulging in money laundering. I am not saying that there will not be a bad apple, but those people do not present the real and current risk. Banks’ energies should be focused not on chasing after the good, but on chasing after the very bad.

The Financial Action Task Force catch-all that says that even middle-ranking people can be involved in money laundering basically puts everyone above grade 7 in the civil service in the frame. Think of people in a Government-backed organisation or trade union regional organisers. If banks follow the FATF guidance, those people could be deemed to be politically exposed persons, so not only their banking facilities, but those of their families and associates, could be withdrawn or curtailed.

I will make some progress, as I was not planning to speak for so long. Once a PEP, always a PEP. Although article 22 of the directive states that after 12 months have passed from the point at which the politically exposed person has left office, a bank can decide that that person is no longer a PEP—that sounds like good news—it goes on to say that banks will “be required to take into account the continuing risk posed by that person and to apply appropriate and risk-sensitive measures until such time as that person is deemed to pose no further risk specific to politically exposed persons.” That is the lobster pot from which few will escape.

Banks are risk averse, so they will feel that it is much better to keep someone as a PEP indefinitely than to take the risk of downgrading them to the status of a normal customer unless they are obliged to do so.

Forget people serving in public life; let us think about those who have left it. Without the protections and guidance in new clause 9, ex-Army officers, ex-judges, ex-trade union representatives, ex-community leaders, volunteers and ex-members of political parties, and former Members of Parliament could be denied the opportunity to serve on charitable and company boards because their presence would confer the status of politically exposed person on the rest of the board. That status is best avoided by individuals who are not yet stigmatised. If conferred, such a status could lead to a withdrawal of the relevant charity or company’s banking services. This is not supposition and I am not making this up. Along with the restriction of banking services, the closure of personal accounts and the blackballing of family members, it is happening now. In accepting new clause 9, the Government will enshrine in an Act of Parliament that banks have a legal duty to act proportionately and in accordance with FCA guidance, and that is the correct thing to do.
Finally, I thank the Government for indicating that they will accept new clause 9. By doing so, they will reduce the chances of an Army officer who is serving their country somewhere hot and dangerous receiving a telephone call from his or her spouse saying, “Darling, while you’re being shot at, we’ve had our bank account closed and we’ve lost our mortgage.” I congratulate the Government on doing the right thing today.

Helen Goodman: I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) who made an excellent speech on an important subject. He showed his characteristic bravery and forcefulness in addressing an issue that many other hon. Members wanted to address, but were unenthusiastic about putting themselves in the firing line.

The Minister said earlier that everybody is happy with this Bill, but now that we are discussing the regulation of financial services, she may discover that Labour Members are not quite so happy with this part of the Bill. I wish to speak in support of amendments 8 and 9, and I am also sympathetic to amendment 2 tabled by the Scottish National party. Getting the senior management regime right is vital for reducing the risk of further irresponsible behaviour in financial institutions, particularly the banks. We all know the devastating impact that the behaviour of the banks had on rest of the economy—anyone who is in any doubt about that should see the film “The Big Short”, which wonderfully describes that episode, albeit from an American point of view.

The clauses on the senior management regime are a retreat from the sensible legislation introduced in 2012, following the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards, which recognised that one way of changing behaviour and culture is to make those people at the top of the banks accept their full responsibility. The clauses in the Bill no longer do that. It is completely sensible for people to be expected to have the same responsibility for the behaviour of those who work for them that other institutions have for health and safety.

We have heard a number of arguments for the Government’s decision to reverse the reversal of the burden of the proof—rather an awkward mouthful—and one of the main arguments is that the regulatory approach that was legislated for in 2012 is too burdensome. This, however, misses the whole point, which is that we want people to spend more time looking at how to reduce risk rather than spending a great deal of time on how to make lots and lots of money irrespective of the risks posed to the economy. The risk does not apply ultimately to themselves on their own account, but it infects all other financial institutions.

I attended a seminar in the City last week, and senior practitioners from law firms, accountancy firms and from some of the big asset managers were in attendance and proved to be supportive of the original parliamentary commission approach. I expressed my feeling that it was disappointing that the Chancellor was going back on this, and suggested that he was not doing it as a whim, but because he had been lobbied to do so. I asked why they thought he had been lobbied in this way. It was, of course, a naive question, and I had no idea what the answer would be. They all roared with laughter and said, “Well, it’s obvious. It’s a way to facilitate people making millions of pounds without facing any downside risks.”

We cannot put ourselves in that situation again. The cost of the bail-out in 2008 was £133 billion. We really must take seriously the lessons that can be learned from that, which is why the amendments tabled by my Front-Bench team and by the SNP should be taken seriously and accepted by the Government.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I should like to take this opportunity to introduce my new clause 10, which is aimed at safeguarding the free debt management sector. Let me reassure the Minister that this is very much a probing amendment; I know she is looking forward to responding to it.

There has been a long debate over the “fee versus free” principle in the provision of debt management plans for indebted consumers. It is not my intention to re-open that debate now, although my concern is about free providers that are facing a looming capacity crisis.

Organisations such as PayPlan and Christians Against Poverty operate the “fair share” model of free debt management that sees creditors covering the cost of customer plans on a polluter-pays basis—in other words, through schemes that are free to the debtor. These organisations are facing increasing pressure as a consequence of fee-charging firms leaving the marketplace after failing Financial Conduct Authority authorisation.

In one recent case, this left 16,000 debt management clients unsupported, and these customers are now being being signposted to free providers. The last thing people want to happen when they are caught up in the desperation of heavy debt is for them to suddenly disappear so that they have to start again with new people.

The debt management sector is nearing a desperate point, and the market is becoming increasingly inefficient, with consumers treated badly in many cases. The fair-share operators I mentioned have seen their revenue reduce as a consequence of consumers’ disposable income falling. As more and more fee chargers leave the market, we will soon face a situation in which fair-share operators are unable to provide economically viable plans. Plainly, we now face a situation in which consumers will be charged higher fees and their options for free debt management services will be severely limited—again, we are going in the wrong direction.

There were considerable and commendable efforts over the course of the last Parliament aimed at safeguarding free debt management provision, most notably on the creation of a voluntary protocol. Members of all parties have tried to make similar long-term changes, reflecting the cross-party nature of this issue. More recent efforts have come from the parliamentary debt management working group, of which I am a member. I see in her place our chairman, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who is poised to speak in, I hope, support of my new clause.

Recent efforts have been aimed at establishing an industry-wide offering of free consumer debt management services. I accept that, while desirable, such an approach may not be feasible at this time. The new clause provides for a small tweak to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, mandating all creditors, via an FCA rule change, to fund free-to-consumer debt management plans under the “fair share” model. Many large creditors—banks and credit card companies—do accept a reduction
in the amount due in exchange for the establishment of a coherent plan, but some still do not, and the new clause is intended to tackle that. While it falls short of outlawing the provision of fee-charging plans, it provides a strong safeguard for the “fair share” model, ensuring that customers can continue to access free debt management plans.

I am certain that this is a robust mechanism for desperately needed reform in the debt management sector, and I hope that, subject to Members’ approval, it can be implemented without delay. I thank the Economic Secretary for her interest in the matter, and for her helpful guidance behind the scenes.

Every age has its challenges, and it may well be that historians will look back at our era and marvel at the levels of unsustainable personal debt that were carried by so many people. Such debt may arise from grave misfortune, poor choices or the actions of others, but whatever the reason, it is vital that the right help is at hand to help people to step their way out of debt, and the FCA can assist that process by making the rule changes I have proposed. I thank the Economic Secretary again for her patience and kindness, and commend the new clause to her and to the House.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I am afraid that I cannot support new clause 10. While I have great sympathy with the aim of the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) to keep the free-to-consumer plans going, I do not feel that his new clause will achieve that.

I am slightly unclear about the use of the term “fee”. As the hon. Gentleman said, this is currently a voluntary arrangement. I am a little concerned about what public benefit would result from his proposal. Would it merely ensure supplier revenues for certain service providers? If so, is that really a legislative issue? I have wider concerns. I feel that too few debt providers give advice on debt, but I also feel that the current landscape is fairly confusing. I do not think that introducing a statutory funding mechanism for one debt solution—a debt management plan—is the right way forward. Plenty of options are available to people in debt, including bankruptcy, debt relief orders, debt management plans, administration orders, debt consolidation, and individual voluntary arrangements.

Many of those plans are not funded sustainably. I think that one organisation that offers them is paid £35 for each order that it issues, and that is not a sustainable solution. I do not want providers to offer plans on the basis of how they are funded rather than on the basis of what is best for the individual, but I fear that the new clause could lead to their doing so. I am sure that many would not, but the new clause might lead to more providers’ choosing to offer the “fair share” solution because it is statutorily funded, whereas they make a loss on every debt relief order that they issue. That is not the best solution for the individual who is in debt.

I think that we need a proper review of the current debt solution landscape. I believe that it is too complex, and that it is not properly costed. I also believe that the providers have insufficient funding. As the hon. Gentleman said, there has been a problem with the debt management plans. In fact, a review of the fee-charging debt management companies found that 60% of their clients were put in a worse position. That cannot be allowed to continue, and I am pleased that the FCA is cleaning up the market. However, I worry about what will happen to people who come off debt management plans. They took a big step to deal with their debts—and facing up to the fact that you cannot pay your bills is a difficult decision to make—and went to a provider. Now they have been told, “Actually, your provider was not providing a good service. Go and find somebody else.” I worry that those people will not look around, and I hope that the Minister will look at ways of promoting opportunities for them to go to other providers.

4.30 pm

I also hope that funding will be available for the other providers, and that they will not be left in the unsustainable position of having to pick up a large number of people all at once. It might be sustainable to pick up 16,000 people over a few months, but to pick them all up immediately when a company goes bump is really difficult. I have sympathy for the motives behind new clause 10, but I do not feel that it will solve the main problem, which is that many debt solutions providers do not have sufficient funding. The new clause would focus on only one solution and could well skew the market in the wrong way, to the advantage of the providers rather than of the people who need the solution.

George Kerevan: I should like to speak to amendments 1 and 2, tabled in my name, and in passing to amendments 8 and 9, tabled by Labour Members. I shall not press amendments 1 and 2 to a vote, but should Labour Members move on amendment 8 and the consequential amendment 9, we will support them.

There is much in the Bill to commend it to us and to the House, and much that will add to the regulatory regime and its performance in the UK. However, the worst part of this legislation—the time bomb ticking away inside it—is the Government’s attempt to shift responsibility away from banks and other financial organisations and stated that if a serious infraction of regulations was encountered on their watch, they would automatically be held responsible unless they could prove that they had taken due steps to prevent it from happening.

That legislation had a great deal of support in the House and among the public, because it was the one sure way of ensuring that those at senior level in the financial sector would not continue to do what they had done all through the 2007-08 crisis: blame everyone else and say that it was not their fault. The legislation made senior managers responsible, just as senior managers in other organisations and utilities have become responsible for major crises.

Why would the Government want to change that law before it even came into operation this month? That sends out the wrong signal. When we put legislation in place that has consensus behind it, we should try it and see whether it works. However, the Chancellor, whose constant refrain is that he has a long-term economic plan, has decided to change the legislation before it has even come into operation. That change sends out all the wrong signals. The Minister will probably say that the measure is disproportionate now that the Government
have widened the number of people being caught up in the senior management regime to tens of thousands, and that applying the law could become problematic. I know all the explanations, but I put it to her that by reneging on legislation that was put in place with great fanfare four years ago before it is even operational, the Government are simply signalling to the rest of the world that they are loosening the regulatory bonds. They might think that they are not doing that, but they are sending out the wrong signal.

The Government have been sending out another signal as well. For years, the Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers have been telling us that we should pay lower taxes, that taxes are bad, and that we should keep more of our own money. Suddenly, however, when we discover that hundreds of thousands of people are setting up secret offshore bank accounts, the Government get all holy and moral, saying, “We didn’t mean you to do that!” This Government sometimes speak with two voices. Individual Ministers are honest and sincere, but they do not understand that they sometimes speak with one voice on taxes and regulation and then do the opposite. It sends out the wrong signal. The Government cannot go on blaming other people. They are to blame if they change the rule without having put it into force for at least a few years to see whether it works. That is why we must leave the provisions in the Financial Services Act 2012 until it has been proven that they do not work.

Richard Burgon: I rise to speak to new clause 14, amendment 8, and amendments 9 and 10, which are consequential on amendment 8, tabled in my name and those of my hon. and right hon. Friends. I will first discuss new clause 14 on combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements and then our amendment on the reverse burden of proof, or the presumption of responsibility, as I choose to call it, for senior managers in the banking sector.

Labour tabled new clause 14 in the wake of Panama papers leak, which the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) just mentioned. The new clause sets out that combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements and then our amendment on the reverse burden of proof, or the presumption of responsibility, as I choose to call it, for senior managers in the banking sector.

Last week, the Government announced a deal on the global exchange of beneficial ownership. We of course welcome that as an initial step, but it is insufficient. The measures announced by the EU this week are also welcome, but they do not go nearly far enough, because they require only partial reporting. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said last week:

“The turnover threshold is far too high, and Labour MEPs in Europe will be” doing the right thing in “pushing to get that figure reduced much lower to make it more difficult for large corporations to dodge paying their fair share of tax.”—[Official Report, 13 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 369.]

Banks need to reveal the beneficial ownership of the companies and trusts with which they work. That means establishing a record of ownership of the companies and trusts supported by UK banks, whether or not the owners are resident in the UK. We must ensure that Crown dependencies and overseas territories enforce far stricter minimum standards of transparency for company and trust ownership, but when UK banks are involved, it is right that a record is maintained of the beneficial owners that they advise.

The tax expert Richard Murphy has written that Jersey, Guernsey and the Cayman Islands are “cock-a-hoop at having rebuffed calls from David Cameron that they must have readily accessible registers of beneficial ownership even for the use of UK law enforcement agencies”. The shadow Chancellor said in response to those calls that the “agreement is a welcome step in the right direction but it fails to do anything to tackle the tax havens based in British Overseas Territories. Failure to take responsibility for these British Dependencies substantially undermines the effectiveness of this agreement.”

Similarly, we are aware that the Financial Conduct Authority wrote to banks urging them to declare their links to Mossack Fonseca by 15 April. The FCA’s call on UK financial institutions to review links with Mossack Fonseca is welcome, but the regulator should recognise the need for complete transparency to retain public confidence.

The FCA should seek full disclosure and act without delay. The slow, drip-drip responses of the Prime Minister’s office in recent weeks have served only to fuel public concern and have been very much a lesson in how to raise suspicion unintentionally. The FCA should publish details of which financial institutions it has written to and why; what information it has asked them to provide; and what action it will take, now that the 15 April deadline has passed. Importantly, it cannot allow banks and their subsidiaries to conduct an open-ended internal investigation, but must establish an early deadline for the disclosure of all information on their relations with Mossack Fonseca, so that the regulator can take all necessary action. Campaigners Global Witness responded by saying:

“These are welcome first steps...but the UK authorities are missing the wider point. Mossack Fonseca is no bad apple; it is just one small part of a much deeper problem.”

That is why it is necessary for us to have a clear direction of travel towards recording beneficial ownership of trust services by UK banks, as we are seeking to do with this new clause.

Given the widespread concerns about tax avoidance, the British public, who bailed out the country’s banking sector, deserve to know the facts about the role of UK banks in this unfolding story. With new clause 14,
Labour has made a positive and practical proposal to take steps to increase tax transparency and publicly available information on the beneficial owners of companies and trusts registered in tax havens.

Let me now deal with the remainder of the amendments. Labour’s position was set out clearly on Second Reading and in our amendments in Committee: removing the reverse burden of proof—the presumption of responsibility—is unreasonable, unwise and, I am sorry to say, risky. We continue to support the current legislation, which was agreed by the Chancellor and in both Houses as recently as in consideration on the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Act 2013. That is why we have re-tabled our amendments on keeping the presumption of responsibility. It should not be forgotten that this measure was a key recommendation of the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards, which said that it “would make sure that those who should have prevented serious prudential and conduct failures would no longer be able to walk away simply because of the difficulty of proving individual culpability in the context of complex organisations.”

The presumption of responsibility, as currently set out in legislation, applies to senior managers. It means that to avoid being found guilty of misconduct when there has been a regulatory contravention in an area for which they are responsible, they will have to prove that they took reasonable steps to prevent that contravention. This Bill removes that onus on senior managers. The onus is entirely reasonable, proportionate and, as bitter experience tells the British people, necessary. Misconduct and misdemeanours in financial services are not merely a tale from history. In 2015, for example, the FCA had to fine firms more than £900 million, and we have also seen the LIBOR scandal, foreign exchange fines and the mis-selling of payment protection insurance to the value of up to £3 billion. The presumption of responsibility is so reasonable and necessary that the policy was introduced with cross-party support; that should not be forgotten.

The 2013 Act applied the presumption of responsibility, through the senior managers and certification regime, to all “authorised persons”. This Bill extends that authorised persons regime to a wider range of businesses but has watered down the presumption of responsibility to a mere “duty of responsibility”. The vast majority of people working in the financial sector were not, and are not, affected by the existing legislation, and would remain unaffected should our amendment pass. That is why the legislation was passed by Government Members in the first place.

In December 2013, speaking of the stricter measures being introduced by the Government, including the reverse burden of proof, the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), said: “The introduction of this offence means that...in future those who bring down their bank by making thoroughly unreasonable decisions can be held accountable for their actions...Senior managers could be liable if they take a decision that leads to the failure of the bank...The maximum sentence for the new offence...reflects the seriousness that the Government, and society more broadly, place on ensuring that our financial institutions are managed in a way that does not recklessly endanger the economy or the public purse.”—[Official Report, 11 December 2013; Vol. 572, c. 252.]

On that, at least, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is a shame that there has been a change in position.

4.45 pm

The Chair of the Treasury Committee said:

“Far from imperilling the UK’s global competitiveness, high standards will make the UK a more attractive place to locate.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2013; Vol. 566, c. 76.]

Other commentators and campaigners who have expressed their support include Martin Wolf of the Financial Times. We have re-tabled this amendment to state our clear opposition to this unwelcome, unnecessary and risky change.

The legislation was introduced by the Chancellor in 2013, and Members of the House should not forget that it was due to come into force in March this year. It has yet to be even tested, as the hon. Member for East Lothian said. Now is not the time to make this concession to top bankers. Both the announcement of the Chancellor’s “new settlement” with financial services—including as it does the departure of Martin Wheatley from the FCA and the scrapping of the FCA’s review of banking culture—and the recent discovery that UK banks, Crown dependencies and overseas territories are at the heart of the Panama papers tax haven scandal mean that the proposal in the Bill to remove the presumption of responsibility is the wrong proposal at the wrong time. We urge Members to support our amendment.

Let me turn to new clause 10, which was tabled by the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter). We recognise the concern about fee-chargers in the debt management sector, who often charge clients exorbitant amounts to set up plans that can clearly add to clients’ problems, rather than helping to alleviate them. In the scenario proposed, instead of charging fees to customers, the commercial debt management companies would receive income through a statutory levy on creditors, and all creditors would be bound by a fee arrangement to which the majority agree. However, it is not clear how that helps consumers specifically. The rules could bind some commercial organisations to paying fees to other ones. There are serious competition issues here, and I am aware of the FCA’s concerns on that point.

There are questions to ask about how the creditors set the level of fees. The measures would not stop commercial debt management companies charging consumers in addition to the fee. In some circumstances, they could lead to commercial providers advising people on the basis of their creditors and not on their actual needs.

Although the new clause can be admirably presented as a way of killing off fee charging, it may well result in a lifeline being thrown to the sector. Critics may well ask why the Government should intervene to prop up this market, just at the point when the FCA is cleaning it up. Secondly, it introduces a statutory funding mechanism for one debt solution—debt management plans—when in fact there are many options available for people in debt, including bankruptcy, debt relief orders, debt management plans, administration orders, debt consolidation and individual voluntary arrangements. Only about one third of those people seeking debt advice are provided with a debt management plan; for others, it is simply not the right fit. Although we welcome the debate, we feel that it is necessary to consider how best we meet the needs of all people with debt problems, so we do not support the new clause.

Finally, let me turn to new clause 9 in the name of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). I am aware that this is an issue of concern to Members in all parts
of the House. The global rules against money laundering require banks and regulated businesses to carry out enhanced due diligence on all politically exposed persons—individuals and with a public function—but if the transposition of the EU directive into domestic legislation is mishandled, a wide range of other people could be affected. It could adversely affect tens of thousands of people, including civil servants, city workers and even, as has been described, the families of armed forces officers serving our country abroad.

The EU’s fourth money laundering directive, passed last year, will need to be transposed into UK law within two years, as has been mentioned. We need to get this right to ensure that the safeguards proposed to prevent tax avoidance and money laundering and, in the light of the Panama papers, the provisions governing the register of beneficial ownership of companies and trusts do not get in the way of individuals using their bank accounts, securing mortgages or supporting charities. We believe that this is an important issue, and we are grateful to the hon. Member for Broxbourne for all his hard work explaining the potential risks to the House.

Harriett Baldwin: Let me start with new clause 9, tabled by my hon. Friend. The Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and others, which addresses the important issue of politically exposed persons. My colleague is an expert not only in oratory but in parliamentary procedure and I commend him for his use of both in this example. The Chancellor entrusts me with a public function—but that this issue, as my hon. Friend knows, and we are grateful to my hon. Friend for his assiduous work in collating examples that he has heard from colleagues and from the banking sector.

It is absolutely right that the “know your customer” requirements should be tailored to the risk posed, and I reassure the House that we are very much on the side of colleagues in this regard. I therefore welcome the amendment and the strong message it sends to banks as they implement these rules. The new clause also addresses guidance, and I fully agree that guidance will help the banks to take an effective, proportionate and commensurate approach to politically exposed persons. The Government intend to implement new money laundering regulations by June next year at the latest and this amendment will come into force at that time. We will consult on the new regulations this year.

As well as accepting the new clause, I want to take the opportunity to update the House on other action that we have taken to resolve these issues on behalf of Members since my hon. Friend had his Adjournment debate on 20 January. On 1 March we had a meeting with the banks that I organised with the Minister for Security from the Home Office, and on 23 March the Chancellor wrote to the banks to explain our views. We will continue to work with the banks, with the FCA and with others to ensure that a sensible and proportionate approach prevails.

I have also written not once but twice in a “Dear colleague” letter to all Members and Peers giving colleagues the name of a senior designated person to contact at each major bank should they or a family member encounter any problems. To conclude on this new clause, I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the issue to the House so that I can give this reassurance about the attention that the Government are paying to this challenge.

New clause 10, on debt management plans, was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), and I thank him for his collaborative approach in tabling the amendment and the ongoing commitment shown by him and his all-party group to supporting all households in problem debt. The Government share his concerns about the potential for detriment to occur to consumers participating in some debt management plans and I recognise the importance of protecting this vulnerable group of consumers. The Government’s focus has been on comprehensively reforming the regulation of the sector to ensure that financial services firms are on the side of people who work hard, do the right thing and get on in life. Responsibility for regulating debt management firms, like that for all other consumer credit firms, transferred from the OFT to the FCA on 1 April 2014. The FCA has made addressing the risk posed to consumers by non-compliant debt management firms the highest priority, alongside payday lending.

Indeed, debt management firms were in the first group of firms to require full authorisation, and the FCA is thoroughly scrutinising firms’ business models and practices. Firms that do not meet the FCA’s threshold conditions will not be able to continue to offer debt management plans. Removing non-compliant debt management firms from the market will fundamentally reduce the risk of harm to consumers and will ensure that consumers have access to sustainable repayment plans as a result of providers acting in the best interest of consumers.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised the question of the handover of clients with debt management plans whose firms have not been authorised by the FCA. That is an issue to which the FCA is paying close attention, to try to ensure that data protection issues are taken into account and to accommodate the disheartening position of someone with one of those plans whose firm fails to be authorised, for whom a better alternative must be found.

On the issue raised by the amendment—how debt management plans are funded—charities such as StepChange and Christians Against Poverty already successfully negotiate voluntary funding agreements with creditors through the fair share model. Introducing changes to this funding arrangement, such as mandatory contributions, may have unintended consequences, disrupting a successful funding arrangement for charities. Consequently, setting the level of this share is not supported by the not-for-profit sector. Similarly, not-for-profit providers are concerned that formalising fair share contributions may change charities’ relationship with creditors and compromise their independence. The perception of charities by their clients as impartial advocates is essential to encouraging households in problem debt to come forward for support.

With the FCA's authorisation process ongoing and the anticipated changes in the market that will bring, now is not the right time to introduce changes to the way debt management plans are funded. Any consideration of changes to funding arrangements should take place when the shape of the debt management market is known. The best setting for looking at the full landscape of debt advice funding will be in the context of the public financial guidance review, which includes a commitment for the Government to monitor the
impact on the FCA authorisation process. If necessary, the funding arrangements for debt advice will be reviewed, and the Government may consider broadening the funding base to include other sectors, to ensure that consumers continue to get the help they need. I trust that this assures my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon that the Government continue to consider it a priority to help those facing problem debt, and that he will not press his amendment to the vote.

I shall deal now with amendments 1, 2, 8, 9, and 10, which would apply the reverse burden of proof to senior managers in the banking sector or in all authorised financial services firms. We reject both sets of amendments, above all because the senior managers and certification regime with a statutory duty of responsibility will be an extremely effective tool for holding senior managers to account.

The duty of responsibility will extend to all senior managers. The discredited approved persons regime will be replaced. Firms must identify exactly what their senior managers are responsible for. Senior managers will not be able to wriggle off the hook because they did not know what was being done in the areas for which they are responsible. The reverse burden of proof is not needed to deliver what we want to deliver—a culture change.

Lord Turnbull, who was a Cross-Bench member of the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards, said:

“In future, senior managers will have to take responsibility for what goes on in the teams for which they are responsible and for the actions of the people whom they have appointed and thereby given accreditation.”

He went on to say:

“I still fail to see why the reverse burden of proof is the only way to get people to understand that...I believe that the proposal now in the Bill—that is, the duty of responsibility—is superior.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 15 December 2015; Vol. 767, c. 2026-28.]

In written evidence to the Public Bill Committee, the Building Societies Association stated:

“The lack of individual accountability to date is mainly the result of a failure to allocate responsibilities in firms’ corporate governance frameworks. Because this deficiency will be fully addressed by the new strengthening accountability in banking rules (through responsibility maps, individual statements of responsibility, handover arrangements), the reversed burden of proof is unfair and is redundant”—not my words, but those of the Building Societies Association.

Today’s debate is about what happens when things go wrong and a firm breaks a regulatory requirement. Under the reverse burden of proof, the senior manager responsible for the area of the firm where the breach occurred would have to prove that they had taken reasonable steps to prevent it. The Bill will impose a statutory duty of responsibility on senior managers. Senior managers would still be required to take reasonable steps to prevent breaches of regulations in the areas of the firm’s business for which they are responsible. However, when such a breach occurs, it will fall to the regulators to show that the responsible senior manager had failed to take such steps. This duty will be extended with the senior managers and certification regime to senior managers in all authorised financial services firms, ensuring that they are held to the same high standards as those in banks.

5 pm

Contrary to the allegations of the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), the duty is in no way “soft” on bankers. A senior manager can be found guilty of misconduct if a breach of regulatory requirements occurred in the area of the firm’s business for which they are responsible and they did not take reasonable steps to prevent it, whether they were aware of the contravention or not. The hon. Gentleman quoted a previous Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid). I think that he might be confusing the reverse burden of proof with the criminal offence of recklessness causing a bank to fail. I can assure him and the House that that criminal offence, with a possible seven-year sentence attached, came into effect in March.

New clause 14 seeks to give the FCA and PRA a statutory duty to have regard to combating tax avoidance, and for them to report annually to the Treasury. I welcome the opportunity once again to set out the measures that this Government have taken—far more than any previous Government—to tackle tax evasion, tax avoidance and aggressive tax planning. We have become a world leader in tax transparency. However, as the UK tax authority is Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, rather than the FCA or PRA, it is responsible for ensuring that businesses and individuals pay the taxes they owe.

Last week we set out a far more effective package of proposals to tackle the problem of tax evasion and avoidance, ensuring a multi-agency approach by strengthening HMRC and involving relevant bodies such as the FCA. The Government are committed to giving HMRC the tools to do its job, whether by introducing over 40 changes to the tax laws, or by providing additional funding to strengthen its capability in key areas. I could go on, Madam Deputy Speaker, about all the measures we have introduced—

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Oh, go on.

Harriett Baldwin: Okay, the hon. Gentleman wants to hear more. In the July 2015 Budget we confirmed an extra £800 million investment to fund additional work to tackle evasion and non-compliance. HMRC’s specialist offshore unit is currently investigating more than 1,100 cases of offshore evasion around the world, with more than 90 individuals subject to current criminal investigation. Even before last week, HMRC had already received a great deal of information on offshore companies, including in Panama, and including Mossack Fonseca. This information comes from a wide range of sources and is currently the subject of intense investigation.

We are going further by providing new funding of up to £10 million for an operationally independent cross-agency taskforce. It will include analysts, compliance specialists and investigators from across HMRC, the National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority. It will have full operational independence and will report to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and the Home Secretary.

Of course the FCA has a role to play. Its 2016-17 business plan states that the fight against financial crime and money laundering is one of its priorities. Its
rules require firms to have effective systems and controls to prevent the risk that they might be used to further financial crimes. That is why the FCA has written to financial firms asking them to declare their links to Mossack Fonseca. If it finds any evidence that firms have been breaking the rules, it already has strong powers to take action. However, it is HMRC that is ultimately responsible for investigating and prosecuting offences associated with tax evasion.

Finally, with regard to trusts, we believe that we have secured a sensible way forward by ensuring that trusts that generate a tax consequence in the UK will be required to report their beneficial ownership information to HMRC. By focusing on such trusts, we are focusing on those where there is a higher risk of money laundering or tax evasion, which arise when trusts migrate or generate income or gains, and minimising burdens on the vast majority of perfectly ordinary and legitimate trusts.

Although I appreciate the spirit with which the new clause has been tabled, I do not believe that it would be appropriate to change the role of the FCA or the PRA, so I urge the hon. Member for Leeds East not to press the new clause.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 9 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 14

Combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements

“(1) Section 3B of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulatory principles to be applied by both regulators) is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of subsection (1) insert—

(i) combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements.

(a) in observing principle (i), the regulators must undertake, in consultation with the Treasury, an annual review for presentation to the Treasury into abusive tax avoidance, including measures to ascertain and record beneficial ownership of trusts using facilities provided by banks with UK holding companies or entities regulated by the Bank of England or the FCA, control of shareholders and ownership of shares, and investment arrangements in an overseas territory outside the UK involving UK financial institutions.

(b) in this section “beneficial ownership of trusts” includes ownership of any equitable interest in a trust including being an object of a discretionary trust, power of appointment or similar arrangement as well as any vested interest under a trust;

(c) control of shareholders and ownership of shares in companies using facilities provided by banks with UK holding companies or entities regulated by the Bank of England or the FCA shall include control by any person with control over a voteholder in a company as defined in Part VI Official Listing s.89F of the FSMA (2000) as applied mutatis mutandis to any person.”—(Richard Burgon.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.
Bingham, Andrew
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérése
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Handyside, Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczmarski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Question accordingly negatived.

AYES

Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Tellers for the Ayes: Jeff Smith and Judith Cummins

NOES
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca

Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmine
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christine
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Sikker, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thelwiss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Urmunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carman, Neil
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehan
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
Williamson, the was a nice surprise to receive an email from David was eating my cornflakes in the hotel this morning, it supported by the Labour Front-Bench team. When I who retired to Drefach Felindre in my constituency. Labour party and of Plaid Cymru, Gwyn Alf Williams, "History of Wales" by the great historian who was a member of the this place—I would have prepared a far lengthier speech, have far more time than I assumed—a rare privilege in would be concluded prematurely. I therefore have only a this group as I feared that our consideration on Report at end insert—

(3A) Regulations under subsection (1) must make provision
( ) Subject to the provisions of subsection (3A).

I am delighted that my amendments 4 and 5 are being Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 36

BANKS AUTHORISED TO ISSUE BANKNOTES IN SCOTLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

5.30 pm

Jonathan Edwards: I beg to move amendment 4, in clause 36, page 34, line 15, at beginning insert—

“( ) Subject to the provisions of subsection (3A).”

This amendment and amendment 5 would enable Lloyds Banking Group, the holder of the Bank of Wales trademark, to issue banknotes in Wales.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 5, page 34, line 44, at end insert—

“(3A) Regulations under subsection (1) must make provision authorising Lloyds Banking Group to issue banknotes in Wales”. See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Jonathan Edwards: I am delighted that we have reached this group as I feared that our consideration on Report would be concluded prematurely. I therefore have only a very short speech, but luckily this is rather a straightforward and uncomplicated matter. If I had known that I would have far more time than I assumed—a rare privilege in this place—I would have prepared a far lengthier speech, quoting extensively from the masterpiece “A History of Wales” by the late, great John Davies, or John Bowhill as he was known to his friends, and from “When was Wales?” by the great historian who was a member of the Labour party and of Plaid Cymru, Gwyn Alf Williams, who retired to Drefach Felindre in my constituency.

I am delighted that my amendments 4 and 5 are being supported by the Labour Front-Bench team. When I was eating my cornflakes in the hotel this morning, it was a nice surprise to receive an email from David Williamson, the Western Mail correspondent, citing a...
I have spoken on this issue before in the Chamber, but I will reiterate a few points that I made on Second Reading. The amendment deals with the historical anomaly that prohibits Wales from producing its own distinctive banknotes. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland are allowed to do so, and so to celebrate their respective national figures and landmarks.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about our historical position, so does he support my view that my predecessor but one in what was then the constituency of Pontypool, Leo Abse, made probably the greatest contribution in the 20th century as a Back Bencher to changing people's lives, and therefore would be a fine candidate to go on such banknotes?

Jonathan Edwards: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. When I realised that I would be able to make this speech, I feared that there would be a lot of interventions along those lines. I will be citing some notable names during my speech, but that is not a matter for politicians to determine.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Edwards: I will in a minute—we have to hear from Blaenau Gwent. It would be appropriate if there was a conversation among the people of Wales about who they would like on their banknotes.

Nick Smith: As part of the list of great men and women whom the Welsh people could consider having on our banknotes in the future, may I suggest Aneurin Bevan, a son of Tredegar and founder of the national health service?

Jonathan Edwards: That is certainly one of the names that I would like to see put forward.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman will note that two men—great men—have been recommended, but I would like to see more women represented on banknotes, whether they are Welsh or Bank of England notes. Does he agree that, whether or not one is a big spender, a resident of Wales holds the rights to the Bank of Wales brand and is in part publicly owned by Welsh taxpayers, to issue Welsh banknotes, just as is permitted for the three clearing banks in Scotland and four in Northern Ireland.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that a worthwhile commercial advantage would be gained by issuing banknotes? That value would then accrue to Lloyds bank, and possibly to taxpayers in Wales and the rest of the UK, which would be a good move.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to my parliamentary leader for his intervention. He is completely right, and that is why four banks in Northern Ireland and three in Scotland have continued the practice. There is a commercial interest for Lloyds, but also a public interest due to our part ownership of the bank.

Permitting to issue Welsh banknotes would be a welcome boost to brand Wales, recognising our country as an equal and economic entity. Notes in Northern Ireland celebrate individuals such as J.B. Dunlop, Harry Ferguson and James Martin, as well as architectural splendour such as that of Belfast city hall. Notes in Scotland pay tribute to that country’s fantastic bridges and recognise the contribution of people such as Sir Walter Scott and Robbie Burns. Notes currently used in Wales recognise people such as Elisabeth Fry, Adam Smith and Matthew Boulton, and previous notes have portrayed Charles Dickens, Michael Faraday, Sir Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, George Stephenson and the first Duke of Wellington. They are all great people, but none, to my knowledge, has anything to do with my country.

Is it not fair and sensible for us in Wales to use notes that recognise our historic landmarks, such as the incredible Castell Carreg Cennin in my constituency, Pont Menai in north Wales, Yr Wyddfa—Snowdon, the largest mountain in our country—and our historic greats such as Owain Glyndwr, who was nominated the seventh most important person of the last millennium by The Times, of all papers? There is also David Lloyd George, the originator of the welfare state, Aneurin Bevan, the architect of the NHS, and Gwynfor Evans, the first Plaid Member of Parliament and the father of modern Wales.

A case could also be made for what is arguably the most famous Welsh painting of all: “Salem”, painted by Sydney Curnow Vosper in 1908. His painting of Siôn Owen aged 71 at Capel Sarah, a Baptist chapel at Pentre Gwynfryn in the north of Wales, is a national icon, much as Constable’s “The Hay Wain” is in England. The Royal Mint already produces Welsh-specific coins, so my proposals raise no major issue of principle—indeed, the Minister referred to the Royal Mint earlier in the debate.

A national poll by ITV Cymru/Wales found that more than 80%—indeed, it was 82.6% when I looked at the website today—of the Welsh public supported these calls. If we are unsuccessful in the Division, I hope that the UK Government will support Plaid Cymru in putting right this historical anomaly and bring forward their own proposals.

Hywel Williams: I have a Welsh pound coin with me, and it reeks of nationalist propaganda because around the edge it states “Pleidiol wyf i gwladd”, which means “True am I to my country”. I certainly agree with that, but it is issued by the Royal Mint.

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend makes my point entirely. There is no issue of principle at stake; this is about finding the mechanism for delivery.
This issue has received considerable media coverage in Wales. Considering that we are only two weeks from the Welsh general election, I suggest to Treasury Ministers that the election prospects of their candidates in Wales may be damaged if they choose to ignore the strong views of the people of Wales on this matter.

Richard Burgon: I support amendments 4 and 5, which were tabled by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). In Committee, the Minister highlighted the presence of the Royal Mint in Cardiff and its role in the production of our coins. In reflecting on that, it is worth noting that the pound coin reflects each nation, with the royal arms, the three lions and the oak tree for England; the thistle and the lion rampant for Scotland; the flax plant and the Celtic cross for Northern Ireland; and, of course, both the dragon and the leek for Wales. Since 2010, we have had pound coins celebrating the capital cities in the floral emblems of each nation of the United Kingdom. It therefore seems anomalous that Scotland, with its own Parliament, has its own banknotes and that Northern Ireland, with its own Assembly, has its own unique banknotes, yet that Wales, with its own flourishing Assembly, has no national identifier for circulating currency.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): If the amendments pass tonight and Wales is allowed to produce its own banknotes, I very much hope that some north Walians will be featured on them. Does my hon. Friend agree that such notes also represent a fine opportunity to showcase the great figures of Welsh literature and music?

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic suggestion, and I shall return in a few seconds to some Welsh figures from music, if not literature. It is important that all aspects of Welsh culture are represented when, as I hope, the Welsh people are able to choose who should feature on their banknotes and coins. A celebration of iconic Welsh scenes and places would also be appropriate. For example, there could be representations of the steel industry of Port Talbot, or the mining communities of the valleys—even perhaps the Tower colliery which, as those who know about the history of mining in Wales are aware, was run as a co-operative when miners used their redundancy payments to turn it into a successful venture. Such imagery would be well supported across the nation. Shirley Bassey and Nye Bevan, the father and founder of our NHS, have been suggested. It would be great to see Nye Bevan on a Welsh banknote. It might be a bit over the top to feature his famous quotes likening Tories to certain members of the animal kingdom, but that would be a matter for the Welsh people to decide.

My own personal suggestion, for what it is worth, is that given that it is now 30 years since the formation of that great Welsh rock band, the Manic Street Preachers, I would love to see them celebrated on a new banknote, although they might have ideological objections to doing so. It is also the 20th anniversary of “Everything Must Go”—I am talking not about the Chancellor’s policy on RBS shares, but the album of that name by the Manic Street Preachers. As the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr made it clear, however, it would be for the people of Wales, not those from Yorkshire or anywhere else, to decide who or what should appear on Welsh banknotes. In that spirit, I hope that the Conservative Government do not commit the cardinal error of snubbing the Welsh people’s desire for their own banknotes.

Jonathan Edwards: And there is an election in two weeks’ time.

Richard Burgon: I had not thought of that point.

The lack of any Welsh-themed banknotes is an error that the amendments are designed to put right. I would appreciate the Government agreeing to the proposal and investigating the possible costs and timeframes for such a change. Labour Members wholeheartedly and enthusiastically support these amendments.

Harriett Baldwin: Anyone would think that a Welsh general election was going on this afternoon, would they not? I am glad that we have had time to debate this issue this afternoon. I can remember the shock in Worcestershire when Elgar, whose birthplace is in my West Worcestershire constituency, was taken off the £20 note. It was certainly a very live political issue.

I know that we all have an emotional attachment to our banknotes, and I therefore sympathise with the desire of the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) to make the case that he has made so ably this afternoon, along with other Members, for banknotes to have some Welsh characteristics. We shall not be able to agree to the amendment today, for reasons that I shall explain, but I hope that what I shall say about our new banknotes will give some cheer to our Welsh colleagues.

5.45 pm

First, let me give the House a history lesson. The UK is a rare example in the world of a country that allows certain commercial banks to issue banknotes. As the hon. Gentleman said, since the 1840s, when the House passed the Bank Charter Act 1844, no new bank has been allowed to issue commercial banknotes in the United Kingdom. Let me put that in context. The 1840s happened a long time ago: it was the time of both Elizabeth Fry, whom we celebrate on the Bank of England £5 note, and Charles Darwin, whom we find on the £10 note. Since then, many of the banks that were originally authorised to issue banknotes have lost or surrendered their rights. The last private note issuer in Wales was the North and South Wales Bank, which lost its note-issuing rights in 1908 when it was taken over by the Midland Bank, now rebranded as HSBC. Today, only seven commercial note issuers remain: three banks in Scotland, and four in Northern Ireland. The Government are committed to preserving the long-standing tradition of commercial issuance in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as is clear from the amendments made in clause 36.

Hywel Williams: Does the Minister agree with my earlier point that there is a commercial advantage to be gained from issuing one’s own notes? Why can that advantage not be extended to bank operations in Wales?

Harriett Baldwin: That is the very point that I was about to make. The amendment seeks to confer the right to issue commercial banknotes in Wales—a clear
commercial advantage—on just one bank, Lloyds Banking Group. That appears to be based on a link to a right to issue that was broken more than 100 years ago. Today, the Government—the taxpayer—owns just under 10% of Lloyds Banking Group. Part of Lloyds Banking Group already has a commercial banknotes issuance operation, which may be why the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr chose to focus on a single bank in his amendment. That is due to the acquisition of the Bank of Scotland operation, which is authorised to issue banknotes in Scotland. However, extending the privilege and the commercial advantage of issuing banknotes in Wales to just one bank would raise competition and commercial issues for others.

I liked the wide range of suggestions about who should be represented on Welsh banknotes, and, as I said earlier, the coins in our pockets are minted in Wales. I appreciate that the motive behind the amendment—the symbolic issue about which the hon. Gentleman feels so strongly—is to create a symbol, rather than to deal with a pressing economic or practical need for different banknotes. The Bank of England has already announced that future banknotes, starting with the polymer £5 note which will be issued in September 2016, will include symbols representing all four home nations. For Wales, the imagery will be taken from the Royal Coat of Arms and the Royal Badge of Wales. The Bank recently announced that the design for the £5 note would be revealed on 2 June 2016.

I am very glad that we have had a chance to discuss the merits of the amendment. The hon. Gentleman will understand why I cannot support it. However, I welcome the opportunity to convey the message that an important symbol of Wales will appear on our new banknotes.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 239, Noes 301.

Division No. 241] [5.49 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiellio, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flyn, Paul
Foxvargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinion, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Iwan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Iain C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, John
Means, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy

Shuker, Mr Gavin
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewli$ss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Michelle
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunn$ Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Elidih
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippi
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
A$sell, Caroline
Argha, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Ba$con, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harri$tt
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebeb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bo$es, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bro$Ikeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Connor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrows, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Car$tile, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman

Fuller, Richard
Fyah, Marcus
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward

Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackint$osh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Previts, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
The Bill will: make the Bank of England more transparent and accountable to Parliament and the public; further strengthen standards in the financial services sector; and strengthen protections for consumers, especially when accessing the new pensions freedoms. Building on the fundamental reforms to the regulatory architecture introduced by the Financial Services Act 2012, the Bill delivers a set of important evolutionary changes to the Bank. It ends the subsidiary status of the Prudential Regulation Authority and creates a new Prudential Regulation Committee, on the same footing as the Monetary Policy Committee and Financial Policy Committee. It makes the oversight functions the responsibility of the whole court, ensuring that every member of the court, executive and non-executive, can be held to account for the use of these functions. It also enhances the accountability of the Bank to Parliament by making the whole Bank subject, for the first time, to National Audit Office oversight. If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me correct something I said in error earlier, when I confused FOI with NAO—freedom of information. Of course, FOI has applied to the Bank of England for some time; this Bill brings in the NAO oversight.

The Bill also implements the remaining recommendation of the Warsh review, updating requirements for the timing of MPC publications and meetings. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) said on Second Reading, this Bill “brings the Bank of England more up to date as an institution, and in doing so it should greatly improve the scope for making it accountable to Parliament and the public.”—[Official Report, 1 February 2016, Vol. 605, c. 667].

During the passage of this Bill we have rightly devoted considerable time to the question of the appropriate role for Parliament. The Treasury Committee plays a crucial role in providing effective scrutiny of the FCA’s chief executive, and the agreement that we have announced today reinforces that.

The second aspect of the Bill is that it strengthens conduct in the financial sector by extending the senior managers and certification regime to all firms covered by the discredited authorised persons regime that we inherited. We all agree on the vital importance of high standards of conduct in the UK financial services industry. This Government have already taken the initiative in this area; we took a key step by bringing in the regime for the banking sector in March this year. The expansion of this new regime to all authorised persons will enhance personal responsibility for senior managers across the industry and raise standards of conduct more broadly.

Thirdly, the Bill introduces support for consumers accessing the new pension freedoms. To support consumers who, from April 2017, will be able to sell their annuity income stream in the secondary market for annuities, the Bill will extend the scope of the Pension Wise guidance service to cover these consumers, and introduce a requirement that, in effect, ensures that consumers with a high-value annuity receive appropriate financial advice before making the decision to sell their annuity income stream. These measures will help make consumers better informed and less vulnerable to mis-selling and scams.

In order to ensure fairness for people seeking to access their pensions early, the Bill will also give the FCA a new duty to cap early exit charges that act as a...
deterrent. This will provide real protection to consumers in contract-based pension schemes who are looking to make use of the freedoms.

The Bill also supports the Government’s consumer protection objectives by giving the Treasury a new power to provide financial assistance to illegal money-lending teams tasked with tackling loan sharks. Today, we have also added the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker).

In closing, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debates, both by speaking and by tabling amendments. In particular, I thank all the members of the Public Bill Committee for their efforts and for the time spent going through the Bill clause by clause. The hon. Members for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Morris) provided challenging discussion throughout the passage of the Bill. The hon. Members for East Lothian (George Kerevan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) gave close scrutiny to the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester made valuable contributions that have been most helpful and insightful, particularly on Treasury Committee matters.

I also thank the Treasury Whips, my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and for Central Devon (Mel Stride), who have provided me with much support both during and outside Bill debates. The Chairs of the Public Bill Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady) and the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have handled our scrutiny well.

I thank my Parliamentary Private Secretaries, who took on the important and thankless task of sitting behind me during our sittings and ensuring that I got the right briefing, for supporting me generally throughout this process.

Lord Bridges and Lord Ashton have done a fantastic job in taking the Bill through the other place, and I trust that they will continue to do so when the Lords consider our amendments.

Finally, I give thanks to the organisations that have assisted us in developing the Bill—the Bank of England, the National Audit Office and the Financial Conduct Authority. I must also give sincere thanks to Treasury officials, lawyers and parliamentary counsel, who spent many hours in the box, drafting amendments and briefings for these debates.

We have had useful and wide-ranging debates, and our discussions with Members in all parts of the House were constructive, even when we did not agree and had to settle matters with a vote. We have shown an understanding of each other’s position and improved the legislation as a result. The Bill will now go back to the other place, where their lordships will consider the useful changes that we have made to the Bill. I hope that they will welcome the legislation in its current form.

In conclusion, this Bill makes changes to strengthen the governance and accountibility of the Bank of England. It will contribute to the Government’s commitment to strengthen standards across the financial services industry and ensure that consumers are well protected. I commend its Third Reading to the House.

Richard Burgon: It is my pleasure to speak for the Opposition on Third Reading of the Bank of England and Financial Services Bill. The Chair of the Treasury Committee very kindly referred to the good humour and good nature I showed in one of my speeches. I am afraid that, if he were here now, he would be disappointed with the speech that I am about to make. People could be forgiven for thinking that I am returning to what some call my po-faced modus operandi.

The role of Government in legislating for financial stability and in ensuring that the Bank of England acts in the interests of the wider economy is to get the balance of regulation right. Righting the wrongs of the 2008 bankers’ crisis is an important task for any responsible Government—a task that Governments around the world have focused on fulfilling in the past decade. The task has been attempted since the bankers’ crisis of 2008, and today the bankers’ Chancellor is threatening to set it back.

The Bill has seen a number of changes since it first appeared in the other place, some of them for the better, but the precipitate changes that the Government are making to financial services regulation through their new settlement with the financial sector, including through measures in this Bill, suggest that they have failed to learn the lessons of the 2008 bankers’ crisis.

The Bill is a missed opportunity. The measures we have challenged on Second Reading, in Committee and on Report include the proposed abolition of the Bank’s oversight committee, the proposed veto on the National Audit Office’s powers of investigation, the proposed downgrading of the power of the Prudential Regulation Authority to that of a committee of the Bank, and the proposed reversal of the presumption of senior managers’ responsibility for misconduct cases. However, we also welcome a number of measures, including the Lords-stage concessions on the powers of oversight for the Bank’s non-executive directors, the reversal of the veto on the NAO’s powers of investigation, and the measures announced on funding for illegal money-lending teams in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

We are disappointed that other proposals have not been accepted by the Government. The leak of the Panama papers in the past fortnight has reawakened public concern about our financial system. There has been publication of thousands of documents detailing the systematic use of tax havens for the registration of secretive trusts and shell companies that are serviced by UK banks and that hold trillions of pounds out of reach of HMRC—a state of affairs that rightly outrages people across the UK and the globe. That is why earlier today we offered the Government an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to delivering the necessary tax transparency measures through our new clause 14.

That new clause, if the Government had supported it, would have instituted a new principle for the FCA: that of combating abusive tax avoidance arrangements, including by establishing a register of beneficial owners of trusts serviced by UK banks. Of course, that in itself is not sufficient, and Labour has set out its tax transparency enforcement plan. Earlier today, our new clause raised the vital issue of the UK banks’ involvement in the Panama papers, which the FCA has now asked them to report on.
The Government have set out initial plans but, with respect, they have not in our view grasped the bull by the horns. They have been dragged there by campaigners, charities and commentators who have rightly urged action on anti-abuse rules and country-by-country reporting. However, it is on the regulation of banks’ activity here in the UK, which has been such a dominant issue in recent years, that the Government have rolled back, watering down their proposals—or, should I say, U-turning on them.

Under the current presumption of responsibility that applies to senior managers, to avoid being found guilty of misconduct in an area for which they are responsible, they will have to show that they took reasonable steps to prevent that contravention. The Bill removes that onus on top bankers, an onus that is entirely reasonable, entirely proportionate and, as very bitter experience tells the British people, entirely necessary. Misconduct and misdemeanours in financial services are sadly not merely a tale from our history. In 2015, for example, the FCA had to fine firms more than £900 million. There was also the LIBOR scandal, foreign exchange fines and the mis-selling of PPI to the value of up to £33 billion, and the presumption of responsibility was so unreasonable and so necessary that the policy was introduced with cross-party support. That should not be forgotten.

It is remarkable that only days after the leak of the Panama papers and the pressure on the Prime Minister to defend his creative financial arrangements, the Government can come to this House and defend their decision to reverse regulation that they chose to bring in back in 2013, following the comprehensive work of the Chair of the Treasury Committee, my colleague Lord McFall, and others on the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards. This measure, which the Government are yet to implement, has been rolled back by the bankers’ Chancellor under pressure from those who would have been scrutinised. This change of policy did not take place in isolation; as I say, it was part of the Chancellor’s new settlement with the financial sector.

Another idea that we supported today, alongside our Treasury Committee colleagues, was strengthening the role of the Treasury Committee in the appointment of the chief executive of the FCA. It is the Treasury’s influence over the FCA and financial regulation that has been the subject of so much debate and concern in the past year; there has been debate and concern about the removal of Martin Wheatley and the scrapping of the FCA review of banking culture. More widely, as part of the post-crash debate, there have been concerns about whether bank capitalisation and leverage would be at sufficient levels and whether a suitably strong ring-fence would be implemented.

Added to this toxic cocktail of the bankers’ Chancellor’s own stirring is his unhealthy obsession with flogging off the Government’s Royal Bank of Scotland shares at a huge cost to the public purse. I have previously asked the Minister whether the Government will establish a floor price for the sale of RBS shares, as they have with Lloyds shares—or do they accept that the Chancellor got it wrong when he said that his loss leader last year would lead to better sales?

There is also the issue of pension master trusts. In Committee, the Minister told my colleague the shadow Financial Secretary that the Government would bring forward legislation, but the Minister of State for Pensions has since told the Work and Pensions Committee: “I have been pressing for a Pensions Bill but so far we don’t have one”, even though the Government could not protect savers without one. Will the Minister say when the Government will take action?

This Bill is a missed opportunity to demonstrate how the Bank of England could carry out its work in the most efficient way possible, with transparency and accountability in its decision making, serving the interests of the people who have sent us here to represent them, and a missed opportunity to demonstrate that senior managers in the financial sector could continue to do their jobs while being effectively and appropriately regulated. These are more missed opportunities from the missed-target Chancellor.

The context of the Bill is vital to understanding our concerns, and the concerns and demands of the wider public. We are eight years on from the economic crisis—the bankers’ crisis, which brought the financial services sector and our country to their knees. The sector was rescued by the decisive action of the then Prime Minister.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should take over and run these dodgy banks that have been in trouble all these years?

Richard Burgon: The Prime Minister of the day did step in and take appropriate action. The important thing is that the lessons of the financial crisis and the banking crisis are learned. I believe that the Opposition have learned those lessons, but those on the Government Benches have not.

Do the Chancellor and the Government still not understand the widespread anger out there? Do they not recognise the public’s deep distaste for the ever-expanding horror story of bailed-out bankers not being brought to book? The Panama papers shone a light on the squalid practice of the super-rich squirrelling away money offshore that Britain needs for our schools and hospitals, and to bring down the UK debt that has rocketed on the Chancellor’s watch. As I said on Second Reading, all that is taking place while there are cuts to pay, pensions, welfare, councils and services.

The public are right to remember that because of the behaviour of some top bankers, people whom this House is meant to represent lost their homes and their jobs. We should never forget that it was the bankers’ crisis that caused the deficit that this Government have relied on as their justification for their political choice to cut our public services, cut funding to our local authorities, cut the incomes of working people and cut support for the most vulnerable people in our communities. The global financial crash caused the huge increase in the deficit and stalled the economy. It also gave the Government the opportunity to carry out their long-harboured and decades-old ideological desire to cut public services and wither away the state.

We need a healthy and effective banking sector, but one that is appropriately regulated, serves the interests of the whole economy, does not hurt ordinary people or small and medium-sized businesses and delivers the vital investment our country needs for long-term growth. The Conservative Government’s climbdown on the
presumption of responsibility, which they previously supported, will hinder, not help, the fulfilment of those ambitions.

Personal responsibility is vital for the operation of our regulatory systems. The Chancellor’s policy U-turn reduces precisely the personal responsibility that the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards recommended in its 500-page report. Scraping a key measure before it has even had a chance to be tested makes no sense—unless, of course, the Chancellor is just following bankers’ orders. The startling and precipitous scrapping of a widely welcomed measure shows that there is a very real risk of failing to learn the lessons of the bankers’ crisis, and that is why we will oppose the Bill today. I urge all hon. Members to do the same.

6.21 pm

George Kerevan: We, too, will oppose the Bill on Third Reading. During Treasury questions today, the Chancellor said—I wrote the phrase down, because I was rather taken with it—that he was quite certain that we now have “better and tougher regulation of the financial system.” That is a good test, and it is a good test for this Bill. Do we have tougher regulation? As the law stands this evening, if a senior named manager in a major financial institution discovers that there has been major corruption, wrongdoing and regulatory failure at their bank on their watch, they are culpable unless they can prove to the FCA that they took reasonable steps to stop that happening. As we speak, they would be responsible, and that has been the case for a month and a half.

If we pass the Bill tonight, the situation will change. That manager will no longer be personally responsible. They will be able to argue, “Actually, I ticked all the boxes, signed all the forms, went to all the group therapy sessions with those on my trading floor and told them all to be good boys and girls, but do you know what? They weren’t, and they hid it from me.” And so we will go through the whole cycle again. The law as it stands, as passed by this Government and this Chancellor, makes each individual senior named manager responsible, like the captain of a ship or ferry; if something goes wrong, they are responsible and they cannot claim otherwise. If we pass the Bill, far from toughening the law, we will weaken it.

The only explanation we have heard from the Government is that it is a bit more complicated now because, in the last instance, it is the consumer’s champion. However, there are still loose ends, and so I come to the issue of the FCA. The FCA is important, and protecting it is important, but it is not to be confused with the consumer’s champion. The FCA is the guardian of the economy and buying and selling, while the consumer’s champion is the champion of the consumer. The FCA is involved in the banking system, while the consumer’s champion is involved in the consumer market. The FCA is a regulatory body, while the consumer’s champion is a consumer body.

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There was an interesting debate in Committee about transfer vehicles. Those are a bit technical, but they are to do with how the insurance market reinsures itself to spread risk. There are clauses in the Bill—that this is a good thing to put into it—that give the Treasury powers to regulate the use of transfer vehicles in the reinsurance market in a tougher fashion, to use the Chancellor’s key word.

I do not have time to go into detail about what is happening, but insurers can offset some of their risk in the reinsurance market, and they usually do that by selling some of it to specialist wholesale houses, which buy into the risk, but whose capital covers the risk if something goes wrong. Now, the insurance market is instead moving towards reinsuring through specialist vehicles of the kind that got us into trouble in the mortgage market in the lead-up to 2007.

When the issue was discussed in Committee, it was interesting that Ministers argued that we needed to put in place a regulatory framework that made it easier to shift the burden in the reinsurance market away from wholesalers that are capitalised and towards special vehicles using all the financial markets’ tricks of the trade, which led to the disaster in 2007. That said to me that, deep down in the Bill, the Government are up to their old tricks—they want to deregulate and to have less tough regulation, rather than more regulation. On those grounds, the Bill fails the Chancellor’s test, and we should vote against it.

There are good things in the Bill. In particular, we can pride ourselves on the fact that, through the Committee stage and leading up to Report stage today, the Government have been persuaded—I use that word in inverted commas—to take the Treasury Committee’s advice and to set a precedent, in that the FCA’s chief executive will in future be subject, de facto, to having their appointment approved by the Committee and, therefore, by this House rather than the Executive.

That does two things. First, it makes the FCA more accountable, because it is accountable to the House rather than the Executive. Secondly, it protects the FCA from interference by the Executive. That is a good precedent. If it is extended, we will be able to ensure that all the key regulatory bodies and their senior staff are approved by the House and, in particular, that the Governor of the Bank of England is subject to scrutiny and approval by the House, rather than simply appointed by the Executive. That is important because of the large powers that have been transferred to the Bank of England since the crisis of 2007.

However, there are still loose ends, and so I come to the word “better” in the Chancellor’s little homily. Have things got better? They have got a little better, given the ability of the House to protect the FCA and to have a role in appointing its head, and we can take that further into other regulatory bodies. However, there are loose ends at the FCA. Much of the Bill and much of the debate has been about the FCA. In the last instance, the FCA is the consumer’s champion; it regulates how the banks sell. Many of the problems we have had in the last 10 years have been about mis-selling by the banks.

Every Member in this House will know we have a number of legacy organisations and legacy campaigns because we have still not put right the mis-selling that has taken place across a range of banks and products since the turn of the millennium.

The FCA is important, and protecting it is important, because, in the last instance, it is the consumer’s champion. A few weeks ago I went to FCA headquarters and had a
meeting with Mr John Griffith-Jones, who is the chairman of
the FCA. I put it to him, “You are the consumer
champion,” but he demurred. He does not feel that
the FCA is the consumer champion. He thinks that that
would go too far and that it would be partisan and take
up the consumer’s choice. At present, the FCA is still
too much the creature of the Treasury. If we want a
tougher and better regulatory regime, we have to make
the FCA truly independent.

The FCA is getting a new chief executive, but I am
not going to offer platitudes and panaceas when
the new chief executive starts. I think that the chairman
of the FCA should consider his position, because I think it
also needs a new chairman. We are only starting on the
road of making sure that our regulatory bodies are fit
for purpose; we have not got there yet.

Finally, many people in Wales, Scotland and Northern
Ireland are disappointed that the Government stood on
ceremony and decided not to widen the
remit until the whole of the UK—the individual nations
and the regions of England—is represented. Until we
do that, the Bank of England is still suspect. That has
not been delivered, so there is still a suspicion across the
UK that the banking regulatory system operates ultimately
in the interests of the bankers, rather than the people.
Until that changes, we will not have a better or tougher
regulatory system; we will simply have the same old
regulatory system dressed up under a different name,
and the same old banking crisis will be around the
corner yet again.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third
time.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 237.

Division No. 242] [6.32 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Clark, rgh Greg
Clarke, rgh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rgh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodd, rgh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rgh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rgh Mr lain
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rgh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rgh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rgh Dr Liam
Francois, rgh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rgh Mrs Cheryl
Gillan, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rgh Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rgh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rgh Damian
Greening, rgh Justine
Grieve, rgh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hannon, rgh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rgh Matthew
Hands, rgh Greg
Harper, rgh Mr Peter
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rgh Sir Alan
Hayes, rgh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rgh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damien
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holluhole, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rgh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rgh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rgh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Latham, Pauline
Leadson, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rgh Dr Julian
Lidington, rgh Mr David
Lilley, rgh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rgh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rgh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Metcalf, Stephen

Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords]

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Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords]

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[6.32 pm]
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Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords]

Bank of England and Financial Services Bill [Lords]

Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Miller, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, Mr Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sherbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephen, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shalesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sarah Newton and Jackie Doyle-Price

Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, rh Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferron, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue

Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hiller, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame
Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoye, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskill, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meams, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moir, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

MODERN SLAVERY

That the draft Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Code of Practice) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 14 March, be approved.—(Charlie Elphicke.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Green belt land between Great Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay

6.45 pm

Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I would like to present a petition signed by the 4,962 people who have joined me in our campaign against building on green-belt land between Great Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay.

The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Great Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay in the South Staffordshire constituency, and others,

Declares that the current proposals to build 136 houses on Landywood Lane, Great Wyrley will lead to the erosion of the distinct identity of our individual villages and could cause substantial environmental damage and further notes that residents have already successfully fought these proposals at local council level in 2013.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take all possible steps to encourage South Staffordshire District Council to reject these proposals, and, if the proposals go to the Planning Inspectorate, to also encourage them to reject the proposals so that the green belt can be conserved for future generations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
UK Citizens Returning From Fighting Daesh

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

6.47 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate, and to so many right hon. and hon. Members for expressing an interest in it. I am particularly honoured that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) will respond to the debate for the Government. I know that the nation sleeps more soundly and sweetly in the knowledge that he is our Minister for Security.

This question is not a new one. We have grappled with how to view and respond to our fellow citizens who go abroad to fight in foreign wars. They did so not for money, as mercenaries, but because they believed that was the right thing to do, and they joined the side of the conflict that at least ostensibly—and certainly, for those in the complexity of an individual conflict—held widespread public support. That side was viewed by many, perhaps at times the majority, as the right side, or as, in one way or another, Britain’s ally. Some 50,000 English, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish fought in the American civil war, and several thousand fought in the Spanish civil war, as was memorialised by George Orwell. More recently, dozens of British volunteers joined Croatian units during the Yugoslav wars between 1991 and 1995.

After the experience of the American civil war, Parliament passed the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870, which prevents Britons from enlisting in a foreign army that is at war with a state currently at peace with the United Kingdom. However, that Act has never been properly enforced. It was, and it remains to this day, extremely difficult to monitor and to prosecute such an offence. Those returning from the Spanish civil war frequently expected to be given a hero’s welcome; in fact, they were invariably treated with suspicion by the police. They faced workplace discrimination, and many were even prevented from enlisting during the second world war.

Today, many—perhaps hundreds; I do not have an authoritative estimate, but perhaps the Minister will give us one in a moment—British citizens have travelled to northern Iraq, and from there into Syria. They have been treated in different ways. Their stories do not suggest there is any clear policy. Those stories do not give us great confidence in our border controls, as different individuals have clearly been treated in different ways.

A growing number of individuals have been profiled in the media. Some have even been on more than one tour, as it were. I have been in contact with 20 families, some of whom I will refer to this evening, including that of one of my own constituents, Aiden Aslin. Two Britons and an Irishman were arrested this weekend crossing back from Syria into northern Iraq, so this remains a topical issue. At least one British citizen, a former marine, Konstandinos Erik Scurfield from Barnsley, has been killed in action. The Foreign Office says that owing to the difficulties and the lack of consular services in the area, it is difficult to estimate whether more British citizens have been killed in action and what may have become of their bodies.

Behind every one of those individuals is a family. I have been in regular contact with my constituent Aiden’s mother, Angela, and his grandmother, Pamela, throughout his 10 months abroad. I cannot overstate their concern and anguish. Their initial thought was that one day they would turn on the television and see their son and grandson in an orange jacket. In their case, at least, there is also acceptance that their son and grandson took this extraordinary decision freely, in sound mind and good faith, because he could not continue to watch the atrocities on the television every night and turn a blind eye. I would not dare to generalise about the motives of all who have gone out there, but I have now met several, and they are brave and good people who deserve our respect and fair treatment under the law.

Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman gets to the point of the debate and I will return to that issue in a moment. The Government and the country need a clear and consistent policy. If we let individuals go, why should we arrest them for terrorism on their return?

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the hon. Friend for securing this debate. The reverse happened in my constituency. Anthony Harrison, a constituent, went to Iraq and fought with the Kurdish YPG forces. When he returned to Heathrow, he expected to be stopped, but was not. He then went back to Gillingham and self-referred to the police. The first duty of the state is to protect its citizens. We should be checking those individuals who have gone out and come back, otherwise there is a real risk to our national security.

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Whichever side of the argument we take—whether we are supporters of these individuals or have reservations—their stories suggest that there is no clear policy. Those stories do not give us great confidence in our border controls, as different individuals have clearly been treated in different ways.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to seek a bit of advice about the highly unusual case of a UK citizen injured fighting the forces of Daesh whom I met in a refugee camp in France. He is leading a pretty miserable existence there because he refuses to abandon his wife and baby boy who had to flee Kurdistan, but are not entitled to seek asylum in the UK. The family do not meet the minimum income requirements for spouse visas, partly because of his injuries. How can we help this courageous UK citizen who fought our common enemy, Daesh, and get him and his family out of their miserable existence in the refugee camp in Europe and back here where he belongs?
Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point; perhaps the Minister will respond to it later in the debate. I am pleased that other hon. Members have come across individuals who are in the same circumstances as people I have met.

These individuals are entering an exceptionally dangerous situation, and many are not at all prepared or suitable for these conflict zones. Some of the militias with which they wittingly or unwittingly become involved divide opinion sharply, and it is difficult for the layperson to navigate their record and legal status in the United Kingdom. Some of the groups have been accused of war crimes or association with terrorism. The diplomatic situation is complex, and things are becoming increasingly hostile towards those who are enlisting in Iraq and Turkey. It is exceptionally difficult to understand what citizens have done while in the field and who they have associated with, or to predict with complete confidence how they will behave on their return.

I start with the premise that although we acknowledge people’s bravery and seek fair and appropriate treatment, we should as far as possible discourage and inhibit British citizens from going out in the first place, particularly if we plan to arrest some of them under the Terrorism Act 2000 when they return. Several militias operate in the region, but the principal group recruiting British citizens that I have come across is the YPG, or its foreign fighters organisation, the Lions of Rojava, which has a Facebook account and is easily contactable online.

My constituent, who had no prior knowledge of the region, was able to carry out a Google search, to make contact and to organise his travel at low cost and with great ease. As far as I know—perhaps the Minister will comment on this—the Home Office and internet providers have made no effort to close down such sites as they might for those that encourage the recruitment of British citizens to fight on the other side. Many of those recruited are making rational choices, and it is not my intention to imply otherwise or discredit them, but there is clear evidence that some are far less equipped than others to make these decisions, such as a 19-year-old man who previously worked as a florist in Manchester and had never left the United Kingdom in his life, a young man with Asperger’s, and a British citizen who had previously tried to take his own life three times. Journalists in the field to whom I have spoken have reported being contacted on numerous occasions by former servicemen who are asking for ways to return. Some of these groups use a language of martyrdom that is not altogether dissimilar from that of the people they are fighting against, which certainly makes me extremely uncomfortable.

Some of those individuals, particularly ex-servicemen and women, would be advised not to go to the conflict zone. Few questions are asked by the recruiters and no military experience is required. Health is never checked, and many if not most people arrive at airports such as Sulaymaniyah completely in the dark about what they should expect. They could be kidnapped and held to ransom—who knows?

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend says that health is never checked when people go out, but given the trauma that people may have suffered on the battlefield, their state of mind needs to be checked when they come back if we are to consider security, because such people may inadvertently get drawn into other criminal activity.

Robert Jenrick: The short answer is that very little support is offered to returning individuals. Indeed, my research suggests that the vast majority of people are not even questioned by the police or security services on their return.

Many people going out have little knowledge of the principal militias such as the YPG. My purpose tonight is not to besmirch the YPG, but to point out that it divides opinion and that many if not most Britons who go out have no real knowledge of that group or the accusations against it. Amnesty International has accused the YPG of war crimes.

The Turkish Government believe, rightly or wrongly, that this is an offshoot of the PKK, which is of course a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK and the USA. Recent reports suggest that some foreign fighters have left the YPG in the field because of its views and joined other even more obscure militias such as the so-called “self-sacrifice” group, which operates in the Nineveh region.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman should be congratulated on securing this debate. Having said that, I have been listening to what he has been saying and I wonder how he would understand it, the Kurdish army, the peshmerga, has joined other even more obscure militias and women, would be advised not to go to the conflict zone. Few questions are asked by the recruiters and no military experience is required. Health is never checked, and many if not most people arrive at airports such as Sulaymaniyah completely in the dark about what they should expect. They could be kidnapped and held to ransom—who knows?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, showing the complexity of the situation. As I understand it, the Kurdish army, the peshmerga, has said that, as a result of direct representations by the US Government, it is no longer recruiting foreign fighters, but militias are different and continue to recruit foreign volunteers. Some of these groups use a language of martyrdom that is not altogether dissimilar from that of the people they are fighting against, which certainly makes me extremely uncomfortable.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Charlie Elphicke.)
The position of British citizens in the field has become even more complex recently because it appears that Turkey has applied pressure on Iraq to take action against the YPG and foreign fighters because of its links to the PKK and the Kurds. The two Britons and an Irishman arrested over the weekend were detained by the Iraqi Government due to “visa irregularities”, which seems a fairly spurious reason for arrest, given that there is no working Iraqi-Syrian border. It none the less suggests that, given our limited consular services in northern Iraq, British citizens are getting themselves into a complex and dangerous situation. British citizens should be discouraged from going out. The sites should be taken down and the Government should, behind the scenes, persuade the Kurdish authorities to keep British citizens out of the conflict. The peshmerga are no longer accepting foreign volunteers, as I say, but the militias certainly are.

Why are individuals not being prevented from travelling when they openly inform officers of their intentions at the airport, as my constituent did, when these immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return? If British citizens are to be arrested under the Terrorism Act, why are we waving them through immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return? If British citizens are to be arrested under the Terrorism Act, why are we waving them through immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return? If British citizens are to be arrested under the Terrorism Act, why are we waving them through immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return? If British citizens are to be arrested under the Terrorism Act, why are we waving them through immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return? If British citizens are to be arrested under the Terrorism Act, why are we waving them through immigration and security officials should surely know that these individuals are likely to be arrested on their return?

Let me turn briefly to how we treat these individuals on their return. Of the 20 I have spoken with or their families, two were arrested under the Terrorism Act; four were questioned, but not arrested; 14 came and went at will, unquestioned, three of whom have been on a second or third tour of duty overseas. That does not give me a great deal of confidence in our border controls.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend talks about people being stopped and questioned by the police. I have a letter here from the Minister in the other place who is responsible for tackling extremism, which states that the stopping and questioning of these individuals is an operational matter for the police, but surely we need guidance for each case from the Government rather than having issue after issue being looked at by the police.

Robert Jenrick: I could not agree more.

I do not know whether this is a representative sample, so perhaps the Minister will tell us in his remarks how many British citizens have been arrested in these circumstances, but it is clear that there is not a consistent approach. Much, as my hon. Friend has just said, is left to individual police forces. My own police force in Nottinghamshire arrested my constituent on his plane and took him for brief questioning, yet he has awaited news of whether he is to be charged for the past 12 weeks. The outcome has now been postponed once again. I am told that the Crown Prosecution Service has not been given the file or been asked for its advice.

Do police forces know how to handle this situation? Some treat these individuals and their families in exactly the same way and in the same circumstances as they would for those fighting for Daesh, which is particularly rough on the families and loved ones, whose homes are searched and computers taken while neighbours watch on through twitching curtains. Others may well chose not to get involved as some individuals have been in the press, but are never troubled by the police.

Clearly, individuals need to be questioned; we need to understand what they have done. I can appreciate, as the Minister may argue, that a single mistake or an individual wrongly assumed to be fighting on the other side who then returns home and commits a terrorist act, is a risk that we cannot bear. However, I suggest that we should exercise caution before arresting individuals, because that will remain on their records for the rest of their lives. If we do arrest them, it should be done consistently, and police forces should be equipped with guidance so that people like my constituent are not left in limbo for months and months while they decide what to do.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will give way one last time.

Kevin Foster: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a debate that has proved quite interesting to me. He has described the complexity of a situation in which different militia groups—different forces—are fighting Daesh. Does he agree that guidance is needed because the task of any immigration or police officer who is presented with a case of this kind is to investigate crime rather than looking into international affairs?

Robert Jenrick: That is absolutely true. This is an unenviable task for anyone who is involved in such investigations.

I do not pretend to have the answers, but let me draw the attention of the House and the Minister to an issue that I think needs careful thought. Given the existence of social media and cheap international flights, it has never been easier for individuals to make contact, to be recruited, and to travel to conflict zones. It might be thought that in this modern age when we are all mollycoddled, people would not dream of doing something of this kind, but people are doing it, and it is becoming easier and easier to do.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential for the Government and law enforcement agencies to send the clear, consistent and credible message that those who decide to go abroad and risk their lives run a very real risk of prosecution when they return? Would that not constitute a powerful disincentive?

Robert Jenrick: I could not agree more.

Most of these individuals—certainly most of those whom I have met—are doing this for what they believe to be good reasons. Most are braver men and women than you or I. However, doing this carries great risks, beyond the risk of being killed, captured or ransomed: the risks involved in being caught fighting with a group that is viewed by some as a terrorist organisation. Even if it is not, people will still be arrested, and that will remain on their records for the rest of their lives.

The Government need a considered and consistent policy, which they do not appear to have today. They need a policy that discourages British citizens from taking such risks, which ensures that, whenever possible,
they are advised of their likely legal status on their return, and which, above all, treats these brave men fairly and appropriately when they do come home.

7.7 pm

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on securing an interesting and informative debate on a topic that has been unfairly overlooked during our discussions about the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As you might expect, Mr Speaker, I have a prepared speech, and I shall refer to it sporadically, but I want to tailor my remarks to the issues that have been raised in the debate. I sense the shivers that are going down the spines of Home Office officials as I utter those words.

My hon. Friend made an emphatic case for why we should broadcast clearly and powerfully that travelling abroad in uncertain circumstances such as those that he has described is extremely dangerous. There are three reasons for that. First, the cause that people go to support is often not what it is purported to be in the propaganda that has encouraged them to do so. Secondly, as my hon. Friend suggested, those people may well not return. They may be placed in extremely jeopardous situations, even if they are going abroad to offer help. They may not know that they are going to fight—to engage in conflict—but they will nevertheless be placing themselves in extreme danger, almost regardless of their original purpose. Thirdly, on their return they may well find themselves in extreme danger, almost regardless of their intentions. They may not know that they are going to fight—to put themselves at risk. There are things that they can do to help.

Part of the reason behind the advice that was offered by my hon. Friend in his impressive speech, and which I have amplified, is that some of the organisations that people might join—ostensibly for the good and noble purposes that he described—might themselves be proscribed. Some of the organisations fighting Daesh are themselves proscribed and might be engaged in activities that we neither endorse nor support. The picture is often more complicated than is portrayed when people are recruited.

Many of those people are recruited through the internet. It will not have missed your consideration, Mr Speaker—little does—that people communicate in all kinds of modern technological ways these days. Much of the propaganda that is now emanating from Daesh uses the most modern methods of communication. We often think of Daesh as brutally archaic, which is understandable given its means and its methods. Indeed, it is often suggested that it is an organisation from times past. However, its technological methodology is extremely up to date. It takes advantage of every kind of social media and it uses the internet regularly in a well-organised and sophisticated way. That is precisely why its message is seductive to its adherents and apologists here in the United Kingdom.

Keith Vaz: The Minister is absolutely right to suggest that we are dealing with a very sophisticated enemy. May I take him back to the point made by the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) about border checks? We still do not have 100% border checks, because our passports are not viewed by immigration officers on departure. They are looked at, together with our boarding cards, by the travel agents, but we are not checked on departure. The hon. Gentleman is calling for better checks at the border, with our passports being looked at by immigration officers and swiped before departure. That does not happen at the moment.

Mr Hayes: The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee takes a keen interest in all such matters. What I will say to my hon. Friend the Member for Newark is that it seems that if people have notified the local police that they may go, which is what he said, and then no more has been done for the reasons that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) suggested, that does not seem satisfactory. It certainly seems reasonable that if people have notified the police that they are going to travel—although it is of course for the police to make a case-by-case judgment on an operational basis—we need at least to be confident that the police have the right guidance on what is appropriate. I am certainly happy to take that suggestion back to the Home Office and to see what more can be done, if anything, to ensure that the advice to different police forces around the country is consistent. As I say, these are, in the end, operational matters, and this has to be gauged on a case-by-case basis, but my hon. Friend the Member for Newark makes an important point none the less.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Minister, who is being generous in taking interventions. Following his comment about briefing police forces around the country, I urge him to ensure that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is included. People can leave the UK on British passports, go out to help in Syria, become radicalised and then come back, perfectly
lawfully, to Dublin or Shannon airports. The border between the Republic of Ireland and South Armagh is entirely porous, so British passport holders can re-enter the UK through Northern Ireland without any border checks.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady makes a reasonable case. There is a robust system in place for missing persons to be identified, for example, by the Turkish police on the Syrian border. We spend a great deal of time considering the issue of people returning from Syria, because some of them will subsequently be subjects of interest to our intelligence services and to law enforcement. However, the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was making was that if someone has said to the police, “I’m going,” do different forces apply the same policy consistently? It is a reasonable point, which is why I have committed to considering it in more detail and to looking at the guidance.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I am anxious to make progress, but I will briefly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: This House took a majority decision to support bombing attacks in Syria and Iraq. Those who watched those debates would assume that the bombing would be in support of the 70,000 allied forces and supporters who were trying to fight Daesh on the ground. That was the whole purpose of the House’s decision. Anyone watching that debate who wanted to support the factions fighting Daesh would feel, when they spoke to the police, that this House was already fighting a war, and that they were doing nothing wrong. Does the Minister understand that is the issue put forward by the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)? There are two different groups: those who are fighting Daesh, and those who support Daesh.

Mr Hayes: I am saying to the hon. Gentleman that someone might think that they are going out for what might be the perfectly noble cause of fighting our common enemy, but there is always a great deal of uncertainty about what happens when they get there. Such people are by their nature often quite ignorant of what they will encounter and may become linked to, tied to, or involved in all kinds of organisations and groups, some of which are proscribed in this country and engaged in all kinds of other activities as well as the battle against Daesh. This is a complicated issue and should not be presented as anything else, although I understand the hon. Gentleman’s sympathy.

Rehman Chishti: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will give way one more time, and then I really must make progress.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister will agree that both categories of individuals—those who go to fight Daesh and those who support Daesh—are of concern. Around 800 individuals are fighting with Daesh. Do the Government or the Minister have an estimate of the number of individuals out there fighting against Daesh? Both groups should be on our intelligence services’ radar.

Mr Hayes: We know roughly the number of people who have travelled to Syria, some of whom initially went for humanitarian reasons. Many have returned, but some have been killed. As both my hon. Friend the Member for Newark and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, all those who go also face the risk of being captured and used as hostages. The strong advice is, “Don’t go, because you don’t know what you are going to encounter. And you certainly don’t know what the consequences may be.” That is precisely the point my hon. Friend the Member for Newark made in his opening remarks, and it is an important signal to send out from this place.

I would not want to suggest that the Government are inactive in this respect, so let me deal with what we are doing. The work we are doing on providing humanitarian aid is well documented. We have pledged more than £2.3 billion in vital life-saving assistance to Syria, and this is our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. We remain one of the largest donors to the Syrian crisis response internationally. Of course it is important also to emphasise that those engaged in terrorism blight lives, provide bogus legitimacy to the worst extremes of human behaviour and tear communities apart. This activity cannot ever be justified, and it will never be justified by this Government, wherever it takes place or whoever commits it. I also understand the desire to confront our enemies, but the struggle for what is right is not, and cannot be, left to individuals; it can be devised and delivered only through the proper exercise of Government authority.

The second point I wish to make is that we are, of course, part of a military response to the threat posed by Daesh; the UK is making a strong military contribution. RAF Typhoon, Tornado and Reaper aircraft have flown more than 2,000 combat missions, and about 1,000 UK personnel are supporting their operation in the wider region. Our aircraft also provide effective close air support to Iraqi and Kurdish forces taking the fight to Daesh on the ground, with recent successes coming in Ramadi and Sinjar. It is through the global coalition, to which we are making such a significant contribution, that we will defeat Daesh. Although it is understandable that individuals should want to add to that, their effort is better expended in supporting what we are trying to do as a nation to get this right, both militarily and in humanitarian terms.

This is also about challenging the propaganda that I have mentioned, as has the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. Challenging that, in communities up and down our nation, is a job for all of us. If people want to fight Daesh, they can do that on the streets of our capital city, London, and in cities and towns across this kingdom. All of us have a job to do in countering that poisonous narrative, which is delivered partly, but not only, through the internet. That is why the Government have invested so much in the Prevent programme and in our Channel programme, which deals specifically with people at risk of radicalisation.

We introduced a Prevent duty for a range of public bodies, including schools, prisons, local authorities and health services. This communal task of challenging the narrative is ongoing. It is highly dynamic, for the very reason that the threat we face is dynamic, and that requires us to redouble our efforts. I say to individuals who want to take on Daesh that there is a job to do in
all those ways. For example, we take 1,800 pieces of terrorist propaganda down from the internet not every year or every month, but every week. That task is vital, as is supporting those community organisations and others that are putting forward the counter-narrative. These are important pieces of work, because the effect on individuals, particularly young people, who are corrupted by that poisonous narrative could not be more devastating.

Of course young people are targeted, because they are particularly vulnerable. They are susceptible to the kind of propaganda that I have described. It is important to know that last year alone, we referred 2,000 young people to our Channel programme, because they were vulnerable to that kind of radicalisation. In some cases, no further work was needed, but in others, intervention by social services was required. More than 200 such young people received support through that Channel programme.

At the end of last year, I saw at first hand, in Portsmouth, Hackney and elsewhere, the work that was done by our Prevent co-ordinators. I have met many of those who are on the frontline of this battle, and that is the frontline on which I want people to fight. I am talking about working in this country, taking on those who wish to corrupt our young people. This is no less than a safeguarding issue. The methods used by those who want to radicalise young people are not dissimilar to those of other kinds of exploitation. There is often a grooming process, which may take place face to face or online. It is often about picking on those young people who are particularly disadvantaged in some way. It is certainly about turning them from the cause of virtue to the cause of wickedness.

There should be no doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Newark has done a service to this House by drawing our attention to the matters that we have debated briefly tonight. I end with this thought, which I hope he will broadcast to the people of Newark and elsewhere. If anyone should be in any doubt, let it be dispelled tonight: this Government and this Minister can outmatch our enemies in respect of our certainty, our determination and our commitment to winning this battle for the very heart and soul of all we are as a people.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inward Investment

1. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage inward investment in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): Before I answer the question, I would like to convey my condolences to the family of Adrian Ismay, the prison officer who sadly died as a result of a terrorist attack in the period since our last Northern Ireland questions. I would like to extend the same condolences to the family of Michael McGibbon, who was brutally murdered in north Belfast, in an attack that has all the hallmarks of a paramilitary assault.

To encourage inward investment in Northern Ireland, the Government have reduced UK corporation tax to the joint lowest in the G20 and legislated to enable the devolution of rate-setting powers to Northern Ireland. Working with the Executive, we are also making progress on the establishment of a new enterprise zone near Coleraine.

Maria Caulfield: I echo the sentiments of condolence expressed by the Secretary of State, and I thank her for her reply. What benefit does she think this inward investment will bring to the local economy of Northern Ireland? In particular, what steps are being taken to ensure that all communities will benefit from it?

Mrs Villiers: There has been significant investment in Northern Ireland in recent years, and it continues to perform beyond many parts of the United Kingdom. Recent good news includes 110 new jobs for Cookstown from CDE; 74 new jobs in Belfast from HighWire Press; and about 70 new jobs in Fermanagh and Omagh. Invest NI reports that it has promoted 37,000 new jobs since 2011 and delivered £2.6 billion of investment to the local economy, benefiting all parts of Northern Ireland.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers so far. She will be aware that key Northern Ireland companies such as Allstate and Almac have had to look outside Northern Ireland to recruit suitably skilled staff in recent times. Has she any suggestion as to how we might ensure a suitable supply of potential staff who are skilled up to take advantage of opportunities offered by inward investment?

Mrs Villiers: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a skilled workforce is crucial for attracting inward investment. Northern Ireland has an excellent workforce, with many highly-skilled individuals, but there is always more that can be done. The UK Government have invested significantly in apprenticeships, which is reflected in Barnett consequentials to the block grant. I know that apprenticeships are also something the Northern Ireland Executive take very seriously, and they are delivering many of them.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that airport connectivity is a vital tool in attracting inward investment? Given that Dublin has announced that it will be increasing its airport capacity by 2020, is it not time Her Majesty’s Government took a decision on airport capacity in the south-east of England?

Mrs Villiers: Yes, the Government will be making a decision on the expansion of airport capacity in the south-east in due course. We are clear that new capacity is needed and that a decision will be made shortly.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I personally thank the Secretary of State for the efforts she made in helping to secure a £67 million contract for the Wrights Group in Ballymena, which was very well received there, and for the work she did behind the scenes in securing that contract? Like me, is she appalled, however, by the scare stories and scare tactics being deployed by the remain campaign, which are turning people away from investment because they are scared of the consequences and all this hate activity that is going on? Will she, like me, ensure that, irrespective of the outcome on 23 June, every effort is made to make sure that moneys released to the United Kingdom will be used to attract inward investment in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his comments on my role in relation to the Wrightbus contract. I did press Transport for London hard to go through with that contract, because I think it is important for job opportunities in Northern Ireland and so that we can have great buses for my constituents. On his question about the referendum, I think it is important for all sides to address the facts of the debate in a measured way, so that on 23 June the people of this country can make a judgment based on the objective facts of the situation.

Terrorism

2. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the level of the threat of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The threat level from terrorism in Northern Ireland continues to be severe. Although many attacks...
are disrupted and prevented, the callous murder of prison officer Adrian Ismay highlights the lethal nature of the continuing threat. The UK Government remain vigilant in combating terrorism, giving our full support to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and MI5 in their crucial work to keep people safe in Northern Ireland.

Henry Smith: I join in the condolences to Mr Ismay’s family. In addition to domestic terror threats in Northern Ireland, what assessments has the Secretary of State made of international terror threats to the Province?

Mrs Villiers: My hon. Friend will appreciate that that is a Home Office lead, but it is something that I discuss regularly with the Home Secretary, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Ireland Justice Minister and other relevant people. The Government take the matter extremely seriously, as the threat from international terrorism is severe. That is one reason why the strategic defence and security review made such a strong commitment to investing in our intelligence services and counter-terrorism spending, which includes a 30% real terms increase in counter-terrorism spending over the course of this Parliament.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State in her words about the killing of Adrian Ismay and also in relation to the brutal slaying of Michael McGibbon, a father of four who was shot on Friday in my constituency. Clearly, that was an atrocious event. Will she join me in commending the courageous words of Mr McGibbon’s widow who has called for people to stand together against these paramilitary terrorists who carried out this atrocious attack? Does she agree that it is vital that we all unite against terrorists from all sides and that we get on with implementing the provisions to tackle paramilitaries in the “Fresh Start” agreement?

Mrs Villiers: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s statement. Mr McGibbon’s widow is an incredibly brave woman. The circumstances of Mr McGibbon’s death are deeply tragic and heartbreaking. I know that the whole House will feel for his family at this time, and it is utterly unacceptable that, in modern Northern Ireland, there are still people who believe that they can take the law into their own hands and administer this violent, brutal treatment of individuals such as Mr McGibbon. It is utterly unacceptable. I agree with him that everyone in Northern Ireland should join the widow in this case and condemn that horrific and brutal murder.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer. Will she also take on board the fact that a number of prominent republicans have been arrested in North Belfast recently, including some out on licence? It is important that she reassures the community that she is keeping under review the terms in which people who are under licence are out on the streets, particularly Sean Kelly, the Shankill bomber. Does she also agree that there is great concern in Northern Ireland about the Attorney General’s decision to order a review into the actions of the Royal Ulster Constabulary when it stopped a terrorist from carrying out a terrorist attack? Will she look carefully at that and speak to colleagues about it?

Mrs Villiers: I agree that it is very important to take seriously revocation of licences. There is a very clear legal framework for doing that. Where there is evidence that a licence should be revoked, it is considered with the greatest seriousness. I also agree that it is vital that we press ahead with full implementation of the “Fresh Start” programme to eliminate the lingering influence of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The time for those groups has passed. They were never justified under any circumstances and any tolerance of them in Northern Ireland today is to be condemned. In relation to the last point about the public prosecutor’s direction, that is a matter for the independent prosecutors.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the Secretary of State’s assessment of the terrorist threat from dissident republican groups to mainland Great Britain?

Mrs Villiers: The threat level is not as severe as it is in relation to Northern Ireland. It continues to be the case that dissident republican groupings have aspirations to mount attacks in Great Britain, but the indications are that their main focus continues to be Northern Ireland, and the Government will remain vigilant in doing everything they can to protect people, both in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am deeply sorry that Adrian Ismay became the 31st prison officer to be murdered in Northern Ireland, and I do hope that a memorial garden for prison officers will soon be completed in Northern Ireland. The question I want to ask the Secretary of State follows on from the second question of the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds). The Secretary of State will know that I have already written to her requesting a meeting to discuss why Sean Kelly’s licence has not been revoked. Gina Murray, a very dignified lady, whose only daughter was murdered in the Shankill Road bombing, wishes to have a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the reasons why his licence has not been revoked. Will the Secretary of State consent to that meeting?

Mrs Villiers: I am certainly happy to have that meeting. In terms of timing, we might have to be careful about the interaction with the decision that I might need to make over the coming days and weeks, but I am sure that we can have a meeting on this matter at some stage.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Despite much progress in Northern Ireland, there remains a terrorist threat, as we saw with the shocking murder of prison officer Adrian Ismay, whose funeral the Secretary of State and I attended. I associate myself with the remarks of the Secretary of State and we send our sincere condolences to Adrian Ismay’s family and colleagues. The Secretary of State will also know that there have been explosives found, bomb-making equipment discovered and murders north and south of the border. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether, in her opinion, these individuals are acting alone or as part of a more organised and co-ordinated terror group?

Mrs Villiers: A number of groupings are active in relation to the terrorist threat in Northern Ireland. They tend not to be terribly cohesive and are subject to
increasing and regular splits. They have connections both north and south of the border and, were it not for the dedication and effectiveness of the PSNI and its partners in MI5 we would see these individuals mounting attacks resulting in tragedies such as that which has befallen the family of Adrian Ismay in such despicable circumstances.

**Vernon Coaker:** I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. She will know that in recent days in Northern Ireland there have been two terrible shootings, one with fatal consequences—that of Michael McGibbon. I associate myself with the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and with the words of the widow. Our hearts go out from this House to all the families and those affected. The PSNI says that the attacks have all the hallmarks of paramilitary assaults, so on the streets of this United Kingdom we have shootings and murders linked to paramilitary activity. It is both sickening and totally unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State tell us more about what happened, and what action she, the PSNI and others will take against those who have no respect for human life or the rule of law?

**Mrs Villiers:** The hon. Gentleman chooses his words correctly; this is absolutely sickening. I feel that this case could be like a number we have seen over recent decades in Northern Ireland and be the point at which people there say that this is completely and utterly unacceptable. The police investigation is progressing, with an individual charged with murder, but it is also imperative, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) said, that we implement the “Fresh Start” agreement proposals, including progress on the strategy that the panel is coming up with. We need to ensure that people have the confidence to come forward and give evidence against these individuals. That has been a persistent problem in gaining convictions, as people are afraid to give evidence in such cases. As a society, we need to do all we can to support and encourage people so that they are able to come forward and give evidence to bring these people to justice.

**Mr Speaker:** We are extremely grateful to the Secretary of State.

**Export Licences: Agricultural Producers**

3. **Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on waiting times for Northern Irish agricultural producers to obtain export licences.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland** (Mr Ben Wallace): Too often the biggest barrier to exports of agricultural goods are health and inspection regimes in destination countries. One of our main efforts involves trying to develop the market to China and other countries and that is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been working closely with Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials and industry to collate information and to address any concerns from destination countries, hopefully cutting out the delays in gaining export health certificates for Northern Ireland suppliers.

**Ms Ritchie:** Does the Minister agree that although getting an export licence and getting approvals for Northern Ireland food produce already takes too long, the wait for Northern Ireland farmers would become ever longer if we were to leave the European Union and had to renegotiate our trade relationships with some of our nearest neighbours within the European common market?

**Mr Wallace:** It is certainly in the interest of Northern Ireland farmers and all farmers across the European Union that they have access to new markets across the rest of the world. That is one reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is, as we speak, in Washington lobbying hard for more access for UK farmers to sell their beef into the United States. We should recognise that the United Kingdom can do it, but if we do it alongside the EU in things such as the EU-US trade treaty we will gain more markets for our farmers and they will go from strength to strength.

**David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will know that one obstacle for the agri-food sector, especially the meat industry, is BSE and swine flu certificates. Will he ensure that his Department works hard with the veterinary division to achieve that? We sometimes put all our eggs in one basket with China, but there are many other countries out there with which we can do business.

**Mr Wallace:** I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is right. That is why, as I said earlier, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is in America, trying to get the BSE legacy issues removed so that we can access American markets to sell our beef, which will be great for our beef price. We need to learn from the Republic of Ireland, which has managed to forge ahead with milk exports around the world, which is why it has a better milk price than our dairy farmers.

**EU Referendum**

4. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive on the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU; and if she will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland** (Mr Ben Wallace): Ministers have regular discussions with the Northern Ireland parties on a range of issues. The Government’s position on the EU referendum is clear: the UK will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in a reformed European Union.

**Susan Elan Jones:** Many of us were interested to see a survey by a highly reputable Northern Ireland business organisation which suggests that 81% of businesses support continuing EU membership. Why does the Secretary of State think she is right on that issue and those businesses are wrong?

**Mr Wallace:** The CBI Northern Ireland, 81% of the membership of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association all believe that remaining in the
European Union is good for Northern Ireland business and good for the economy. That is why the Government believe we are better off in.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): May I join in the condolences that have been expressed by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, and may I add condolences to the family of Sister Clare Theresa Crockett, the nun from Derry who was tragically killed in the earthquake in Ecuador? Has the Minister heard how many of us are so appreciative of the difference that EU membership has made to the border economy and not just to funding in Northern Ireland under programmes, but to funding models? Has he heard others say that that will be dwarfed by the bounty that we will receive as money is redirected to Northern Ireland instead of Brussels? Does he believe there is a crock of gold at the end of the Brexit rainbow?

Mr Speaker: A ministerial answer of one sentence would not be disorderly.

Mr Wallace: Northern Ireland benefits extremely well from money that it receives from the European Union. There is no pot of gold at the end of the Brexit rainbow, so I suggest that we get on and focus on what is right for Northern Ireland, which is remaining in the European Union.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): If the UK does decide to leave the EU, there will be an annual £9 billion hole in the EU finances. As other eastern bloc nations look to join to get more slices of a diminishing financial cake, what opportunities does the Minister believe Northern Ireland companies would have in those circumstances to export to Europe and beyond?

Mr Wallace: The first thing we should recognise is that Northern Ireland business does not agree with the hon. Gentleman and believes that it should remain in the European Union. If people voted to leave the European Union, from 24 June Northern Ireland businesses would unfortunately have to deal with instability for the next two years, which would damage their market.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It will not have escaped your gimlet-eyed gaze, Mr Speaker, that those of us on Opposition Front Bench are united on the subject, but for months we have had uncertainty about what will happen to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic in the tragic event of Brexit. Two Sundays ago Lord Lawson popped up on the “The Andrew Marr Show” to say we would have a border. Leaving aside the irony of that coming from a French resident whose policy was to shadow the Deutschmark, may we have some clarity on what will happen to the border? Are there any revelations that the Minister would care to share with us?

Mr Speaker: Far too long.

Mr Wallace: On 24 June the border will still exist. However, if the United Kingdom chose to leave the European Union, it would step outside the customs union, which would inevitably affect trade across that border on which Northern Ireland is significantly dependent, because of more bureaucracy, more checks and a slowdown of trade.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I appreciate that the Secretary of State must feel quite lonely in Belfast these days, given that her views on Europe are not shared by the overwhelming majority of the population of Northern Ireland. Can we get to the bottom of the question of Brexit and the border? Her colleague, Nigel Lawson, the former Chancellor, said that leaving the EU would mean rebuilding the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Three days ago she said that that was not the case. They cannot both be right.

Mr Speaker: Far too long.

Mr Wallace: One thing myself and my right hon. Friend are completely united on is that there will be no return to barbed wire and watchtowers should we leave or remain in the European Union. What there will be, however, is a Northern Ireland that steps outside the customs union, and that would inevitably affect the free flow of trade across the border.

Exports

5. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What discussions has she had with the Northern Ireland Executive on increasing the level of exports from Northern Ireland.

Mrs Villiers: To do that, we are delivering economic stability, and we are cutting national insurance contributions for 3.4 million self-employed people. We are also working with the Northern Ireland Executive through the economic pact to deliver things such as our start-up loans programme for young entrepreneurs and through the taskforce on access to banking, which has delivered £60 million in business finance.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): At a meeting yesterday involving the oil and gas group, Harland and Wolff from my constituency railed against the religious observance of EU regulations that is required of it, unlike its competitors across the European Union. How can we redress the balance so that it can compete equally with its competitors across the European Union?

Mrs Villiers: The Government are certainly doing all they can to ensure that the UK, including Northern Ireland, is one of the most competitive places in the world to do business, which is one reason why we have reduced corporation tax. We are bearing down on
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): The promotion of tourism to Northern Ireland is primarily a devolved matter, but the Secretary of State and I take every opportunity to consider joining up the Northern Ireland tourism strategy with that for the rest of the United Kingdom, so that we can work together rather than just with Ireland.

Mr Wallace: In all tourism, the best thing to do is to play to our strengths. I will certainly explore that option, and I am also keen to make sure that tourism in the Republic of Ireland dovetails with the offering in Northern Ireland, so that we can encourage people into both Dublin and, indeed, the north of Ireland. We also look forward to, I hope, capitalising on the next series of “Game of Thrones”, which is due out very soon and was filmed in Northern Ireland, north of the wall.
People across the country will be marking the Queen’s 90th birthday tomorrow in many different ways. Many right hon. and hon. Members will have joined their women’s institutes in the Clean for the Queen initiative, tidying up our neighbourhoods. Some will raise a small glass and many will have a proper knees-up tomorrow.

When the Prime Minister next has an audience with the Queen, will he pass on my best wishes and those of the whole House to our remarkable monarch? Long may she reign.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Prime Minister: I am very glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter. I will certainly pass on his best wishes and those from right across Yorkshire. Tomorrow is an important landmark, not only for Her Majesty the Queen, but for our country and for the Commonwealth as a whole. She has served our nation with such dignity and ability for so many years—64 years—on the throne. It is right that the House will have the opportunity tomorrow to pay tribute to what she has done, and I know that the whole country and the whole House will want to join me in saying, “Long may she reign over us.”

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am also looking forward to wishing her a happy birthday tomorrow, but until then, could the Prime Minister explain why he is intent on forcing good and outstanding schools to become academies against the wishes of teachers, parents, school governors and local councillors?

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that we want schools to be run by headteachers and teachers, not by bureaucrats. That is why we support the policy. We also support it because of the clear evidence of academies. If we look at converter academies, we will see that 88% of them are either good or outstanding, and schools started by academies see a 10% improvement, on average, over the first two years. The results are better, education is improving and I say let us complete the work.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister has not managed to convince the former Chair of the Education Committee, his hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who said:

“Current evidence does not prove that academies raise standards overall or for disadvantaged children.”

Why is the Prime Minister ignoring evidence of Select Committee Chairs, and so many others, on this issue?

The Prime Minister: The results speak for themselves. Under this Government, 1.4 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools. Let me take the right hon. Gentleman to a school near where he lives. Let us try the Downhills primary school, which is not far from his constituency. It was in special measures and taken over by an academy, and two years later it was a good school. The question I put to the Leader of the Opposition, and to so many other Labour MPs, is this: why do you want to stand on a picket line under a banner saying “Save our failing school”?

Jeremy Corbyn: As the Prime Minister well knows, every teacher, parent and pupil wants the best that they can get for their schools, and a good education system. Many are concerned about top-down reorganisation. If he will not listen to the former Chair of the Education Committee, will he listen to his hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)? He said this:

“If a school is well governed, well run and performing well, it should be left alone and allowed to do its job.” [Official Report, 13 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 445.]

Will the Prime Minister explain why good school leaders should focus their time and resources not on educating children but on arbitrary changes imposed from above?

The Prime Minister: Let me make two points on that specific issue. I would say to outstanding or good schools that they have nothing to fear from becoming academies, but a huge amount to gain, and we want even outstanding or good schools to be even better. In truth, academies and greater independence, and letting headteachers run their schools, has been hugely effective. This is something that was started by the Labour Government and given rocket-boosters by this Government. We have seen massive improvements in our schools because of academies, and we say, “Let’s get on with it, finish the job, and give all our children a great opportunity.”

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sure the Prime Minister is aware of the views of people in Oxfordshire on this issue. Councillor Tilley, the Conservative cabinet member for education in the Prime Minister’s county, said:

“I’m fed up with diktats from above saying you will do this and you won’t do that.”

The Prime Minister claims to be an advocate of devolution. Is he not concerned about criticisms from his hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), who says that “there is little accountability or parental involvement”?

Does the Prime Minister understand the anger that so many people feel because a system that they do not want is being imposed on them and on what are often already very good if not outstanding schools?

The Prime Minister: It is always good to get a lecture on diktats from someone whose press secretary is an avowed Stalinist, but I will pass over that. Creating academies is true devolution because we are putting power in the hands of headteachers and teachers. Of course we will find people in local government who want to keep things exactly as they are, but one of the reasons I so strongly support academies is that when they fail, they are intervened on so much faster. Local authority schools are often left to fail year after year after year, and I think that one year of a failing school is one year too many. Let us encourage academies, build a great education system, and have opportunity for all our children.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, I spent an interesting afternoon at a local school in my constituency. I visited Duncombe primary school, which is a good to outstanding school, and I had a long discussion with the headteacher, parents, parent governors, and year 6 pupils. The year 6 pupils were very interesting. Hawan, Tasnia, Eamon and Maryanne asked me to ask the Prime Minister: why are you doing this? They love their school, and they like it the way it is. They do not want any top-down reorganisation. He has not even convinced the former Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, who said that he
does not “quite know why” the Government are doing this. What is the Prime Minister’s answer to those smart pupils in year 6?

The Prime Minister: My answer to those pupils in year 6 is very much the answer that the right hon. Gentleman gave. I have been following his tour of the school, and this is what he said:

“I want to see a family of schools and I want to see them properly funded.”

Of course, with our reform to the national funding formula, there will be fair funding right across the country. With our plans for academies, there will be genuine families of schools that choose to group together. Here is the point about outstanding schools. Not only will they be able to get better, but in groups of academies, they will be able to help other schools to improve. That is why we need this reform: to make good schools even better and to help to raise the aspiration of all. That is what it is all about.

Jeremy Corbyn: We appear to be heading into some kind of fantasy land. The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that school spending “is expected to fall by at least 7% in real terms” in the next four years—the biggest cut since the 1970s. So why on earth is the Prime Minister proposing to spend £1.3 billion on a top-down reorganisation that was not in his manifesto? Teachers do not want it, parents do not want it, governors do not want it, headteachers do not want it and even his own MPs and councillors do not want it. Can he not just think again and support schools and education, rather than forcing this on them?

The Prime Minister: Let me answer the question about spending very directly. We protected spending per pupil all the way through the last Parliament and all the way through this Parliament. We are spending £7 billion on more school places to make up for the woeful lack of action under the last Labour Government. That is the truth on spending.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about fantasy land, and I think the Labour party this week entered fantasy land. The Labour party is abandoning Trident in Scotland and it has selected in London someone who sits on platforms with extremists. When I read that the Labour party was going to ban McDonnell from its party conference, I thought that was the first sensible decision it had made, but it turns out that it was not the job destroyer that the Labour party wanted to keep away from its conference; it was one of Britain’s biggest employers. No wonder Labour MPs are in despair. Frankly, I’m lovin’ it.

Q3. [904564] Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend whether he agrees with the Treasury forecast issued on Monday, which warns that if we stay in the European Union, there will be 3 million more migrants by 2030? Last year, my right hon. Friend and I were elected on a clear manifesto pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. How will we be able to deliver on that pledge unless we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The point about the Treasury forecast is that it takes the Office for National Statistics figures and the Office for Budget Responsibility figures and it does not alter them; it is trying to make a very clear and pure argument—backed by the Governor of the Bank of England yesterday—that shows what would happen if Britain left the EU. There is a demand out there for independent and clear statistics, and that is exactly what the Treasury has provided.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is believed that the recent murder of Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah was religiously motivated. This week, Christian, Jewish, Sikh and Ahmadiyya Muslim faith leaders launched a campaign across Scotland entitled United against Extremism. Will the Prime Minister join me and colleagues from all parties in supporting the aims of that campaign to support and foster understanding and stand up to extremism?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly join the right hon. Gentleman. This was an absolutely shocking murder. What it demonstrates, and what his question hints at, is that we need to stand up not only against acts of appalling violence such as this, but against the extremist mindset that sometimes tries to justify such events and other such outrages.

Angus Robertson: I am in total agreement with the Prime Minister. The murder of Asad Shah is just the most recent example of sectarian extremism targeting the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the UK, including reports of Ahmadiyya being refused employment, businesses being boycotted, schoolchildren being bullied and shunned, and people such as Aamer Anwar who have worked to bring faith leaders together facing death threats. Does the Prime Minister agree that such extremism is totally unacceptable in a country where we believe in free speech and religious tolerance? The time has come for all community and all faith leaders of all religions to stand up against extremism.

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that faith leaders can play a huge role in standing up against extremism and I welcome what they do, but we need to be very clear about what we are facing. The attack on Ahmadiyya Muslims by other Muslims demonstrates once again that what we face is not some clash of civilisations between Islam and Christianity or Islam and Buddhism. What we are seeing is a small minority within one of the great religions of our world, Islam, believing that there is only one way—a violent, extremist way—of professing their faith. This is a battle within Islam, and we have to be on the side of the moderate majority and make sure that they win it. We have to really understand what is happening, otherwise we will take the wrong path.

Q6. [904567] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The future of services provided by Paignton hospital has been thrown into doubt this week by news that the clinical commissioning group and the local trust are about to launch a consultation that could see it closed with no replacement. Does the Prime Minister share my concerns, and does he agree that it is vital that services are replaced and that the trust and CCG justify their actions?
The Prime Minister: I am aware of the draft proposals concerning Paignton hospital. I understand that no decision has yet been made. The plans are due to be considered by the clinical commissioning group’s governing body. Let us remember that these bodies are now, by and large, clinically-led, and I think that is important. Decisions about what services are required will be taken by that group, but if there are significant changes, they still have to meet four key tests: support from clinical commissioners, strengthened public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base and support for patient choice. All those things have to be satisfied.

Q2. [904563] Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The air in our cities is both toxic and illegal, with diesel fumes contributing to 800 deaths a week—that is 40,000 a year—so why is the Prime Minister, instead of weakening plans to improve our air quality and save lives?

The Prime Minister: We are investing in better air quality. Since 2011, we have committed over £2 billion to help bus operators upgrade their fleets. We have seen air quality improve between 2010 and 2014, with emissions of nitrous oxides coming down by 17%. When it comes to these standards that we all have to meet, we are working with our car industry. I want a strong car industry in Britain. I am proud of the fact that it has recovered so strongly that the north-east of England now makes more cars than the whole of Italy and that we are a major investor in and builder of diesel engines, but we are going to make sure that it has the resources it needs to meet the higher standards that are set out.

Q7. [904568] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a truth universally acknowledged that fish and chips taste best on the beaches of Skegness, and that is why 4 million people visit those beaches every year. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should work with the Environment Agency, the local enterprise partnership and local councils, build on the work of this Government that has brought jobs and growth, and extend the tourist season and build a billion-pound coastal economy by the end of this decade?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I announced the five-point plan for tourism last year to encourage people to visit UK resorts—both people from overseas and British people—and that is exactly what is happening. Is it not interesting that in the week when we on this side of the House are supporting fish and chips, those on the other side of the House are banning McDonald’s?

Q4. [904565] Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): More than 2,000 people have signed a petition, started by Allisons Chemist in Cockermouth in my constituency, calling on the Government not to cut the funding of community pharmacists. Given the major reports last week regarding the actions of Boots, which now faces investigation by the regulator, is it not time that the Prime Minister and his Government supported independent pharmacists, such as Allisons, which are a vital lifeline for our community and help to keep our high streets alive?

The Prime Minister: We are supporting rural pharmacies—there is a specific scheme to help there—but in the last five years there has been a massive increase in pharmacy spending. As we make sure that as much of the NHS’s resources as possible go to the frontline—the doctors and nurses, the operations and the A&E we want—we have to make sure we are getting value for money in pharmacy, while also protecting the rural pharmacies the hon. Lady speaks about.

Q10. [904571] Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Given his earlier important comments, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the duty of all Members to condemn without caveat all extremism and never to share a platform with any extremist?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are going to condemn not just violent extremism but the extremism that seeks to justify violence in any way, it is very important that we do not back these people or appear on platforms with them. I am concerned about Labour’s candidate for Mayor of London, who has appeared again and again and again—

Jeremy Corbyn: Disgraceful.

The Prime Minister: The leader of the Labour party says it is disgraceful, so let me tell him: the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) has appeared on a platform with Suliman Gani nine times; this man supports IS. He even shared a platform—with Interruption. The Opposition are shouting down this point because they do not want to hear the truth. Anyone can make a mistake about who they appear on a platform with, and we are not always responsible for what our political opponents say, but if someone does it time after time after time, it is right to question their judgment.

Q5. [904566] Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): News overnight of a management and large, clinically-led, and I think that is important. Decisions about what services are required will be taken by that group, but if there are significant changes, they still have to meet four key tests: support from clinical commissioners, strengthened public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base and support for patient choice. All those things have to be satisfied.

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speech but crucially over her decision to liberalise restrictions on Turkish visas, given that that country has such a porous Syrian border and such booming identity fraud? Is he concerned that currently Chancellor Merkel seems porous Syrian border and such booming identify fraud? Are they putting those rights or the right automatically to come to Britain. It is very important to get this clear.

Q8. [904569] Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): In the last hour, we have had the devastating news that British Gas proposes to close its Oldbury site, with the loss of 700 jobs. Will the Prime Minister instruct his Ministers immediately to contact the company and the unions and to arrange urgent meetings either—preferably—to save these jobs or, if that proves impossible, to establish a taskforce to create alternative opportunities for this loyal and hard-working workforce?

The Prime Minister: First, it is certainly true that a country in the Schengen zone is only as strong as its weakest border—that is absolutely right—but we, of course, are not in the Schengen zone. Secondly, the Schengen zone has decided to offer visas to Turkish nationals, but we have not made that decision, and will not be making that decision. Let us remember, however, that a visa is not a right to go and live and work or reside; it is a right to visit, so let us also be clear that Turks with visas visiting Schengen countries do not have those rights or the right automatically to come to Britain. It is very important to get this clear.

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I heard the news shortly before Question Time. We will make sure that a ministerial taskforce is available to talk to the company and the local community and to provide assistance in terms of retraining and other things.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Mrs Thatcher used occasionally to organise seminars for Ministers, with senior academics, for colleagues like me whose knowledge of modern science, she thought, needed to be improved. Will the Prime Minister contemplate similar seminars for some of his senior and very respected Cabinet colleagues with businessmen on the nature of international trade in today’s world, because some very respected figures appear to believe that one simply turns up and sells goods and services that comply with British-made rules, and that they do not have to comply with any rules agreed with the country to which one is selling. Will he include some of the many businessmen who are putting investment decisions on hold now because of the uncertainty about Brexit after 23 June, which illustrates the dangers we would run if we made our whole future trading arrangements with the outside world as uncertain as some people are trying to make them?

The Prime Minister: I always listen very carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend makes, which is absolutely right, that is just because we have friendly relations with a country does not mean that we automatically get good relations. I am extremely pleased that President Obama is coming here this Friday, but it is worth noting that even though we have the friendliest relations with the United States of America, we currently cannot sell beef or lamb to it. The point is that we do not just need good relations; we need nailed down trade arrangements.

Q9. [904570] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): At the Budget, the Chancellor announced the creation of a northern schools strategy, which I broadly welcome. However, I am concerned that all the progress that that might make could be reversed by the forced academisation plans. Why are the Government pushing those plans, which parents in my constituency do not want—plans that even a former Tory Education Secretary describes as plain daft and unnecessary?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should wait for the outcome of the review that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set up. The point I would make is that some schools that have been failing for year after year have been left in that state by local authorities. We have found that the way to help succeeding schools fly and failing schools to improve is to have academies. The evidence is right there in front of us. That is why we are so keen on progressing this.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): One reason why my right hon. Friend led this party to victory at last year’s general election was our pledge to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands. Can he therefore tell us, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), why the Office for Budget Responsibility projects immigration to be above 200,000 a year for the rest of this decade? By what assumptions did it reach that figure, and can he give us some details?

The Prime Minister: To give my right hon. Friend some details, the OBR did not take into account, for instance, the agreements we have just reached with the European Union over welfare and other immigration restrictions. The Treasury document is very clear that it is not about making all sorts of different assumptions about variables, but takes a very clear set of statistics established by the OBR. That is why it was interesting when the Governor of the Bank of England came out and said that it was an analytically robust process. As for the detail, it does not take into account the agreement that we reached in Europe.

Q11. [904572] Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2009, Michelle Samarawera was brutally raped and murdered in Walthamstow. Since 2011, a man who is wanted in connection with that crime and seven other counts of sexual violence in my constituency has been evading extradition from India. There have been more than 30 court appearances to date and another one is planned for tomorrow, yet despite the severity of the crime and the delay in those proceedings, there is no record of any ministerial or diplomatic representations from either the Foreign Office or the Home Office. Will the Prime Minister personally commit today to putting
that right and to raising the matter directly with his
counterpart, Narendra Modi, so that we can finally
seek justice for Michelle?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the hon.
Lady that assurance. The British Government always
raise all these individual cases if that is what the victims
want us to do, just as we raise cases where there are
British people stuck in the Indian justice system. I was
not aware of the specific case, but if she gives me the
details I will make sure that we raise it appropriately.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): With the President of
the United States visiting the UK later this week, may I
ask my right hon. Friend to raise the issue of the
Chagos islanders? In a report last year, the Government
rightly concluded that the islanders have a right of
resettlement. Given the US military presence on Diego
Garcia, will he raise the case of US assistance for the
right of return of the Chagos islanders to the British
Indian Ocean Territory?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly discuss that issue,
and it is right that my hon. Friend raises it, because
many Chagossians live in his constituency of Crawley.
My constituents of Hackney and the Chagossians
rightly concluded that the islanders have a right of
return of the Chagos islanders to the British
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The Prime Minister: Let me first pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman and his Members of Parliament and Assembly Members. It is right to say that politics in Northern Ireland is more stable and, frankly, more productive than it has been for many years. Obviously, these issues around the acts of the past still cause a huge amount of pain and difficulty on all sides of the debate. One thing we have to hold on to is the fact that we have an independent and impartial justice system.
Border Force Budget 2016-17

12.37 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement setting out the details of the Border Force Budget for 2016-17.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The first priority of government is the safety and security of its citizens, and the Government have always made the integrity of the UK border a priority. We will never compromise on keeping the people of this country safe from terrorism, criminality and illegal immigration.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will publish the Treasury main supply estimates in just over an hour’s time, setting out estimated budget allocations for the whole of government, including Border Force, for the financial year 2016-17. In advance of those figures being laid in the Library, I can inform Members that these estimates will show that the indicative budget for Border Force is £558.1 million in 2016-17—a 0.4% reduction in overall resource spending compared to the supplementary estimate for 2015-16. At the same time, we will increase capital spending at the border by just over 70%, from £40.1 million in 2015-16 to an estimated £68.3 million in 2016-17. That means that Border Force spending is, to all intents and purposes, protected compared to 2015-16, with increased capital investment to improve the technology at the border, to improve security and intelligence and to strengthen control.

Over the next four years, we will invest £130 million in state-of-the-art technology at the border. Since I became Home Secretary six years ago, we have pursued an ambitious programme of reform at the border to keep this country safe. In the last Parliament we abolished the dysfunctional UK Border Agency, set up by the last Labour Government, and made Border Force directly accountable to Ministers within the Home Office. Since then, Border Force has transformed its working practices, command and control and leadership, and we have invested in new technology such as e-gates at airports and heartbeat monitors at freight ports to improve security, prevent illegal entry to the UK, benefit passengers and deliver efficiencies.

At the same time I have worked closely with my French counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, to secure the juxtaposed controls in Calais and Coquelles, reduce the number of migrants attempting to reach the United Kingdom, and safeguard UK drivers and hauliers travelling through those ports. We have developed a robust, intelligence-led approach to organised crime at the border, working closely with the National Crime Agency, which we established in 2012. We have supported greater collaboration between counter-terrorism police and Border Force, while increasing counter-terrorism budgets to prevent foreign fighters from returning and dangerous terrorists from travelling to the UK.

These reforms are working. Border security has been enhanced. Border Force continues to perform 100% checks on scheduled passengers arriving at primary checkpoints in the UK. When passengers are deemed a threat to public safety, we can and do exclude them from the UK, and 99,020 people have been refused entry to the UK since 2010. We are disrupting more organised crime at the UK border than ever before. In the past year, Border Force has seized nearly 8 tonnes of class A drugs, more than 2.5 times as much as in 2009-10. Meanwhile, legitimate passengers and hauliers of goods continue to be provided with excellent levels of service.

The Government remain committed to making further investments when necessary to exploit new technology and strengthen controls. As a result, Border Force will grow more efficient year on year, while improving security for the safety of citizens, businesses and the country as a whole.

Andy Burnham: Finally, an answer—and yet another U-turn—from the Home Secretary. Let us be clear: it is Labour pressure that has brought her to the House today, and Labour pressure that has made her back down on her planned deeper cuts in the UK border. Just as we forced her to U-turn on police funding, we have now forced her to U-turn on the Border Force budget. She has spent the last two weeks ducking and diving, refusing to answer questions that I put to her in the House and that the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), put to her senior officials—I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his determination. Why could the Home Secretary not answer our questions? Because she has been furiously back-pedalling for the last two weeks, and patching up holes in the Border Force budget.

Let us be clear about what has just been announced to the House. The Home Secretary has announced a revenue cut in the Border Force budget. Let me put that into context. She has announced a budget of £558 million. In 2012-13, the budget was £617 million. It has fallen by more than £50 million on her watch. That is this Home Secretary’s record on border funding. How can she justify it when the terror threat has been increasing all the time? Will she guarantee, on the back of the budget that has been announced today, that there will be no cuts in the number of front-line immigration officers, and that officers will not be replaced by less-trained staff?

The bigger question, however, is whether the budget that the Home Secretary has announced is anywhere near enough. Today, a group of the most eminent police and counter-terrorism experts have written an open letter saying that attacks in Paris and Brussels must be “a wake-up call for the British Government” on lax border security.

Worryingly, the letter reveals that the National Crime Agency has evidence that people-trafficers are now specifically targeting weaker sea ports. I have repeatedly warned the Home Secretary about that. Will she accept the call from the group of experts for a review of border security, and for extra resources to plug the gaps?

Those gaps are very real. A whistleblower working at the port of Immingham, the country’s largest freight port, has been in touch with me to reveal that the staff of ferry companies, who are carrying out the Home Secretary’s border exit checks, are simply not trained to do it; that the passports of lorry drivers are not checked on arrival by anyone; and, worst of all, that school leavers are now being recruited to check passports,
replacing experienced border officers. Border security on the cheap: that is the reality of what is happening at Britain’s borders today, under this Home Secretary. It is the direct consequence of the cuts that she has already made in the UK border during her time in office—and, unbelievably, she wanted to make even further cuts in the border before we in the Labour party stopped her.

The Home Secretary has spent the last two weeks running scared, scrabbling for loose change behind the back of the Home Office sofa; but, worse, she has weakened our borders, has damaged our security, and is only now pleading to stop the cuts. On an issue of such importance to the British public, she is going to have to do a lot better than this.

Mrs May: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that in so much of what he said he simply does not know what he is talking about. He talks about U-turns on funding, but the only such U-turn we have seen is from a Labour Front-Bench team that now claim to have wanted police funding to remain steady and not to be cut when they actually suggested that police funding could take a 10% cut.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about border security and the National Crime Agency, but I remind him that it was the coalition Government and me as Home Secretary who set up the NCA. The reason why we have a border command that is looking at serious and organised crime across our borders is because of what the Conservatives have done in government. Labour did none of that in 13 long years.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman, who was of course at one time a Home Office Minister, that it was under Labour that we saw the creation of the dysfunctional UK Border Agency that we had to abolish. We had to change how we dealt with such issues. Under the last Labour Government, there was no operating mandate at the border, and as people came through the primary checkpoints, they were not all getting the necessary 100% checks. We have enhanced security and will continue to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering are concerned that we should have the most secure and safest borders possible. While it is true that many illegal immigrants are stopped in lorries in France and on arrival in Britain, far too many illegal immigrants are still in the backs of lorries when they go down the A14 past Kettering towards the north of England or wherever. What more can the Home Secretary do to reassure my constituents that we are going to get even tougher on and stop illegal immigration, which also has a security implication?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is important that we continually review our processes for screening people as they cross the border, and that we ensure that we are stopping people who want to come here as illegal immigrants. That is one reason why we have invested tens of millions of pounds in security at Calais and Coquelles to ensure that it is harder for people to get into lorries to come across the border and harder for them to access the channel tunnel. It is also why we continue to look at improvements in technology that may enable us to put in place equipment that is even better at detecting people when they try to stow away in such vehicles. However, we cannot do that once and expect it to cover everything; we have to keep going at it, which is exactly what we are doing.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): This has been a sorry saga, and it is still not quite clear why the senior civil servant was so evasive before the Home Affairs Committee. What exactly was the hold-up? The Border Force budget requires careful scrutiny and attracts significant public interest. What will the Home Secretary do to make the process for deciding the budget more transparent in future?

What lies underneath the issue is that a fantasy net migration target and budget cuts are leading the Home Office down the path of targeting exactly the wrong people, using the wrong policy levers. Unable to enforce existing immigration rules properly, the Home Office introduces even more draconian rules, clamping down on skilled workers, students, spouses and refugees. It is using landlords and landladies as border officials and giving immigration officers police powers. Meanwhile, other SNP MPs and I saw with our own eyes in Calais and Dunkirk at Easter how vulnerable children who have family here in the United Kingdom are left in the most disgraceful of conditions. It is immigration control on the cheap.

When will the Home Secretary fix her Border Force budget not to satisfy the ideological pursuit of austerity, but at the level necessary to command public confidence? When will she abandon the fantasy net migration target and set immigration policies in accordance with evidence instead of political expediency?

Mrs May: The hon. and learned Lady mixes up border security and checks with immigration. They are two different issues. She commented on the appearance of a senior civil servant before the Home Affairs Committee. When asked whether the director general of Border Force had been told what his budget was for this year, the individual replied:

“We know what funds the Border Force needs in order to deliver the plan for this year and Charles has them.”

On a related immigration issue, the hon. and learned Lady referred to the question she has raised previously, as have other Members, about the speed at which children in Calais who have family members here in the UK are being processed. We recognised that there was an issue, which is why we seconded somebody to the Ministry of the Interior in Paris to work on this and why we are now seeing people being processed in weeks, rather than months, and in some cases in days.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): There is nothing worse in this House than manufactured rage at a problem such as this, and I note that the shadow Home Secretary made not a single mention of praise for the excellent job our Border Force staff are doing, which members of the Home Affairs Committee saw in our visit to Calais and Coquelles—it is not through a lack of thoroughness that any drugs or people are getting through. Will she also acknowledge the need to be more flexible, given the increasing number of cases of independent vessels coming across the channel to the Sussex and Kent coasts, in particular? We need to be mindful of that, too.
Mrs May: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks, and I echo the comments he has made; our Border Force staff are working day in, day out to protect our border and they do an excellent job. He is right, however, that we always need to be flexible in looking at where people will try to enter the UK so we make ports such as Calais more secure. That is exactly what we are doing. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration has been talking to our Belgian and Dutch counterparts about access from ports in those countries into the UK. The whole point of some of the changes we have made in Border Force has been precisely to make it more flexible, in order to respond to need as it arises.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the detail she has provided to the House today and I join others in praising the work of Border Force, especially the leadership provided by Sir Charles Montgomery. Will she deal with the practical points mentioned last week by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and today by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)? Will she confirm that there are 100% checks on every lorry entering this country, in order to deal with the security and immigration issues? Does she agree that although we have spent a huge amount of money in Calais, we have displaced this problem further into other ports in Europe, and without the co-operation of European partners—without them doing their bit—we will still get people coming into this country who should not be here?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman referred particularly to the questions from not only my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) this afternoon, but my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). The point I made subsequently, outside this Chamber, to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough is that we do undertake checks on lorries but that they vary, so different sorts of checks may be done. Different technologies are used, and in some cases we use dogs. A variety of types of check may be undertaken at the border for the lorries. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that, as I have just indicated in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), it is necessary for us to be looking at where there may be displacement of people trying to enter the UK illegally. That is precisely what we have been doing, particularly, as I said, with the Governments of Belgium and the Netherlands.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Cuts were made in January by Border Force to the maritime aerial surveillance capability. Has my right hon. Friend been able to reinstate that capability, which is crucial in detecting people who are trying to smuggle into our country and was instrumental in ensuring some of the successes to which she referred earlier?

Mrs May: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are maintaining the capabilities he talked about, but we are delivering them in a different way. He and I have discussed a particular contract that is no longer in place. What Border Force has done is look to see how it can work in a variety of ways to provide that capability, including, obviously, by working with the Royal Navy.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Last year, an asylum seeker was located in my constituency because the courts said it would be unsafe to relocate him in London. He subsequently committed a number of crimes and is now in prison. My constituents have had the burdens on our health service and on our schools of taking 500 asylum seekers and many others over the years. Will the Home Secretary tell me what moves she is making to ensure that there is a fair distribution throughout the UK of asylum seekers, given that there are 500 in my constituency and I believe there are none in either the Prime Minister’s or Chancellor’s? How many are in her constituency?

Mrs May: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, my constituency is not somewhere that normally takes asylum seekers, but I am pleased to say that it is taking some of the Syrian refugees under the resettlement scheme that has been put in place. The point is that we talk regularly with local authorities about where it is appropriate for asylum seekers to be dispersed to. Those conversations are continuing and I am pleased to say that a number of new local authorities have come on board. I also gently remind him that we have not changed the system of asylum dispersal; this is exactly the same system that was run by the last Labour Government.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Millions of pounds could be saved for the Border Force budget by having a more efficient removals system. What steps will my right hon. Friend be taking in the light of the findings of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration in his report issued last month?

Mrs May: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that we continually look at how we can improve our ability to remove people from this country. That is why we have brought forward changes in a variety of immigration Bills to enhance our ability to do that and, in particular, to make it harder for people to live illegally in the UK. The decisions put through in the Immigration Act 2014 to deal with people’s access to driving licences, bank accounts and rented property are all having an impact in improving our ability to identify illegal immigrants and remove them.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On that point, how many more staff could be deployed to police our borders if the Government were to scrap the landlords’ helpline and use that resource instead to more securely police our borders?

Mrs May: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to ensure the security of this country and have illegal immigrants removed from it, he should know that the measures we have put in place in the Immigration Act to ensure that people who are renting property are here legally are having an impact.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK has the strongest borders in Europe, partly because of the Government’s investment in technology at our borders and partly because of the Conservative party’s firm position that we should not join the Schengen system?
Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that. It is crucial that we have not joined the Schengen system and that we will not do so. It means that we retain control at our borders.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Constituents who work on the docks in Grimsby have contacted me in the past few weeks because they are concerned about the level of security around the large transporter ships that arrive into Grimsby bringing millions of pounds worth of goods into the country. They raise those concerns from a humanitarian perspective, but can the Home Secretary assure my constituents that Grimsby’s ports are adequately protected?

Mrs May: As I have indicated, we look at the border security at ports regularly to ensure that it is appropriate for the nature of the business those ports are undertaking. The hon. Lady refers to the humanitarian issue of people who may be being smuggled across the border in transporters, and I say to her that the people who are responsible for that issue are the traffickers who put illegal immigrants into those containers.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There was indeed praise for my right hon. Friend from the shadow Home Secretary, although it was so below the radar that she might not have noticed it. She was accused of both back-pedalling and performing a U-turn, and I am not aware that it is physically possible to do both—although she has done neither. In praising the work that Border Force does on behalf of all of us in keeping our country safe, what role does she see the Investigatory Powers Bill, which is currently before the House, playing in assisting and strengthening the work of Border Force?

Mrs May: It is important that all our law enforcement agencies and those who are responsible for enforcing laws around security at our borders are able to access the various tools and powers that they need. That is why the Investigatory Powers Bill is so important, not just to our security services, but to a variety of law enforcement agencies. I note that one of the points in the letter in today’s Daily Telegraph to which the shadow Home Secretary referred was the importance of access to communications data, which is precisely what we are trying to protect in that Bill.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I recently flew back into Gatwick from overseas, and it took me almost 25 minutes to get through the border. There were 15 desks for staff, only eight of which were open. As you know, Mr Speaker, I am a relaxed and patient kind of guy, and I am always happy to wait my turn, but families with children, business people and tourists from all over the world were there. What kind of a message does that send about the welcome to the United Kingdom and the efficiency of our Border Force, and how will this budget help to remedy those kinds of inefficiencies?

Mrs May: There are service standards for people coming through the border at our airports, and we meet those standards. These proceedings are very interesting because, on the one hand, people are calling for more border security, and, on the other, the hon. Gentleman is saying that he wants to get through the border rather more quickly.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman always looks to be a happy chappie.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I can confirm that the shadow Home Secretary was quite right when he drew attention to the port of Immingham in my constituency because border staff there do have worries. The concerns of residents in the town and neighbouring areas have been heightened following reports last week that the National Crime Agency acknowledged that Humber ports were being targeted. Can my right hon. Friend give an absolute assurance that resources will be moved to protect the Humber ports if the NCA’s analysis is correct?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend’s point is important and one that I have responded to in reply to a number of questions, including that of the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. When we created Border Force and took it out of the dysfunctional UK Borders Agency, we introduced more flexibility in Border Force’s ability to move resources around the country. That is absolutely crucial so that we do not just have static forces at a number of ports and we are able to move them when there is a need to do so, which is exactly what we are doing in relation to the ports on the east coast, of which Immingham is one.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As the Home Secretary knows, Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom with a land border with another country. As both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland lie outside Schengen, co-operation is key. Last week, a representative of Garda Siochana said that they felt hopelessly ill equipped and ill resourced to stand against the threat of terrorists entering the United Kingdom through their borders. Will the Home Secretary address the issue, and can she give any comfort about whether the budget involves proposals or resources to make that access point to the United Kingdom less vulnerable?

Mrs May: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are in regular discussions with the Irish Government about how to improve security at their external border because, obviously, there is the common travel area between Ireland and the United Kingdom. We have already done a lot of work with the Irish Government on data sharing and the sorts of systems that might support improved security, and we will continue that work.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In contrast to some hon. Members who have spoken, I wish to pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of Border Force officers at Gatwick, especially with regard to their recent apprehension of terror suspects. May I have an assurance that they will continue to get the support that they need from the Home Office?

Mrs May: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As I have said, we now have a Border Force that is more flexible and that is able to use its resources appropriately. The director general is continually looking to ensure
that resources are appropriate at ports and commensurate with the traffic that they are experiencing. He rightly praises the Border Force officers at Gatwick who, along with those elsewhere, do an excellent job.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When will the Home Secretary make a statement on allegations that lapses under her watch allowed terrorists Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Mohamed Abrini to breach this country’s border security?

Mrs May: I say to the hon. Gentleman that, of course, in terms of border security and stopping people crossing the border, what is important is not just that we have a border control, as we do by not being a member of the Schengen border-free zone, but that information is exchanged between the parties when that is available. That is exactly what we are working on to ensure that information is available at our borders when we want to be able to stop people.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I put it to the Home Secretary that I do not think that she has yet fully answered the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee about 100% checks on trucks? I accept the issue about flexibility, as we might have different situations in different places, but does she accept that there is genuine concern about security in ports up and down the country? How is the cumulative cut to the revenue budget of the Border Force compatible with providing the necessary level of security?

Mrs May: On that last point, I must say to the Labour party, as we have said before regarding a number of other areas, that it is about not how much money we have, but how we spend it. It is about ensuring that we are using money as effectively and efficiently as possible. Ensuring that we have an operating mandate that means that 100% checks on individuals are undertaken at primary checkpoints is something that this Government have introduced and that the previous Labour Government failed to do. All the trucks going through the juxtaposed controls are indeed screened.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Over Easter, a number of my constituents were incredibly frustrated at Manchester airport when they were queuing to go through passport control solely because that passport control was significantly under-resourced. What reassurance can the Home Secretary give that Manchester airport, which after all is our largest international airport outside London, will have adequate resources at its passport control? While she is looking into that, will she also look at the loophole at terminal 3 whereby passengers who transit from Heathrow and have their baggage sent directly through to Manchester do not have to go through a customs check?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman asks about the resources at Manchester airport. I can assure him that we regularly have discussions with Manchester airport about the traffic that is going through it and its requirements, and we judge the appropriate resources that are needed by Border Force. We fully recognise the significance of Manchester airport to which he refers.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): A recent watchdog study into Border Force at Manchester airport showed that one in four passengers from the sample taken got through the border inappropriately, that a whole Ryanair flight was recently missed, with 159 passengers receiving no checks whatsoever, and that £1.5 million was spent on sniffer dogs that—guess what?—sniffed out no class A drugs or terrorists. Meanwhile, business passengers and tourists are suffering interminable delays. The airport is suffering because of a lack of investment in Border Force. The Home Secretary might have protected the budget, but it is not making any improvement whatsoever to a very poor existing service. What does she say about that?

Mrs May: I will say to the hon. Gentleman exactly what I said to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). As Manchester airport expands, we will talk to the officials there and discuss what resources they consider necessary. The issue of a misdirected flight to which he refers is something that we have taken up with Manchester airport with regard to the staff whom it has on the ground to deal with these flights. This is an important issue and we are very serious about how we deal with it.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I concur with the commendations of colleagues for the excellent work that is done by border staff, but numbers are also important—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. A rather unseemly exchange is going on between the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who has just put a question and was dissatisfied with the answer, and the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) who, in the exercise of his duties as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Secretary, always feels compelled to display a level of fealty unsurpassed and indeed unequalled by any other Member of the House of Commons. That is not necessary. We all know of the fealty bordering on the obsequious that is on evident display from the hon. Gentleman on a daily basis, but it must not be allowed to interrupt the eloquence of the flow of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)—or even the flow of his eloquence.

Toby Perkins: I will endeavour to re-find myself, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister received a report from experts saying that 30,000 was the right number of Border Force members to protect our borders. Does that still reflect the policy of the Government, and can the Home Secretary tell us how many border staff we currently have?

Mrs May: The report to which the hon. Gentleman refers proposed the creation of an entirely new police force at the borders. When we came into government and looked at what was necessary, we decided to approach the issue in a slightly different way, creating the National Crime Agency and a specific border command within it. The staff operating at borders are not just Border Force, but border command from the NCA and special branch at the ports, and, of course, they also work with
immigration enforcement. For the first time in this country, we have a specific border command within the National Crime Agency.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**PROPERTY OWNERSHIP IN LONDON (REGISTRATION) BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field, supported by Mr David Lammy, Andrew Rosindell, Mr Gareth Thomas, Tom Brake, Siobhain McDonagh, Wes Streeting, Stephen Timms, Jon Cruddas, Stephen Pound and Mr Virendra Sharma, presented a Bill to require the creation of a register of owners of property in the Greater London area, including details of the name of the owner of each property and the name of the beneficiary owner in the case of properties owned by a trust or similar body; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 163).

**Forensic Linguistics (Standards)**

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.10 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on the forensic science regulator to establish a code of practice and conduct for the providers and practitioners of forensic linguistics in the criminal justice system; to make provision about the required scientific quality standards for the discipline; and for connected purposes.

Our children and young people face an enormous threat from being groomed by radical extremists and paedophiles, facilitated by the internet, social media and mobile technology. The Bill is therefore about the protection of vulnerable people, and it is about the monitoring and analysis of communications between people about whom we need to be really concerned: people who plot and scheme to do others harm; people such as paedophiles and extremists; and people who use modern technology as a tool in their evil business.

Last October, I led a Westminster Hall debate on the use of children as suicide bombers. We know that many of the techniques used in recruiting and grooming such children are the same as those used by paedophiles. We also know that there is software available that will identify the messages and language of groomers, and that, using a variety of tools, security agencies can match those to the voice and language patterns of known individuals. Forensic linguistics is a complicated and relatively new field. Linguistic evidence can involve science, social science and interpretation, and forensic linguistic analyses require a complex set of knowledge and skills. Presently, however, anyone—including you or me, Mr Speaker—can proclaim themselves an expert in forensic linguistics. Consequently, there is a considerable danger of substandard analysis being offered in a court of law.

We need a standardised qualification for analysts and a standardised set of techniques to give the courts confidence that such evidence can be accepted as more than just interesting background. The Bill does not represent sophisticated legislation, as compiling a statutory register would be relatively straightforward. The register called for by the Bill would not need its own regulator, as one already exists: the forensic science regulator. She is already working on including speech and audio analysis as a recognised speciality area, but as textual linguistic analysis draws on interpretative as well as scientific methods, it falls outside her current remit.

I would also draw attention to current codes of practice and conduct for forensic science providers and practitioners, and more generally for expert witnesses in the criminal justice system, that could be adapted to include the practice of forensic linguistics. For setting the accredited qualifications, there are academic institutions with evident authority in this area, such as the centre for forensic linguistics at Aston University. I personally thank the director of the centre, Professor Tim Grant, for his help in developing the Bill. I am also grateful for encouragement from the president of the Chartered Society of Forensic Sciences and the director of forensic services in Scotland, Mr Tom Nelson. The standard of specialist witnesses and forensic scientists themselves is
inherently protean—I know of some people who call themselves forensic scientists, but cannot tell the difference between the sensitivity of a test and the specificity of a test, let alone calculate its predictive value.

I have already said that speech and audio analysis and textual analysis are two different things. The problem for textual forensic linguistics is that many aspects of the work—the determination of meanings in messages, profiling the background of a writer and so on—are a long way from the laboratory-based paradigm. The closest we get to laboratory-based science is in comparative authorship analysis, for which methods are published and tested. The diversity of questions that forensic linguists address and the approaches that they take to those questions means that the forensic science regulator does not cover their work, so there is no way for high-quality practitioners to be identified and used and low-quality practitioners avoided.

There is a need for a mechanism to recognise what should count as quality work in textual forensic linguistics. That could be a register of individuals or methods, or both. The obvious person to hold that would be the forensic science regulator, but that would definitely represent an extension of her current role, hence the need for the Bill.

Where is the proof, however, that forensic linguistic analysis can work? In those cases in which forensic linguistic evidence has been allowed in court, it has proved particularly valuable. For example, it was used in the appeals of Derek Bentley and the Birmingham Six. In many instances across the UK, it has been used to determine the authorship of SMS text messages in murder cases. It has been used to extract the meaning of coded texts and slang terms used in internet chatrooms, often involving conspiracies to murder and child sex abuse conversations. Good forensic linguistic evidence has withstood appeal, yet this excellent work could be undermined due to substandard analysis by poorly qualified and unqualified practitioners.

Although it has strong roots in the UK, textual forensic linguistic evidence is increasingly accepted internationally. Examples of its use include successful appeals against murder convictions in Australia and cases of disputed wills in South Africa. In 1996 in the United States, textual forensic linguistic analysis was used to identify the writer of the Unabomber’s manifesto as Ted Kaczynski, and he was subsequently convicted of running a bombing campaign across the country.

In the United Kingdom, too, textual forensic linguistics has been used in investigations of serious counter-terrorism cases. In 2004, for example, Dhiren Barot was arrested in London and charged on the basis of linguistic evidence linking him to the writing of a conspiracy document. He later admitted to plotting to bomb the New York stock exchange, the International Monetary Fund headquarters and the World Bank, among other targets.

The United Kingdom’s forensic science regulator role was created in 2007 by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). It is good that some progress has been made, but on this issue, Mr Speaker, it is time to put the regulator to work. The Bill would enable the statutory agencies to use information and evidence that they gather through the medium of forensic linguistics to protect more children from predatory adults, and to protect the British public from the likelihood of events such as those that happened recently in Brussels, Paris, Istanbul, Kabul and Pakistan. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Roger Mullin, Ian Blackford, Drew Hendry, Lady Hermon, John Mann, Michelle Thomson and Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg present the Bill.

Roger Mullin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 164).

ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Energy Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 18 January 2016 (Energy Bill [Lords] (Programme)) and 14 March 2016 (Energy Bill [Lords] (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Message

1. Any Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

2. Proceedings on that Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

3. The Message shall be considered in the following order: Commons Amendment No. 7, Commons Amendment No. 6, Commons Amendment No. 8, Commons Amendment No. 2.

Subsequent stages

4. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

5. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. (Stephen Barclay.)

Question agreed to.
After clause 79

Onshore wind power: circumstances in which certificates may be issued after 31 March 2016

1.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 7A.

Mr Speaker: With this we will consider the following:
Lords amendments 7B to 7S.
Lords amendment 7T, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendments 7U to 7W, 6A and 6B, 8A to 8C and Lords amendment 2A.
I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 2A. If the House agrees it, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the Journal.

Andrea Leadsom: To deliver on our manifesto commitment, the Government remain determined to bring forward the closure of the renewables obligation to new onshore wind in Great Britain. This commitment is based on plans that were signalled well before the general election last year, and that should not have come as a surprise to hon. Members or to industry.

Back in March 2015, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock), then Minister for Energy and Climate Change, stated in this House:

“We have made it absolutely clear that we will remove onshore wind subsidies in the future.”—[Official Report, 6 March 2015; Vol. 293, c. 1227-28.]

Prior to that, in December 2014, the Prime Minister, speaking of wind farms, stated in the House of Commons Liaison Committee:

“we don’t need to have more of these subsidised onshore. So let’s get rid of the subsidy”.

We have been absolutely clear all along. The Government’s policy is to bring forward the closure of the renewables obligation to new onshore wind.

To protect investor confidence, the Government have proposed a grace period for those projects meeting certain conditions as at 18 June last year, as outlined in the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on that date. The grace period provisions are intended to protect those projects that, at 18 June last year, already had relevant planning consents; a grid connection offer and acceptance of that offer, or confirmation that no grid connection was required; and access to land rights.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend said before setting out that list of warnings, and as we discussed in Committee, the proposals were in our manifesto, which commanded the support of the British people. Does she agree that we are again on thin ice, with the other place trying to interfere with the Government’s agenda, which has already been voted on by the British people?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. This is a manifesto commitment. Peers should listen to the manifesto commitment of this Government and respect it; that is normal practice, as I understand it.

The Government have taken action on a key concern raised by industry about an investment freeze. The clauses are therefore intended to ensure that projects that meet the core grace period criteria, and which were intended to be able to access the grace period as proposed, are not frozen out of the process. Since proposing this measure, the Government have continued to receive representations from industry suggesting that it supports and welcomes the proposals to address the investment freeze. The Government have also put in place a provision to ensure that an existing grace period for delays caused by grid or radar works will continue to apply.

We now need to get on and complete this Bill. As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) said in Committee, speaking for the Scottish National party:

“We agree that swift passage of the Bill with clear and consistent RO grace period provisions is needed in order to provide certainty to investors in the onshore wind sector as quickly as possible. The renewables industry fears that the longer legislative uncertainty over RO closure persists, the greater the risk of otherwise eligible projects running out of time to deliver under the proposed grace periods.”—[Official Report, Energy Public Bill Committee, 2 February 2016; c. 217.]

He is right.

In addition, these clauses give the Secretary of State a power to make regulations that would prevent electricity suppliers in Great Britain from using Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificates relating to electricity generated by new onshore wind stations and any additional capacity added to existing wind stations after the onshore wind closure date. This is a backstop power that would be used only if Northern Ireland did not close its RO to new onshore wind on equivalent terms to Great Britain.

Since our last debate on this issue, I am pleased to say that the RO in Northern Ireland has closed to large-scale new onshore wind stations with a capacity above 5 MW with effect from 1 April 2016. The Northern Ireland Executive are currently consulting on closing to stations at 5 MW and below.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): On the response of the Northern Ireland Executive, we are going into Assembly elections in Northern Ireland, so will the Minister confirm that this is almost too late for the present Northern Ireland Executive? She wants the Bill to be rushed through and completed, but we will not have a running Executive in Northern Ireland until at least a fortnight after the Northern Ireland Assembly elections.

Andrea Leadsom: I do not agree that we are rushing the Bill through; there has been an enormous amount of time for consultation and discussion. As I said, the Northern Ireland Executive are consulting on closing the RO to stations at 5 MW and below. I can assure all
hon. Members that the Government continue to engage with Northern Ireland with a view to effecting closure on equivalent terms to Great Britain.

Since our last debate on this policy in this House, the Government have introduced two further small changes to the Bill. These will provide for the provisions on the early closure of the RO to new onshore wind in Great Britain, the related grace period provisions, and the backstop power relating to the RO in Northern Ireland to come into force on the date that the Bill receives Royal Assent. Amendments 6A to 6B, 7A to 7S, 7U to 7W and 8A to 8C adjust the early closure date, previously 31 March 2016, to the date of Royal Assent. These changes are made in various places throughout clauses 79, 80 and 81, and to both the grid or radar condition and the investment freeze condition.

I was very clear in our last debate on this issue, as was the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the other place, Lord Bourne. The Government do not intend to backdate these provisions.

Before I speak to Lords amendment 7T and the Government’s motion to disagree, let me again say that the Government remain committed to delivering our manifesto pledge to end new subsidies for onshore wind. The final policy, which was agreed at our last debate in this House, strikes the right balance between protecting consumer bills and addressing the concerns of the industry.

The Government do not agree that it is appropriate to include the provision in Lords amendment 7T. The Government want this part of the Bill returned to the state in which it left this House last month. The amendment inserted into the Bill in the other place would allow projects that did not have formal planning consent as of 18 June last year into the RO beyond the early closure date. That would include projects that had an indication from a local planning authority that they would receive planning consent, subject to a section 106 or section 75 agreement being entered into. It would also include projects where the local planning committee was minded to approve the planning application before 18 June 2015, but planning permission was not issued until after that date. To be clear, those projects did not have planning permission as at 18 June last year, so they do not meet the grace period criteria proposed by the Government.

1.30 pm

Mr Speaker, 18 June was set out as a clear, bright line, and we have continued to maintain that it is important as a clear cut-off and statement of intent to industry. Tampering with such an integral part of the early closure policy at such a late stage in its development simply will not do. Such a change would lead to an increase in deployment—an increase that runs counter to the intent of the early closure policy. The Government have a mandate to protect consumer bills from rising costs, and we must continue to maintain the clear, bright line that is so carefully set out in the Bill’s provisions.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What would this Lords amendment cost the average consumer, if the full 90 MW we are talking about were deployed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the amendment is likely to reduce the predicted savings from early closure by something in the region of £10 million per annum, which is a significant figure. Given that early closure of the RO is expected to save around £20 million a year in a central scenario, and as much as £270 million a year in the high scenario.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that this was one of the most popular policies in the pretty popular manifesto we put to the electorate? We therefore need to get on with implementing it, and the other place should recognise that this issue arose out of the election.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right: this is a key, popular manifesto commitment, and we are determined to implement it, as we promised the voters of this country we would last May.

Let me turn briefly to amendment 2A, which was agreed in the other place. The amendment simply seeks to ensure that the function of determining whether an oil field project is materially complete can be transferred to the Oil and Gas Authority. That function sits outside chapter 9 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 but elsewhere within part 8, so it does not fall within the definition of “relevant function” under clause 2(6) of the Bill. It therefore cannot be transferred from the Secretary of State to the OGA by regulations made under clause 2(2). The amendment simply removes the reference to “Chapter 9 of” from the reference to part 8 of the 2010 Act in clause 2(6), ensuring that this important function can be transferred to the OGA. The amendment is purely technical, and seeks to put beyond doubt that all key oil and gas taxation functions can be transferred to the OGA once it becomes a Government company, as we have always intended.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The amendments we have received from the other place make a number of changes to the Bill. In most instances, as the Minister mentioned, those relate to the commencement of the closure of the RO. That is essentially because of the Bill’s progress through Parliament and the potential charge of retrospection against the Bill. It is good that the issue has been rectified, and that the Government have confirmed that they do not intend to backdate the closure of the RO.

However, those changes point to the issue raised in amendment 7T, with which the Government have a motion to disagree. We need to be clear that the amendment is not saying that changing the closure date for the RO onshore wind is wrong, although I continue to contend that it is. Contrary to the impression the Minister has given this afternoon, developers of projects did not realise that the closure date would be earlier than previously thought. Indeed, the so-called warnings before the general election, which she mentioned, were not about the early closure of the RO, but about future funding for onshore wind in general. Developers of projects knew that the RO would come to an end in March 2017, and many had spent several years—a long period—in the development process before the warnings were issued, and before the policy was put forward in the manifesto and, subsequently, the Bill. Having planned on the basis of the notion that the RO would come to
an end, they found out very late in the day that the goalposts had been arbitrarily moved, and that their investment was lost overnight as a result.

Nor is the amendment in any way contrary to manifesto commitments; it is not about the principle of the early closure of the RO, but about the grace periods that follow from that closure process. It is not saying that there should not be grace period exceptions for schemes that, for various reasons, might fall foul of the new, arbitrary cut-off date. By highlighting a small number of projects that have fallen foul of the cut-off date for very specific reasons, it is saying that grace-period schemes should be built on a reasonable level of equity and fairness, and should work within an understanding of proper reasons for exemption; they should not simply impose a few extended, but nevertheless still arbitrary, cut-off dates for projects.

Lords amendment 7T highlights a particularly egregious inequity in the grace-period scheme. This involves schemes that have, even according to the new guidelines laid down in the Bill process, done the right thing throughout by seeking and securing local support. As the Government said earlier in the passage of the Bill, it was to be the sine qua non of permission for the development of any onshore wind in the future that local communities should have the final say in decisions; schemes, it was said, should obtain support, perhaps through local planning approval, and should not, for example, seek to win an appeal on the basis of national determination, having been turned down at local level.

The schemes covered by the amendment fit exactly that description. They have determinedly gone through the local process and engaged with it, rather than standing back and waiting to progress through an appeal. They have won local community support, in each instance through the granting of a planning decision by the local authority. The only issue is that, having gone through that often lengthy process of local consultation, they find that the successful, locally supported outcome has, at the stroke of a pen, effectively been turned into refusal. That has happened because the final planning certificate has not arrived by the cut-off date because of issues relating not to the permission, but to details of section 106 agreements on community benefit or similar issues, or to section 75 agreements in Scotland—that is, issues that arise not as part of the agreement process, but because the agreement has been reached. As these schemes could not produce a final, formal planning certificate by the arbitrary date of 18 June, the scheme as a whole was lost.

Here is the timetable of one such scheme, the Twentyshilling Hill wind farm in Dumfriesshire. The planning application was initially made on 15 March 2013—a long time ago. It was approved by a planning committee, subject to a section 75 agreement, on 16 December 2014. It was not the fault of the wind farm applicant that the council took a few months to settle the section 75 application. Even so, the application was agreed on 17 June—again, before the cut-off date. However, despite the agreement being public and on the council website, the final certificate did not arrive until 1 July, making it null and void in the Government’s eyes, as the Minister has stated.

In retrospect, it might have been wiser for those and other developers not to take too much time on, or give too much attention to, local agreement, but to instead precipitate an appeal that they might have won. Indeed, when developers have done just that and the appeal decision has arrived after the cut-off date of 18 June 2015—we heard of such instances during the passage of the Bill—it has been accepted because of a provision relating to the grace period. The projects are deemed to have been okay all along and are allowed to proceed. That is frankly perverse, and it falls seriously short of the test of reasonableness and equity that ought to inform any grace period arrangement.

Lords amendment 7T relates to a small number of cases and seeks to restore a semblance of equity to the process. It is based on the principle that the Government themselves promoted as the basis for decisions on onshore wind applications. It is a principle for the future that, incidentally, Labour supports.

I shall explain the equity. If a local planning committee found in favour of a planning decision before 18 June, and the decision was arrived at via a process of consultation and community acceptance of the application, it should be covered by the grace period provisions. This small amendment would affect only about half a dozen schemes. In the overall scheme of things, it would make an insignificant inroad into levy control framework financial provisions, as far as the RO is concerned. It would, however, place a much-needed patch of equity on the grace period structure, and perhaps point the way to addressing seriously a future issue. That issue is this: are the Government intent on ensuring that onshore wind will be built in the future if it is, after all, the cheapest and most cost-effective renewable available—if local communities support the proposals, or do they intend to use national clout to override local wishes in pursuit of an overall closure of onshore wind, at least in England?

Accepting the amendment and finalising the Bill in this way would go a long way to restoring a principle that was supposedly central to the process for the future, and it would demonstrate to local communities that they really will be able to decide and not have their local wishes snuffed out by a fiat from the centre.

John Redwood: I hope that the other place will not delay this Bill further, because many people and parties in this House, and in the other place, wish it to go through to provide measures to help our oil and gas industry, which is struggling with the collapse in the world oil price and the consequent threat to jobs and prosperity that we would like to help alleviate.

I have two main reasons for strongly supporting the Government. First, they are absolutely right to say that our energy is too dear and that their measures are a contribution to tackling the problem of very expensive energy. A tragedy is unfolding in several of our industries, most recently in the steel industry, where the consequences of very high energy costs compared with those of our competitors around the world are manifest, especially the impact on output, profit, loss and loss of jobs. We desperately need to do more to tackle the problem of very expensive energy, so I admire the Government’s urgency in tackling one of its sources. The subsidy withdrawal is entirely appropriate.

One of the problems with wind energy—this makes it a very high-cost way of offering generating capacity—is that back-up capacity needs to be built to generate the power by some other means, because there will be times of the day, days of the week and weeks of the year when
there is no wind. At such times, we are entirely reliant on the back-up power, and that requires a full range of back-up. There will always be extra costs involved with such an unreliable renewable source of energy.

On cost grounds, it is vital that we make rapid progress. I think that good notice was given—the election was notice enough. I would have thought. It was a prominent and popular policy. None of us was shy about debating it and we got a lot of support from many people.

The second main reason why I think the Government are right to take this action is that wind is so intermittent and unreliable. Therefore, if there is too much wind, the problems of managing and balancing the system become that much greater. As the Member of Parliament who represents the control centre on Bearwood Road in Wokingham, I am only too well aware of how its task is made much more expensive and complicated the more interruptible and unreliable energy there is on the system. The Government’s measure will be a welcome check on that. It will help it to manage the system better and to provide more reliable power for industry.

If there is too much unreliable power on the system and that power goes down, it is industry and commerce that will take the hit. They will be asked to forgo the use of power when there is no wind, but when we are desperately trying to compete in a very competitive world, surely it is important not just to keep the lights on in people’s households, but to keep the factories turning over.

1.45 pm

For those two powerful reasons—there are many others, but I will not detain the House with them—I strongly support what the Government are doing. I urge the other place to recognise how important it is for our national energy security and for the sake of the prices charged to our consumers, and, above all, to remember that it was an election pledge.

Callum McCaig: As is so often the case with learning about the workings of this place, sometimes I do not know whether something is a formal rule or a convention. I had assumed that “ping-pong” was a mere colloquialism, but I was surprised to learn from the Order Papers online that it is the formal name for this process. I was never very good at ping-pong when I was younger—I kept taking my eye off the ball, which could also be said of the Government, whose dogmatism in pushing this issue and continuing with ping-pong means that they are taking their eye off the bigger picture. I agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that the bigger picture for the Energy Bill, at every stage of the process, has been the establishment of the Oil and Gas Authority.

If we simply accept the Lords amendments, which I support, we could finish our deliberations on this Bill and be done with it. They are balanced and sensible and would deliver the pragmatic response that it is beholden on the Government to deliver.

Simon Hoare: I am sure that everybody has hugely pressing engagements, but given the importance of the OGA, and given the state of the oil and gas fields in the North sea, is the hon. Gentleman surprised at the absence of his party colleagues?

Callum McCaig: Sometimes it is better to know the answer to a question before asking it. A number of my colleagues are meeting constituents down from Scotland who suffer from motor neurone disease. Given the hugely debilitating impact that that illness can have on people, and given the impact that Westminster can have on welfare, it is important that a number of our folks are there.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): That is a very fair response, but it is also notable how few Scottish National party MPs were in the Chamber on Second Reading of this Bill, which relates directly to one of the great issues facing the hon. Gentleman’s nation.

Callum McCaig: I started by saying that at one point in my youth I was guilty of taking my eyes off the ball. With these diversionary tactics, Conservative Members are well and truly taking their eyes off the ball. We could discuss who is here. It is disappointing that there are not many Members in the Chamber, and I am not sure proportionately how many Tories are present. I could do some buck-of-a-fag-packet sums—that might appeal to them—but instead I shall persevere.

We are talking about 90 MW of onshore wind. The Minister said in Committee on 2 June that “it is absolutely our intention to give local communities the final say on wind farm developments.”—[Official Report, Energy [Lords Public Bill Committee, 2 June 2015, c. 76.]]

Six of the seven schemes that have received planning consent are in Scotland. The committee dates were 24 November 2014 for West Benhar in North Lanarkshire; 11 December 2014 for Twentyshilling in Dumfries and Galloway; 3 June 2015 for the Chruach extension in Argyll and Bute; 15 September 2014 for the Barlockhart Moor extension; 27 January 2015 for Poniel in South Lanarkshire; 24 February 2015 for Crookedstane in South Lanarkshire; and 5 June 2015 for the Melton Common wind cluster in Hull. Those were all before the Government’s cut-off date of 18 June 2015.

As the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) suggested, if we are to put local consent at the heart of this issue, we must respect the outcome and will of local councils that decided to proceed with these schemes, but which through no fault of their own—or indeed of the developers—were not granted planning consent and a decision notice until after this decision. For the Twentyshilling Hill wind farm, evidence to the Committee from the provost and chair of the Royal Burgh of Sanquhar and District Community Council, and the chair of Kirkconnel and Kelloholm Community Council stated:

“Our two Communities number nearly 5000 inhabitants, and, since the closure of the coal mines nearly 50 years ago, have stumbled from crisis to crisis. Despite the problems affecting our area, we are not dependent communities, and both Kirkconnel and Sanquhar can boast good public initiatives and an earnest desire to improve our lot through self-help. Windfarm monies will, at least allow local people the ability to take decisions which will improve the area in which we live.”

Twentyshilling Hill wind farm has the potential to offer life-changing improvement to the lives and living conditions of the populations of Upper Nithsdale. That is local empowerment. We are talking about local consent and support, and Twentyshilling Hill wind farm has unmistakeably got the support of the communities in which it will be set. For the sake of a few points of
doctrinaire principle from the Government, we are seeing that taken away through no fault of the community or the developer, but purely to persevere unnecessarily. I urge the Government to put their eyes back on the ball and allow the Energy Bill to proceed. If we go back and forth with ping-pong we risk delaying that further.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way. Let me make a point that I also raised in Committee. I accept that there may not be time for this with some of these schemes, but on a point of principle, if the Scottish Government and the SNP wish to continue these schemes in Scotland, why will they not pay for them themselves?

Callum McCaig: Because there is no mechanism. We discussed that in Committee, and the hon. Gentleman voted against the mechanism that would have allowed that to happen. I do not see how that question focuses on the issue. If we want Scotland to receive support for such projects, that could have been provided.

James Cartlidge: On a point of correction, I seem to recall that the hon. Gentleman wanted Scotland to have the power, but that the Scottish Government were not going to pay for it. That is what we discussed in Committee—they were not prepared to pay for it.

Callum McCaig: There were two different aspects, and we had a number of debates. The hon. Gentleman asked how we would do something, but we cannot do it—pure and simple. Let me return to the nub of the matter. People would like pragmatic government, but we are seeing doctrinaire government that dismisses the views of communities.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Callum McCaig: I am coming to a close. Such doctrinaire government is making communities withdraw their support, and I urge the Government to show pragmatism today.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure to listen to a message from the other place and to disagree with it wholeheartedly. A few hours ago the German Government decided that they want to withdraw subsidy from onshore wind schemes, for exactly the same reasons that we in this country are doing so. In previous debates and in Committee, I described my campaign to get this clear manifesto pledge from my party. I will not go through that again—I had only half an hour last time to describe the process and some of the things that I was after, and we are time-limited today—but it all stemmed from the Kelmarsh decision in my constituency.

Members in this place understand how important it is to represent their constituents, but I wish to tell some of those in the other place that it was not only one small village in my constituency that was affected by an onshore wind decision—Hanging Houghton, Brixworth, Draughton, Maidwell, Hazelbeach, Kelmarsh, Yelvertoft, Winwick, Crick, Lilborough, Badby, Kislingbury, Guilsborough, Watford, West Haddon, East Haddon, Ravensthorpe, Great Oxendon and many more villages in my constituency were all affected by proposals for unwanted onshore wind farms. That is why at the end of the previous Parliament, a letter to the Prime Minister was signed by 101 Members of Parliament in order to get this change. There was a long battle across the Floor of the House about whether we should be subsidising onshore wind, and a clear manifesto pledge by the Conservative party to stop funding it.

The hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) have highlighted small factors within the grace period, but this is a clear manifesto pledge and principle that people in my constituency wanted and people—equalised across the constituency and the House about whether we should be subsidising onshore wind, and a clear manifesto pledge by the Conservative party to stop funding it.

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Callum McCaig: If the hon. Gentleman is saying that I should not have raised an issue, what is the point of the House? If we do not discuss these issues in the House, we will not get the answers that people need.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is a pleasure to hear that the hon. Gentleman considers that this is a point of order. I know the hon. Gentleman did not have a lot of time in the point of order, so I will not go through the arguments again. I said that we had a manifesto commitment to get rid of onshore wind, and that has a manifesto commitment. They lost their seats partly because in their constituencies they could not defend the onshore wind turbines that the Conservative party had made a clear commitment to get rid of.

Callum McCaig: We are talking about a very small number of wind farms. I do not believe that those Liberal Democrats who would have been impacted by the wind farms that we are dealing with today would have lost to the Conservative party.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I know the hon. Gentleman said that he had a bit of trouble with conventions, and so, obviously, do some Members of the House of Lords. I am trying to remind them of a long-standing tradition and convention in this place, which is that when a party has a manifesto commitment to enact legislation, that legislation should not be overturned by those who are un-elected down the other end of the corridor. If we consider who tabled the amendments and voted for this message to be sent to the Commons, we see a whole list of former MPs who lost their seats because of the manifesto that they are now trying to overturn from an unelected place.

I was involved with this manifesto pledge through to the point of delivery, and I sat on the Energy Bill Committee. I am pretty sure that I know what our manifesto pledge was, as did those who voted for it in my constituency—it was on my leaflets and plain for all to see. I wish to send a message to those down the other end of the corridor that they are dabbling with democracy. They are not just fighting for the principle of a grace period for six wind farms; they are determinedly fighting against a clear manifesto pledge by a governing party.

Dr Whitehead: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman had in his election leaflet details of the grace periods that would have been in his leaflet as a consequence of the manifesto commitment. If those details were not in his leaflet, does he agree that the question of grace periods is not about the manifesto commitment, but
about how that commitment might be made more palatable, as far as the transition is concerned? That is what we are debating today.

2 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is the sort of thing that I probably would have had etched into a stone for people to laugh at. The hon. Gentleman knows the answer. Of course, I did not have anything about grace periods in my local campaign leaflet that I sent to my constituents, because I thought that people would understand exactly what we meant when we said that there was no subsidy for onshore wind. I did not think that it was necessary to dance on the head of a pin for the sake of a simple party political point.

I end where I began. My constituents are desperate for the measure, and they are desperate for the measures to help the oil and gas industry. They are surprised that Liberal Democrats down the other end of the corridor are willing to play politics with the elected Chamber on a point in a manifesto on which they were heartily defeated. My constituents are annoyed by the fact that the matter has not become law already.

James Cartlidge: It was a great pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee. I hope that the House will not mind if I return briefly to the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig), because it is important to set the record straight. Before I give my reasons for supporting the Government, let me say that my recollection—I am happy for this to be clarified—is that in the Bill Committee, SNP Members tabled amendments to give them the power to keep the projects open but, when asked, they did not confirm that they would put up the money to support those projects. The justification that they gave related to the nuclear industry. As I recall, they said that it was quite fair for them not to have to pay for the projects because they have to pay for the nuclear industry, which they do not agree with. Thereafter, I asked them whether they would want to be cut off from the electricity supply that comes from the nuclear sector in this country, and the answer was no. As always, they want to have their cake and eat it—rather like the Mayor of London, although they do not make much grace as he does. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South has tried his best today, and I see that he has got some extra support to back him up.

My two reasons for supporting the Government are clear and along the lines of the points made by my right hon. Friend and others. I simply want to say that we should not delay a Bill—[Interruption.] Does the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) wish to intervene?

Dr Whitehead: I simply want to make the point that we could finish proceedings today if the Government agreed to the amendment, and the Oil and Gas Authority could go forward with all speed, as everybody wants it to.

James Cartlidge: Absolutely. If the hon. Gentleman is willing personally to provide £10 million so that the taxpayer and electricity customers do not have to be so encumbered, I am sure that we can find a way.

We have a clear position. The Bill has not changed in respect of the fundamental decision to establish the Oil and Gas Authority. At one point on the day of Second Reading, the price of a barrel of oil was $27.70. It is now around the $40 to $44 mark, so there has been some stabilisation, but that word has to be used carefully in view of what is happening around the world. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard had an excellent piece this week on continuing stability in Kuwait, and we see today in the FT that Saudi Arabia is starting to borrow from the markets. The price may go up, or it may go down again. The key point is that the outlook is uncertain. Enacting the Bill, with this new and respected regulator, will add stability and credibility to the sector at an important time. It is not a magic wand, and it will not immediately heal the problems that undoubtedly exist in this industry, which is vital for the United Kingdom, but it is a key part of our energy policy and proposition. That is why the Bill should become law as soon as possible.

This is basically about our national interest, which has, for many decades, been tied to North sea oil and to the energy sector. That is true not only of Scotland; in the East Anglian economy, a significant amount of output and a significant number of jobs come from the oil sector. I encourage all hon. Members to support the Government on this matter. Our reasons are clear. This is about supporting the energy sector and respecting the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I think we all hoped that the Energy Bill would by now have completed its progress through Parliament. It is a shame that it has not, especially because the closure of the renewables obligation for onshore wind was a clear manifesto commitment by the Government before the last election. That was a popular pledge, especially in my constituency, where opposition to wind farms in the Mendips and at Chipilow is widespread. It is difficult to explain to my constituents that that manifesto commitment, which the Government have a clear mandate to deliver, has not been enacted because of the intervention of the unelected Members of the other place.

That is especially true, as has been noted by a number of my hon. Friends, because the Opposition has been abetted in the House of Lords by a party that was roundly rejected in Somerset, in the south-west and
across the country. Not one of its elected Members has come to this Chamber today to justify the actions of their unelected colleagues in that other place. The illiberal undemocrats have a great deal to answer for. I want to congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister of State on their forbearance in seeing the Bill through Parliament. I understand that the other day, the Secretary of State spent some time at the Bar of the other House eyeballing those who were delaying the legislation. Sadly, they had their way, and we are here yet again to debate it.

It is important that we do not allow the closure of the renewables obligation for onshore wind to be cast as anti-green. The deployment of onshore wind has been widespread, despite strong opposition in this place—with my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) in the vanguard—and in communities across the country. As a result of £800 million of subsidy, there are 490 operational wind farms and just under 5,000 operational turbines, so the measure is not anti-wind or anti-green.

The Government need to deliver their manifesto commitment to ensure that bill payers are not expected to foot the bill for the excessive deployment of this type of generation. Let us be clear. The Government are well on track to achieve 30% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020, and we should congratulate them on that. They are serious about decarbonisation and serious about security of supply, but they are also serious about keeping bills down. A line must be drawn somewhere, and the Government’s decision on the matter is, in my view, entirely reasonable.

Let us reject Lords amendment 7T and stop the onshore wind industry impeding the progress of a Bill that, principally, establishes the OGA, with all its important functions in reinvigorating the UK’s oil and gas industry, safeguarding hundreds of thousands of jobs, contributing billions to our economy and protecting an essential component of not only our energy security but, I argue, our national security. It is high time that we moved on with the Bill, and that the Lords accepted the will of this elected Chamber. It is time that we focused on our energies not on onshore wind, but in using the Government’s subsidy structure as a lever to encourage the technologies, such as offshore wind and new nuclear, that we envisage will be part of our energy mix for the next 20 or 30 years.

Graham Stuart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Heappey: I am just wrapping up, but I am pleased to give way.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and well-informed speech. Does he agree that although we are ending the subsidy for onshore wind, there will still be a role for it? We must continue to make sure that, while it is not subsidised, onshore wind does not lose out in comparison with the strike prices granted to other technologies.

James Heappey: I accept my hon. Friend’s point to a degree. This is not the end of onshore wind in that onshore wind is not being banned, but is simply being told that it is time to find its own feet and to go it alone, where it can be sited in a permissive planning environment. I regularly drive up the M5 past the onshore wind turbines at Avonmouth, and one might argue that they are entirely reasonable in that industrial setting. Provided turbines can be sited in a permissive place and they do not require any further Government subsidy, they may of course continue. However, it is important that the subsidy ends and that it does so with the passage of the Bill.

It is also important to note that the Energy and Climate Change Committee has recently begun pre-legislative scrutiny of the next energy Bill. There is a great deal in it that is quite exciting, in my view, so let us get this one done and get on with that one.

Graham Stuart: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, in which there have been interesting speeches by Members on both sides of the House. On ending the subsidy for onshore wind, the whole aim of subsidy regimes for renewable technologies is to encourage costs to fall and to drive them down over time to the point at which they no longer need a subsidy. The Government put that in their manifesto.

I think a lot of this is down to Labour Members, because they would not listen to communities, such as my own, which felt that wind farms were being imposed on them that blighted their view of the landscape. The sense of a loss of control, even more than the imposition of the turbines themselves, created a great deal of resentment. We have ended up in a position in which the party that won a majority at the general election stood on a manifesto promise to end this subsidy.

The Government have made provision to ensure that onshore wind, where it goes ahead, has the support of the local community. I have said previously in the House, so I will not go on about it at too much length, that that issue should have been sorted out. If it had been sorted out sooner, we might not have had the backlash that has found its form—not least through the agency of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—in saying, “We feel that this subsidy regime is imposing these turbines on us.” The permissions, not the subsidy per se, was the central issue, but we are where we are.

Further to my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), I want to make this point. Given that we now have an energy market in which the price producers charge for energy is far less than that at which anyone can afford to commission new production, we have a rather artificial market. I hope and expect we will make sure—I know Ministers are looking at this—that future regimes, for contracts for difference or whatever else, do not artificially block onshore wind from getting access to the market because of how pricing within that market operates. It is perfectly possible to ensure that there is no subsidy for onshore wind while ensuring that onshore wind alone is not deprived of access to the mechanisms that drive new commissioning for every other technology. I hope that Members on both sides of the House can agree to that. As long as communities have the final say on whether new wind farm capacity is brought into their area, and as long as onshore wind is treated no differently from other technologies, including fossil fuels such as gas, that is the situation we need to bring about.

John Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is quite difficult to attribute cost to stand-by power for wind? Wind uniquely needs such a power in a way that other forms of energy do not.
Graham Stuart: I agree that there are such issues. In his speech, my right hon. Friend did not reflect on the success of the Government. I know he is sceptical about both climate change and the Government’s approach to this over the years, but what is undeniable is the way in which the cost curve has accelerated downwards. We were previously in a situation in which clean energy was ridiculously more expensive than fossil fuels, which poison the air and also have climate risks attached to them. We have therefore seen a real driving down of that cost. Onshore wind is now in a position where it should be able to compete on a level playing field with new gas-fired power stations; we will not of course see any more coal-fired ones.

2.15 pm

Whereas the price of offshore wind was £150 per MWh just a few years ago, we will now, as was announced in the autumn statement, see a ceiling of £104 or £105 per MWh. By the time we are into commissioning for the mid-2020s, we will be looking at a price of below £85 per MWh, which, as my right hon. Friend and other Members will know, is less than that guaranteed for Hinkley.

We are therefore moving to a world of renewables. As part of the reset, we will have an improved approach to encouraging storage and demand management. The roll-out of smart meters will be part of such demand management—I know that efforts are being made with National Grid to find the cheapest way to encourage major industries not to use energy at times when the grid is being pushed—as will interconnectors. We are therefore building the more intelligent system that will take cost out of the intermittent renewables sector at the same time as those renewables are cheaper in relation to their production costs, become more efficient and help us to meet our climate change objectives.

I am pleased to say that it is time we put this law in place and made sure that the Oil and Gas Authority can do its work. If there is an uptick in the oil price, as my right hon. Friend and other Members will know, is less than that guaranteed for Hinkley.

Andrea Leadsom: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate. The Energy Bill will enact our manifesto commitments in two key ways. It will create the Oil and Gas Authority, which provides part of our continued support for North sea oil and gas. It will also implement the recommendations of the review by Sir Ian Wood, and we are doing everything we can to ensure the long-term survival and thriving state of this critical UK industry.

The North sea oil and gas industry has been the UK’s largest industrial investor for many decades and has paid billions of pounds in corporation tax on production. However, as the basin matures, oil and gas become more difficult to access. We cannot and must not accept any delay in completing the Bill, because we need to give the Oil and Gas Authority the powers it needs to maximise the economic recovery of the UK’s remaining oil and gas reserves. Industry and Government share the same ambitions and are working very closely together to manage the remaining resources effectively and efficiently.

I find it very disappointing that Opposition Members, who should know better, have suggested that by adding a mere £10 million extra per year to consumer bills, we can somehow achieve our aim of setting up the Oil and Gas Authority early. They should be ashamed of themselves. They should be supporting the Bill’s speedy conclusion to Royal Assent for the sake of the oil and gas industry they all profess to support so enormously.

On the delivery of the Government’s manifesto commitments on onshore wind, we promised to end new subsidies for onshore wind and to ensure that local people have the final say on where onshore wind is built. Opposition Members suggest that just because there is local agreement, it is fine to add to the bills of all consumers across Great Britain, but that is simply not the case. It is our duty as consumer champions—at least on the Government Benches—to keep down the cost to consumers, and that is what we will do.

Onshore wind has deployed successfully to date and is projected to meet our planned range of 11 to 13 GW by 2020, but we do not want to continue to provide subsidies where they are no longer necessary and where they are simply adding to the costs for energy consumers. We must seek the right balance between each of our three competing priorities: to keep the lights on; to keep down the cost to consumers; and to decarbonise at the lowest possible price. Above all else, we want Members right across the Chamber to support these amendments so that we can get the OGA—

2.20 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of the Lords message, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order; this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F).

That this House agrees with Lords amendment 7A.

Question agreed to.

Lords amendment 7A accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7T. (Andrea Leadsom.)

The House divided: Ayes 293, Noes 224.

Division No. 243

AYES

Adams, Nigel  Barwell, Gavin
Afridi, Adam  Bebb, Guto
Aldous, Peter  Bellingham, Sir Henry
Allan, Lucy  Benyon, Richard
Allen, Heidi  Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, Sir David  Berry, Jake
Andrew, Stuart  Berry, James
Ansell, Caroline  Bingham, Andrew
Argar, Edward  Blackwood, Nicola
Atkins, Victoria  Blunt, Crispin
Bacon, Mr Richard  Boles, Nick
Baker, Mr Steve  Bone, Mr Peter
Baldwin, Harriett  Borwick, Victoria
Barclay, Stephen  Bottomley, Sir Peter
Baron, Mr John  Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
But, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clevery, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodd, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudley, Caroline
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Guinness, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hall, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Rebecca
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howlett, Ian
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCarty, Jason
McCarty, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merr, Johnny
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jessica
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Osborne, rh Mr George
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggins, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wrang, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Guy Opperman and Jackie Doyle-Price

NOES
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, Ian
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 7T disagreed to.

Remaining Lords amendments agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendment 2A.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 7T;

That James Cartidge, Andrea Leadsom, Holly Lynch, Callum McIaig, Paul Maynard, Julian Smith and Dr Alan Whitehead be members of the Committee;

That Andrea Leadsom be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Julian Smith.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.
Backbench Business

**Daesh: Genocide of Minorities**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We now come to the Back-Bench debate on the recognition of genocide by Daesh against Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities. Before I ask Fiona Bruce to move the motion, I point out that we will be very strict about opening speeches being no longer than 15 minutes, including interventions, and that there will be an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

I remind hon. Members that when interventions are taken and a minute or two is added to their speech limit, those minutes are taken out of speeches of Members lower down the speakers list. If people can be aware of that, I will be very grateful.

2.36 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Christians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are suffering genocide at the hands of Daesh; and calls on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court. It will support similar resolutions of other leading international and legislative bodies.

There are only two possibilities for Members here. If the House is not satisfied that genocidal atrocities are being perpetrated, we must not pass the motion, on the other hand, if the House is not satisfied that genocidal atrocities are being perpetrated, we must not pass the motion. So we have to decide.

I put it to the House that not just one but every single one of those criteria was satisfied by the two testimonies yesterday.

Yesterday evening, here in the UK Parliament, we heard the truly harrowing personal testimony of a brave 16-year-old Yazidi girl called Ekhlas. She was seized by Daesh from her home, along with others from her community in Sinjar in northern Iraq. At the age of 15, she saw her father and brother killed in front of her. She told us of how every girl in her community over eight, including herself, was imprisoned and raped. She spoke of witnessing her friends being raped and hearing their screams, and of seeing a girl aged nine being raped by so many men that she died. Many young girls had their fragile bodies rendered incapable of pregnancy, and others who were far too young to be so were made pregnant. Horrifically, she spoke of seeing a two-year-old boy being killed and of his body parts being ground down and fed to his own mother. She told of children being brainwashed and forced to kill their own parents. Fortunately, she managed to escape the prison during a bombardment of the area around it. Others are not so fortunate.

We heard from another woman, Yvette, who had come directly from Syria for last night’s meeting. She spoke of Christians being killed and tortured, and of children being beheaded in front of their parents. She showed us recent film footage of herself talking with mothers—more than one—who had seen their own children crucified. Another woman had seen 250 children put through a dough kneader and burnt in an oven. The oldest was four years old. She told us of a mother with a two-month-old baby. When Daesh knocked at the front door of her house and ordered the entire family out, she pleaded with them to let her collect her child from another room. They told her, “No. Go. It is ours now.”

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this very important debate. She is making a powerful speech. Every year, Members of this House sign the holocaust book of commitment, making the pledge that that terrible genocide will never be forgotten. I have personally signed a pledge that I will never walk on by. Does she agree that today we have the opportunity to make sure that none of us walks on by as we see this terrible genocide unfold?

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely do. After the horrors of the holocaust, the words, “Never again” resounded through civilisation. We must not let them resound again.

Speaking to MPs at yesterday’s meeting, the young girl Ekhlas implored us:

“Listen to me, help the girls, help those in captivity; I am pleading with you, let us come together and call this what it is: a genocide. This is about human dignity. You have a responsibility. ISIS are committing a genocide, because they are trying to wipe us out.”

Genocide is an internationally recognised term, defined in the 1948 convention on genocide, to which we are a signatory as a country, as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group...Killing...Causing serious bodily or mental harm...Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions...calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part...Imposing measures intended to prevent births...Forcibly transferring children”.

I put it to the House that not just one but every single one of those criteria was satisfied by the two testimonies yesterday.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Bruce: I will, but after that I will not take any further interventions because of the limitation placed on my speaking time.

Rehman Chishti: I applaud my hon. Friend for bringing this motion to the Floor of the House. She talks about using the term genocide; our international partners, such as the United States, its Secretary of State and House of Representatives, and the European Parliament have already said that the acts committed by Daesh amount to genocide. We should interpret international law in line with our key partners, who are working with to defeat Daesh.
**Fiona Bruce**: I absolutely agree. We do not want to be behind but in the lead. Our country has a proud history of leading on human rights and ensuring that aggressors are brought to justice. We must do so in this case, too.

Yazidis and Christians have been targeted explicitly because of their religion and ethnicity. It is not just them, but Alawites, Shi’as, Shabaks and Mandaeans. The suffering of the two women I mentioned has been replicated countless times by other families, as we know from the statistics that we have all heard in this House. I have seen many reports documenting evidence of genocidal atrocities, as I am sure other Members have, from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN assistance mission for Iraq and others—thousands of pages recording executions, mass graves, assassinations of church leaders, crucifixions, systematic rapes, torture of men, women and children, beheadings, and many other acts of violence so unspeakable that their evil seems almost fictional. But it is not.

Daesh is targeting specific groups precisely because of those groups’ characteristics, and it has declared that, and that its acts have genocidal intent. For example, issue 4 of its online magazine “Dabiq” tells its followers that they will be held accountable if the Yazidi people continue to exist. As Lord Alton of Liverpool—I pay tribute to him for his work on this issue—has said, if we do not recognise this as genocide “we might as well rip up the genocide convention as a worthless piece of paper.”

As a consequence of the evidence meticulously collected by non-governmental organisations, activists and the UN, resolutions condemning the actions of Daesh’s genocides have been passed around the world—as has been mentioned—by the Council of Europe in January 2016, the European Parliament in February and the US House of Representatives in March. Following that, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, made an announcement confirming the position of the US Government, stating, “Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control including Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims. Daesh is genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology and by actions.”

If that is the position of the US Government, why is it not the position of our own?

In answer to that question, which has been raised many times, UK Government Ministers have repeatedly said that, “it is a long-standing Government policy that any judgements on whether genocide has occurred should be a matter for the international judicial system rather than legislatures, governments or other non-judicial bodies.”

In other words, whether this is genocide is a matter for the courts to decide; in this case, more specifically, it is a matter for the International Criminal Court. But—this is the crucial point of the motion—under the procedures relating to the ICC, it cannot make that judgment until it is requested to do so, and the only way that can now happen is if such a referral is made by the UN Security Council, of which the UK Government are a permanent member. That is why supporting the motion is so important. There is a circular argument here—a stalemate—which this Parliament needs to break. The motion before the House calls on us, as Members of the UK Parliament, to make a declaration of genocide, and then asks that the UK Government refer that to the UN Security Council so that the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court can take action.

That prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, has already said, as long as a year ago, that she stands ready to take action, given a referral, saying: “I remain profoundly concerned by this situation and I want to emphasise our collective duty as a global community to respond to the plight of victims whose rights and dignity have been violated. ISIS continues to spread terror on a massive scale in the territories it occupies. The international community pledged that appalling crimes that deeply shock the conscience of humanity must not go unpunished. As Prosecutor of the ICC, I stand ready to play my part, in an independent and impartial manner.”

When so much suffering continues daily, can we wait any longer before doing all that we can to act against it?

I am aware that the UK Government are already involved in assertively tackling the aggression of Daesh and its poisonous ideology in many ways, not least through air strikes, cutting off finance and providing counter-terrorism expertise, as well as through humanitarian aid and information gathering. I commend the Government for that, but there can surely be no good reason for delaying the additional step of referring this to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction on the ICC to start its own unique procedures to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Some may ask what difference that would really make. It will make a real difference. Recognition of genocide brings with it obligations on the part of the international community to prevent, punish and protect. It initiates the process leading to the prosecution of perpetrators and makes it more likely that guilty individuals will be punished. It is often followed by a stronger international response both against the atrocities and in the provision of greater help for survivors with their urgent needs—something that is much needed in this case. It can facilitate reparations for survivors.

Recognising the actions of Daesh as genocide should therefore help inject further momentum into the international efforts to stop the killings. It would, I hope, lead to more active safeguarding of those members of religious minorities on the ground whose lives and very communities currently hang in the balance. It may also make potential new recruits—including those from the UK—think twice about joining Daesh, given the ramifications of being caught.

Recognition of genocide is not the only or the final action of the international community, but it is a crucial step, and one that we should make today. I recognise that conferring jurisdiction on the ICC requires the support of other members of the Security Council, but that should not stop our country from initiating the process. I add that there is precedent for the Security Council to establish a fact-finding committee of experts, so that all current evidence can be assessed and new evidence can be collected. If the motion is passed, I appeal to the Government to consider that recommendation at the Security Council.

I repeat: some may ask, “What difference will this really make?” I leave the final word to the young girl Ekhsas. To her, it would make all the difference in the world. When I asked her yesterday what her hopes were for the future, she replied, “to see justice done for my people.”

I ask Members to support the motion. In the final analysis, it is about doing justice and seeing it done.
Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Between 2005 and 2010, I had the privilege of working for the fantastic Aegis Trust, which works both to commemorate and to prevent genocide.

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a distinguished Member of the House and a member of the International Development Committee, as well as a campaigner on human rights, particularly those of religious and other minorities. I agreed with everything that she said, which I believe has strong cross-party support. Like her, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to happen. I hope that the hon. Lady will have an opportunity to send a really strong message from all parties that we believe that what is happening is a genocide and that the international system has a duty and responsibility to act.

In both Iraq and Syria, ethnic and other minorities have been in severe danger since the emergence of Daesh, and we have seen this once diverse region witnessing mass killings, rapes, forced conversions, and the destruction of shrines, temples and churches in the region. The hon. Member for Congleton spoke about the meeting she convened and chaired last night. I, too, listened to the powerful speech from Ekhlas, a young woman who has been through hell—something that no young person should ever have to go through. Sadly, this was not the first time that many of us have heard such testimony. Earlier this year, a meeting was convened by the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who chairs the all-party group on the prevention of genocide, and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) at which we heard from another teenage Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad, who had also been captured and imprisoned by Daesh. Nadia told us that she had been beaten, tortured and raped before, thankfully, she managed to escape. Her story shocked us in the same way that Ekhlas’s story shocked us last night. Since her escape, Nadia has spoken here in Parliament, at the UN and with various Governments, including our own, simply to raise awareness of the plight of the Yazidis in general, and Yazidi women in particular.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I join others in highlighting the importance of this debate. Surely to goodness, though, making these poor people go through it all again when they have to provide their testimony to organisations seems harsh when those organisations should not need such persuasion. They should be capable of realising what is happening without needing to put people through the pain of having to repeat themselves over and over again.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the evidence is there. I suppose that human testimony provides an important additional dimension, but he is right that the evidence is extremely well documented. It is estimated that more than 3,000 Yazidi women are being held against their will by Daesh.

A glance at the history of this region should surely lead us to learn some lessons today. A century ago, the Armenians and Assyrians suffered a genocide. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Congleton that the policy of Daesh towards the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities amounts to genocide.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I fully intend to support and vote for this important motion. When I was in Syria two weeks ago, I interviewed about 23 or 24 people from various groups who had suffered, including Christians and Alawites. My key point in the debate is that not just Daesh was responsible, but Daesh and its allies. We should remember that when we come to bring these cases before the international court.

Stephen Twigg: The right hon. Gentleman’s makes an extremely important point, which I hope will be elaborated during today’s debate.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I shall also proudly support the motion, and I hope that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who made a powerful speech, will press it to a Division. We should follow the US Secretary of State and call this behaviour what it really is. The suffering of the Yazidis at the hands of Daesh is compounded by their suffering at the hands of the Assad regime. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we focus only on Daesh, we do a great disservice to those who are fleeing the horror of the Assad regime, whose suffering should count just as much and should demand as much attention from this Government?

Stephen Twigg: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the Assad regime has unleashed appalling terror on its people. It is absolutely right to focus on it, as a number of us have made clear in previous debates. Before the debate on military intervention in Syria, I visited refugees in Jordan and heard at first hand the horror that they had experienced, usually at the hands of the Syrian regime, but sometimes at the hands of Daesh and their allies. Today’s motion is a focused one that we can all unite in supporting, but it does not detract in any way from the importance of continuing to highlight the abuses of the Assad regime.

On the question of whether this is a genocide, let us be clear that Daesh gives the Yazidis a choice—of forced conversion, death or exile. I think that that amounts to the destruction of the foundations of the life of a group of people. United Nations international criminal tribunals have recognised sexual violence and sexual slavery, both of which we know are prevalent in Daesh’s actions towards the Yazidis, as part of a genocidal process.

I want to raise a specific point about the importance of documentation. An estimated 25 mass graves containing the mortal remains of Yazidis murdered by Daesh in August 2014 have now been discovered in Sinjar in northern Iraq. These graves are not adequately protected and are being disturbed by a variety of people, including—perfectly understandably—the relatives of the victims, as well as local people and sometimes journalists. However, there is a risk that the evidence, and therefore our ability to identify the victims of Daesh, will be compromised. Yazidi campaign groups have called for the protection of the graves and an analysis of the mortal remains that they contain. An international response on this matter is needed, but has not yet materialised.
[Stephen Twigg]

The US Holocaust Museum has recommended a genocide designation partly to raise public awareness because, as its says, “historical memory is a tool of prevention”.

The International Commission on Missing Persons is the leading organisation dedicated to addressing the issue of persons missing in the aftermath of armed conflict. In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, its Government set up a human rights ministry with a remit to consider the policy towards mass graves. Unfortunately, that ministry has been dissolved. It is clear to me that it is the ICMP that should respond to the challenge in Sinjar of identifying the victims and examining the mass graves forensically in order to preserve evidence, and I would be grateful if the Minister addressed that issue. The UK has a good track record of working with the ICMP, for example in Bosnia. Will the Government undertake to work with the ICMP and the Iraqi Government to help to protect these mass graves? It is crucial that these crimes are properly documented, especially if the motion succeeds and a referral for genocide is made to the United Nations. It is important to the families of the victims that those victims are identified as accurately as possible.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): For years, I collected evidence of Iraqi war crimes for an organisation called Indict. I was therefore involved with some of the mass graves in Iraq, many thousands of which still remain unexcavated because of security threats. I fully support my hon. Friend’s points. It is important to protect the mass graves because of the evidence contained therein.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to her decades of work on this crucial issue.

As part of our duty to recognise the genocide, we should prioritise protecting the evidence that will help us to bring those who are guilty of genocide to justice and to dignify the victims of these awful crimes. I support the motion and believe that the hon. Member for Congleton made a powerful case for why the House should urge the Government to refer the matter to the UN. I understand the Government’s position—I raised the matter with the Prime Minister a few weeks ago—but the way in which we recognise genocide is different from that of the Americans. The hon. Lady has come up with an intelligent and, if I may say so, ingenious way of ensuring that we get a positive response from the Government. Today’s debate also provides an opportunity for the House to send out a very powerful message on a cross-party basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) reminded us that every year in January we commemorate the Nazi holocaust. We have Holocaust Memorial Day because the message to our own Government, and also to Daesh and the wider international community, that we recognise this as genocide and want action to be taken against the perpetrators of that genocide.

3 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I support the motion and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this welcome debate.

It is profoundly disturbing that people in Iraq and Syria are being attacked for belonging to different religious and ethnic groups. Daesh has assassinated church leaders, committed torture, kidnapping, mass murders, sexual abuse and systematic rape, and brought about the sexual enslavement of women and girls. Daesh’s official propaganda videos and newspapers document its specific intent to destroy Christian and Yazidi groups in Syria and Iraq. Yesterday evening I attended a meeting at which I heard about the many cases that have been mentioned today by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), as well as about the use of former public buildings to imprison girls as young as nine, as well as women, for the purpose of systematic rape and to satisfy sexual lust.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the women and girls who are abducted and then escape face stigma and discrimination when they return? Does he agree that those women and girls are victims, and that they should be given all the help and support that they need and deserve so that they can move on in life? We should also bring the perpetrators to justice.

Derek Thomas: I was left with that very thought after yesterday evening’s meeting—how can these girls and young women rebuild their lives and somehow find a place in society in which they can lead full and enriched lives? Considerable work is needed to support them.

The United Kingdom has a rich tradition of helping and advocating on behalf of the world’s most vulnerable people. Whenever a crisis or disaster occurs, the UK Government and the British people are quick to respond and lead the charge, providing humanitarian aid and financial assistance. Why is it, then, that despite being one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and having the responsibility of our unique role in the international community, we have been slow, and appear reluctant, to trigger the legal mechanisms in the international judicial system? The legal designation of genocide on the part of Daesh relies first on action by the UN Security Council and having the responsibility of State John Kerry, the United States House of Representatives, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have
already described ISIS atrocities as “genocide”. It is time that the UK joined those countries in politically recognising the atrocities as such.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making good points. Does he agree that the principle of universal jurisdiction should apply to crimes against humanity that are so heinous that all states should take some responsibility?

Derek Thomas: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Last November, I supported military action in Syria because our armed forces are able to reduce the capability and advance of Daesh, and the evil that it espouses. The debate on the day was about not just military action in Syria, but achieving a political solution in that area of the middle east. Surely recognising the behaviour of Daesh against minority groups—it is well documented and not disputed—as genocide is an important part of such a political solution.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): People talk about reconstruction, but should not part of that reconstruction involve the rehabilitation of these women, and some form of compensation for them and their families? As we heard earlier, in some communities, the stigma is there for a lifetime and cannot be got rid of. That applies particularly to Christians, who have been persecuted not only by Daesh, but in North Korea and other parts of the world.

Derek Thomas: The great challenge facing the international community is the question of how, once we have achieved peace in Syria and Iraq, we can secure it so that people can rebuild their own countries. I suspect that many people will never be able to move back to their countries simply because of their memories of the horrors that they have experienced. We as an international community must do all that we can to support those people, wherever they may end up rebuilding their lives.

The British people are horrified by what they hear and see regarding the treatment of these minority groups in Syria and Iraq, and they rightly expect the House of Commons to use whatever tools are available to work to bring that to an end and to achieve peace in this troubled part of the world. A tool that is available to us is a recognition of these evil acts as genocide, and our position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to enable the situation to be investigated by the International Criminal Court. People are being brutalised, and not disputed—as genocide is an important part of such a political solution.

It is difficult to deny that what is going on meets the tests for genocide. Of course the bar is set high, and rightly so, but large numbers of Yazidis, Christians and Shī’ā Muslims have been killed. It is clear—this point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—that that meets the test set out in the convention on the prevention and punishment of genocide, as it is action committed “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

It is clear that that is what Daesh is seeking to do.

I think that Pope Francis was right when, last year, he described the killing of Christians in the middle east as genocide. As we have heard, the United States Secretary of State and the US Congress have recognised what is happening as genocide—last month, I think—and we should do so as well. We understand that the Government are likely to argue that it is for the judiciary, not Parliament, to make such a determination, but it is not clear to me—perhaps the Minister will be able to explain—what trigger for judicial action could lead to the view, which I think we all share, that genocide is under way. I hope very much that the House will agree to the motion, so that the Government can make the reference for which the hon. Member for Congleton has argued.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My right hon. Friend has asked a very interesting question. We should bear in mind that it was the allies who set up the Nuremberg courts. Governments can, in fact, get together and do something.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, on her indefatigable work in this area, and on the way in which she opened the debate. I apologise for having missed the first few minutes of her speech. I am grateful to her for organising yesterday’s evidence session, to which every speaker so far has referred, and which included harrowing personal testimony about the horrors that Daesh is inflicting on people in Iraq and Syria whose religious outlook and faith are different from Daesh’s.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not clear to me how this can happen in the United Kingdom if the Government do not act. Last night we heard from a young woman, who has been referred to already, who had seen her father and brothers killed simply for being Yazidis. She herself had been raped and enslaved. She made it very clear in her evidence that what was going on was genocide, of Yazidis and also of Christians—she made it clear that Christians were included in the genocide—and as US Secretary of State John Kerry pointed out, it is certainly the case that Shī’ā Muslims have been victims of genocide as well.

Rehman Chishti: The right hon. Gentleman says that Shī’ā Muslims have also been killed by Daesh. Does he agree that Daesh itself has no religion, in that it kills Muslims who stand in the way of its warped ideology? Whatever a person’s faith, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, if they stand against Daesh, they will be killed.

Stephen Timms: I think the hon. Gentleman is right, but it is clear that Shī’ā Muslims have been singled out. For example, in a prison just north of Mosul, nearly 600 were picked out from the rest of the inmates because they were Turkmen Shī’ā Muslims, and were machine-gunned one by one. I hope that we can make a clear statement today that this is genocide, both to express solidarity with Yazidis, Christians and Shī’ā Muslims who are the victims of this horrifying brutality, and to make clear our determination to ensure that those responsible face prosecution and a just punishment for what they have done.

I want to make some observations on how we can deal with the commitment to religious freedom that we all espouse. I recognise and pay tribute to the work of past and present Ministers on this, but we should be doing more. Others are doing more, and we should as
[Stephen Timms]

well. I commend to the Minister an idea that was in the last Labour party election manifesto: the Government should appoint a global envoy for religious freedom, who would report directly to the Prime Minister, and establish within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office a multi-faith advisory council on religious freedom. That would be an important way for us to acknowledge and publicly commit to the importance of British influence being wielded on this front, through the work of Ministers and the Foreign Office around the world.

The Canadian Government deserve credit for establishing an Office of Religious Freedom. It has had a positive impact, but I am sorry to hear that it is now being wound down. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom was established a long time ago, in 1998, and it is an attractive model, with commissioners appointed by the President and by the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Last December, the commission called for the US Government to designate the Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen and Shabak communities in Iraq and Syria as victims of genocide by ISIL.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very good case. I entirely support the motion, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. It is clear that ISIS is using rape as a strategic weapon of war. It is being used not only as a form of ethnic cleansing but as an unthinkable form of forced conversion. One victim recounted being shown an officially headed ISIS letter stating that any captured woman would become a Muslim if 10 ISIS fighters raped her. Will the right hon. Gentleman support my call to the Government today to assemble a specific unit to support local health and criminal justice teams in gathering evidence, so that these appalling crimes do not go unpunished?

Stephen Timms: I gladly support the hon. Lady’s call. The legislation in the US that created the Commission on International Religious Freedom also mandated the State Department to prepare an annual report on international religious freedom. The last one was published just a year ago, and I imagine that we are about to see the next one in two or three weeks’ time. This means that the US Congress and Government have a serious and consistent deployment of effort to wield influence in favour of religious freedom around the world. We do that in a much more ad-hoc way; we should do it in the much more consistent way that the US example demonstrates.

I hope that the House will be united this afternoon in supporting the call by the hon. Member for Congleton for the Government to recognise what is happening to Yazidis, Christians and Shi’a Muslims in Iraq and Syria as genocide. I hope that we will be able to build on this, and that the Government will make a consistent commitment to religious freedom around the world.

3.14 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her great courage and compassion, and for taking such a strong lead in this debate. I rise to support the motion calling on the Government to recognise the appalling acts by Daesh against the Yazidis, Christians and others as genocide. It bears repeating that genocide is defined as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

Have we seen evidence of such intent? Yes, indisputably, in the kidnapping of women and girls; in torture, rape and sexual enslavement; in beheadings, crucifixions and mass graves; in the assassination of Church leaders and the desecration and destruction of churches, cemeteries and artefacts; and in the enforced conversions and the driving of people from their lands. We should remember the plight of the 40,000 Yazidis trapped on a mountainside in 2014, and the airdrops made to save them from certain death.

Yesterday, I heard first-hand testimony in this place from a very brave, scarred young woman who had escaped her captors. However, testimony comes not just from victims but through the self-proclamation of the perpetrators in thought, word and deed. How do they plead to the charge of the murder and subjugation of Yazidis and Christians? They claim credit.

This Government are committed to upholding human rights, supporting projects the world over and dedicating millions in funding to that end. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. I understand that what stands in the way of us formally calling Daesh’s atrocities genocide is the question of legal standing. The term “genocide” is a legal definition and can seemingly be determined only by the International Criminal Court. So what can we do? We can call for evidence to be formally collected. We can call this in by referring the matter to the United Nations, so that it can give jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court. Daesh is indiscriminate in who it hurts, but it reserves particular cruelties for Yazidis, Christians and other minority ethnic groups. How best can we support those groups of persecuted people at this moment? We can call their suffering what it is: genocide.

3.17 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I was particularly struck by the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). If we do appoint a global envoy, may I suggest that my right hon. Friend’s name be put forward? He held a similar position under Tony Blair, and I can think of no one better qualified. Much praise has already been given to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and we should place on record the fact that in the short time she has been in the House, she has won for herself a reputation for great courage and determination as a defender of the weak, the poor and the defenceless. She has earned a great reputation, and she has done an enormous amount of good on these matters. She is ably followed by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in that regard. It is an honour to be speaking in a debate instigated by the hon. Lady. I am also glad to see two of the more humane Government Ministers on the Treasury Bench today. I am confident that they will respond in a way that reflects the emotion that is being felt right across the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Congleton listed the litany of horrors that we have heard, both last night and on so many other occasions. It seems almost otiose to repeat...
them, but I shall recount one chilling and almost unbelievably brutal incident. A group of captured young men were lined up and made to strip to the waist and hold their arms up. Those who had no hair under their arms were considered young enough to be taken away, indoctrinated and turned into bombers or jihadists; those who showed signs of puberty or maturity were shot. The fact that anyone can act with such callous, utterly brutal violence in this day and age is almost beyond belief. The fact that they do it in the name of a religion, the name of which means peace, is absolutely unforgivable, impossible to contemplate and utterly inexcusable.

To anyone out there who thinks that this ghastly, nihilist death cult can in any way triumph, may I say what a privilege it is to see the Palmyra arch being erected in Trafalgar Square as a physical demonstration of our commitment? Daesh can crush, destroy, kill, rape or maim, but it will never, ever win. It will not be allowed to win, because if it does, darkness will descend on the earth and we will be in a terrifying place.

The motion is extremely well crafted and beautifully phrased—I do not want to heap overmuch praise on the hon. Member for Congleton, because she is already embarrassed—and using the definition within it is incredibly important. We are quite rightly concentrating on the horrific circumstances of the Yazidis, but let us not forget that Daesh has probably killed more Muslims than people from any other religious or ethnic group. It does not in any way defend or protect its co-religionists; it slaughters indiscriminately.

Robert Flello: I gently take my hon. Friend to task for saying “indiscriminately”. Daesh does kill indiscriminately when it comes to some groups, but it absolutely discriminates when it comes to Christians and Yazidis, because it wants to exterminate them and completely eradicate them from the world.

Stephen Pound: My hon. Friend quite correctly takes me to task. I meant that Daesh’s slaughter was universal, but it does of course target some groups specifically.

At least one hon. Member present has been with me to northern Iraq, actually broken bread with members of the Assyrian Christian community, and seen the lives that they lived. Their lives were always difficult, but they were able to live and practise their faith in something approaching peace, even under the dark days of Saddam Hussein. To see those people now being hunted down, specifically discriminated against and slaughtered on the grounds of their faith is utterly chilling and terrifying. Is it not extraordinary how many of them refuse to recant or recuse, and how many say, “This is our faith”? In some cases, they die for that faith. That is extraordinary and testament to the courage that still exists. As for a specific genocide, the Jewish people are also being destroyed. The magnificent, huge Jewish community in Iraq that did so much for the country is being specifically hunted down and destroyed. We must never forget that whole groups of people are suffering.

This comes down to the word “genocide”. I have had so many debates on the Floor of the House about the Armenian genocide of 1915. I call it genocide, but I appreciate that the House chooses not to call the massacre of nearly 2 million Armenians a genocide because the word was not promulgated until 1948. In reality, however, we know it was genocide. To deny that recognition through the use of the word to a group of people who suffered that way is a double discrimination. It is a double death, in many ways. Let us call this what it is: this is genocide, and Daesh must not be allowed to triumph and win.

What can we do in this House? We must of course make the reference to the United Nations, but I want to speak beyond this House for a moment. We are not in a hermetically sealed bubble here; we are the sounding board of the nation. People are watching us and listening to us, and it is possible that somewhere in the dark places of our cities and towns there are people who are tempted by this death cult. There may be people who, as an excuse for their own inadequacies or some compensation for their failures, like the idea that they can go and die gloriously for this twisted philosophy. I want to speak to those outside this Chamber for a second. If anyone watching thinks that the great religion of Islam is calling them to go and slaughter children or unborn babies, to rape, to loot or to murder, read the holy Koran, the hadiths and the surahs. They will not find those words in the holy book. If anyone out there huddled in darkness actually feels tempted for a moment to leave this country, their city, or our community to go and kill before they die, please think. They have the gift of life at the present time. Hold that gift of life. It is too precious to throw away, as are the lives of others; their lives matter just as much.

Why are Christians, Muslims, Assyrian Christians, the Shabak, and Jews being persecuted in this way? What have they done to bring this Armageddon down on their heads? They have not in any way threatened forced conversions on people who subscribe to the ISIS-Daesh philosophy. This is a war of aggression that must be described by the one word—the only word—that describes it today: genocide. This House must speak to not just fellow legislators or the United Nations, but all those out there who are thinking about the issue, and who may be even remotely tempted to move into an area so dark, deep and desperate that only the worst and most serious word, one which describes the ultimate crime, accurately describes the full horror of what is happening to communities in Syria and Iraq. We all know what that word is. Let us be united in this House, and hopefully outside, and say that what is happening is genocide, and has to be recognised as such.

3.26 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I appreciate the contributions made by hon. Members so far, especially that of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who made a powerful case. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for allowing us to recognise in this debate that what we are seeing in parts of Syria and Iraq is the genocide of Yazidis, Christians and other religious minorities.

As we debate the nature of what is going on in Iraq and Syria, we must understand the nature of the organisation perpetrating the crimes. Daesh and its followers have a particular interpretation of Islam, which they use to attack those who do not subscribe to the same religion or interpretation of their religion, meaning that, in addition to the targeted persecution of Christians and Yazidis, Shi’ite Muslims are also killed and persecuted, as many Sunni Muslims.
When the Sinjar disaster happened, 200,000 Yazidis were driven from their homes, with 40,000 trapped on Mount Sinjar, where they faced either slaughter by Daesh if they came down or dehydration and death if they remained. The number of Christians in Syria has dropped from 2 million to 1 million, and their number in Iraq has dropped from 1.4 million to fewer than 260,000.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Like other Members, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing the debate. The figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) cites are very much an example of the fact that Christianity is dying in its cradle, which is why so many of our constituents who are fellow Christians have contacted us about this genocide. Does he agree?

Chris Green: Absolutely. This is why many people in Britain are leading the debate, because they recognise this to be a genocide, and I appreciate that many, if not all, Members in this Chamber agree with so many of the British people.

Daesh is creating what it would deem to be the caliphate, targeting those who do not fit into that vision. We have seen the systematic persecution, torture, enslavement, rape, kidnap and murder of a number of groups solely because of their religious identity. Daesh’s desire to establish a caliphate in the territory it holds is only a starting point; it is intending to draw many more Muslims from across the region, Europe and beyond. Clearly, Daesh is an expansionist organisation that has far greater territorial ambitions than to hold on to the land it currently has, and so, given the opportunity, it will take more land and subject more people to the systematic persecution and killing with which we have become familiar.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that this issue has many of the hallmarks of what we faced 75 years ago, in that Daesh is like National Socialism: it is not just a movement trying to take over one country; it is a movement trying to make a race and a belief dominant, and in doing so eliminate its opponents?

Chris Green: My hon. Friend is entirely right to speak of Daesh in this ideological way. People are getting caught up in this and are divorced from their humanity—the humanity they would have been raised with and that they see around them. More must be done to ensure that we tackle that extremism, be it online or from other sources.

The continued existence of Daesh means it will continue to be a draw and an inspiration if this caliphate does take hold and persist. To see that, we need only look at Libya, where Daesh-inspired terrorists kidnapped and beheaded 21 Coptic Christians—the anniversary of that was recently marked by a service in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft.

Genocide is fundamentally about committing acts with the intent to destroy, in part or in whole, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Although the classification of “genocide” is a matter of legal rather than political interpretation, for the international courts and the United Nations Security Council, this is not simply a debate about semantics. Furthermore, it is important for the British people, through their Government and the media, to understand what is going on in the middle east. Does the term “human rights violation” really fit what we see happening to Christians in the region? Can the systematic and targeted attacks on the Yazidis really be understood by referring to them as one of a number of middle eastern “humanitarian crises”?

The UK is playing a leading role in a global coalition of 66 countries and international organisations responding to Daesh’s inhumanity, but I join the voices of many in this House by asking the Government to make a referral to the UN Security Council. A referral from the Security Council is the only means by which the International Criminal Court can investigate and prosecute these acts of genocide. Genocide is understood by most to be the gravest crime against humanity, and this is what is being perpetrated by Daesh. We have a responsibility as a democratic nation to apply pressure to the international judicial bodies.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): In an impressive speech, the hon. Gentleman has, like other Members, used the word “genocide” to describe the treatment of Christians and Yazidis. Does he think it would be helpful and possibly powerful if there were a vote on this motion, so that this House confirmed its definition of the treatment of the Christians and Yazidis as genocide?

Chris Green: I shall end by saying how much I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this House needs to have a vote so that we can make that point loud and clear.

3.34 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on a motion that is of supreme importance to me personally. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate and echo her thanks for the work done in the House of Lords in the past few years to bring this issue to the attention of the UK population and us in this place. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

I wanted to write a speech that would provide evidence that this was a genocide, but that has been covered by other Members, including the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Congleton. Therefore, I will focus my remarks on my experience and why this subject is so important to me, and why it is so important to us as a humanitarian country—a country that believes in human rights.

As a Member of Parliament, I have, over the past eight or nine months, travelled to Rojava, in Syria, to the Kurdistan Regional Government region of Iraq and to Turkey. I have been to the refugee camps of the Yazidi people: I have been to the Nowruz camp in Rojava and to refugee camps outside Batman and Diyarbakir in Turkey. I have spoken to many men, women and children—Yazidis and Alevis—who have been affected by the actions of Daesh. Their lives have been inexorably and demonstrably changed by what has
happened to them in their communities and in their countries. It is that experience that brings me here to the Chamber today to speak and to show how what is happening is genocide.

I was in Rojava for eight days. I met members of the organisation Yekitiya Star, to which other Members have referred, in which Kurdish women—Muslims, not Yazidi women—work with Yazidi women to try to bring back those women who have been abducted, raped and brutalised. They have experienced barbarism. Those women who have had these terrible experiences—the worst experiences—are ashamed to return to their communities because of what has happened to them. Children of nine and 10 have been raped and impregnated. They are victims of a brutal system that demeans religions and demeanes people. The system is about bringing them to account. Those women spoke powerfully to all of us who were there in Rojava. They told us that people from the Kurdish movement in Rojava were buying back women at auctions, using the resources of Rojava to bring women back from slavery. Sometimes they were found out. Sometimes Daesh worked out that they were trying to stop the enslavement by buying back the women inducting them. In such cases, those women disappeared. These are powerful stories of what is happening to women and men in that area.

I had a perfectly crafted speech to read out, but I have decided to speak freely. Yesterday, I listened to the testimony of Ekhlas, a 15-year-old who was abducted from her house. I will not paraphrase what she said, as I took down her words directly. I will read out her testimony, as her voice and the voice of the Yazidi and Alevi women deserve to be heard in this place. If anyone wants to intervene on me, could they do so now, as I will read out Ekhlas’s words.

“There was a knock at our door. We were targeted because our religion and belief is different from theirs, and our humanity is different from theirs, because we believe in the Angel Taus. In our religion, we do not believe in rape. We do not believe that innocents should be killed, or that a child should be cut up and his mother forced to eat him. My father and my two brothers were killed in front of me. They took me away from my mother. He grabbed my arm and my leg and then he raped me. He was 32 years old; I was 15. After they raped me, they took my friend and they raped her. I could hear her shouting. ‘Where is the mercy? Where is the mercy? There must be some mercy in their hearts.’ They killed the men and they took the girls. Any girls over the age of nine were raped—like me. What does a nine-year-old girl deserve to be heard in this place? If anyone wants to intervene on me, could they do so now, as I will read out Ekhlas’s words.

Because her body could not handle the brutality.

“We saw a two-year-old boy killed, then ground in to meat and fed to his mother who did not know what she was eating.”

Some younger girls were taken. She said:

“Some young girls were impregnated, and were only children. What are they going to do as pregnant children? There is so much brainwashing. Daesh tell you your religion and brainwash children.”

They arm them, and they

“put them in front of their own parents and demand that they kill them. Listen to me, I am begging you. Listen to me, listen to what I am telling. Help us. I beg of you. Listen to me. Help the girls who are still in captivity. Let us all stand hand-in-hand and take a stand. This is a genocide against Christians and Yazidis”—and others.

“This is about dignity, this is about humanity in dignity. If you are a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a human, do not close your ears. I plead with you, please listen.”

This is a genocide.

3.41 pm

Nusrat Ghanj (Wealden) (Con): That was a very moving speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate.

“We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.”

That is Daesh. For the members of this death cult, the destruction of a way of life, an ideology and a set of beliefs that is not theirs is both their ultimate and sole aim. Daesh is self-defining as a committer of genocide.

To achieve that, its members rape, enslave, and decapitate. Their victims are Muslims, Kurds, Yazidis and Christians.

The Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates that in Syria, approximately 470,000 people have been killed either directly or indirectly as a result of the five years of civil war. What is most shocking is that the United Nations has given up estimating the number, because the numbers are so vast that it cannot provide verifiable statistics. Whatever the number of those killed, millions more have been displaced and lost. Each cowardly act of death and destruction is just that—a cowardly act—but put together, these acts make up a reign of terror targeted at a specific group of people. This is the systematic murder—genocide—of the people who form these communities, the cultural heritage that has tied them together for generations and the values and beliefs that define them.

I heard first hand what Daesh do. I was lucky—or unlucky—enough to meet a young, brave Yazidi woman called Nadia Murad, in a meeting co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for which I give him credit. She had been taken by Daesh as a sex slave. Her race was justification enough for the horrific way in which she, her family and her community were mistreated and destroyed.

We failed to prevent genocide in Bosnia. In Germany, the Nazis were appeased while they targeted Jews. The death cult of misfits that we face now cannot be allowed to get away with this any longer. In Iraq and Syria, Daesh’s statements have taken credit for the mass murder and persecution of Christians and have shown its clear intent to purge Christian communities from the area it claims as its own. As a country, we show a weakness by failing to acknowledge the extent of the persecution against Yazidis, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities. We are failing the victims of deliberate and targeted persecution, where race, faith and gender are all the excuse that Daesh needs to find new and innocent targets for mass murder. If we do not recognise these acts as genocide, we effectively declare that we are not willing to take all action necessary to bring it to an end and to bring the perpetrators to justice, as they deserve.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): A week after the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) brought Nadia Murad to the House of Commons, I was fortunate enough to bring her to the Public Gallery here. In fact, she went up there with my wife who, incidentally, is the daughter of holocaust survivors. Afterwards, as I am sure the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber will agree, Nadia was so grateful.
I could not understand why she was so grateful to us, but I think it was because she had faith in this House. She genuinely believed that we would act to help her and her people. She was not one of our jaded constituents. She thought that this House meant something, and that we would do something to help her and her people.

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend is right. As the oldest democracy in the world, we have a responsibility to Nadia Murad also.

We would be complicit in overlooking the scale of criminality that is ongoing and largely unpunished. That is not a position that a country steadfast in its commitment to fairness, freedom and justice should be relaxed about. The UN Security Council’s declaring these acts to be genocide is key to preventing the spread of terrorism and radicalisation, and it allows an international criminal tribunal to be set up to try the terrorists who are committing these heinous acts and to bring them to true justice. That is why I support the motion.

On 12 April, when the Minister was challenged on the issue, he said:

“I too believe that acts of genocide have taken place”…—[Official Report, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165.]

I hope we can move on from that statement today.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. I was present when the Minister gave that response. Does my hon. Friend hope, as I do, that this afternoon the whole House will be given the opportunity to send a powerful message by voting and being united in that vote, and inviting Ministers and Parliamentary Private Secretaries—those on the payroll—to vote as well, to send a strong message that what is happening is genocide?

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a powerful statement. I, too, hope that is the case. Sending cross-party support today will also be a very strong message.

Previous generations have already struggled to explain Bosnia, Rwanda and the Nazi persecutions. Now it is our turn to decide whether we will have to explain to future generations what we did or did not do against the death cult Daesh. Historical memory can be a tool of prevention, but it is rare that society uses it in that way. Let us be the generation that does use it as a tool of prevention. The Nazis wrote history, the Bosnian Serbs wrote history, and Daesh is currently destroying and rewriting history all at once. Not satisfied with destroying the past and present of races, faiths and genders, it is destroying the future of those communities too. It is our collective job, as a member of the UN family of nations, to make sure that those communities are not just a blot of ink in the story of Daesh.

3.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). I agree with every word she said. We have had a fantastic debate today and, like her, I hope the Government will support the motion so that we can move forward and ensure that action is taken as a consequence of the debate.

Many hon. Members have already congratulated the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on tabling the motion. She is to be congratulated. We should be proud that we are debating a matter of such importance in the House today.

We have a moral responsibility to speak out against the crimes of genocide that have taken place against Christians, Yezidis and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. We should be exercising that responsibility today by passing the motion, which calls upon the UK Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council to grant the International Criminal Court the mandate to bring the perpetrators to justice.

As the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) recently reminded the House, the allied Governments made a joint statement on 17 December 1942 condemning genocide and committing themselves to bringing the Nazis to justice for their crimes. Just as we stood against genocide then and made sure that those responsible would face justice, we must show the required leadership today when faced with genocide in Syria and Iraq. The Government need to show leadership in pressing for recognition of the fact that genocide has taken place, and we must all reflect on why, on a moral, ethical and humanitarian basis, action must be taken.

Genocide is understood as the deliberate, systematic extermination of national, racial, political or cultural groups, and that is exactly what has been taking place. The ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria have seen the deliberate targeting of Yezidis, Christians and other minority groups. The Yezidi town of Sinjar was captured by Daesh in August 2014, and the seizure of the town and the surrounding districts unleashed the ethnic cleansing of the Yezidi people. A UN report tells us that 200,000 Yezidis were driven from their homes after the fall of Sinjar. At least 40,000 were trapped on Mount Sinjar; cut off by Daesh, these people were without food, water or shelter. As has been said, the choice for many was slaughter by Daesh if they fled or dehydration if they stayed.

The UN has estimated that 5,000 men were massacred and 7,000 women were enslaved in that action. The women captured by Daesh were sold into sexual slavery, and many were displaced throughout Daesh-controlled territory. As we have heard, the testimony of survivors of Yezidis and Christians—tells of the horrific and daily violence carried out against them, and that has been a deliberate policy on the part of Daesh.

Last night, as we have heard, a young Yezidi woman, Ekhlas, came to Parliament to tell her story. It was a most harrowing account of what had happened to her and her family—a graphic description of what has happened not only to her, but to thousands of other people in Syria and Iraq. Before Ekhlas spoke, she was introduced by a human rights lawyer, Jacqueline Isaac. Jacqueline spoke of the fear of the knock on the door by fighters from Daesh, which would lead to people being categorised into different groups, with murder, rape and hostage-taking commonplace. That is exactly what took place with the Nazis in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. That resulted in the UK Government signalling their intent in 1942 to bring the perpetrators to justice. If that was right in 1942, it is right in this House today, in 2016.

When we close this debate, I hope that the House and the Government will unite in supporting the motion, and that we can do the right thing for the Yezidis, Christians and other minorities who have suffered the wholesale removal of their communities from the region.
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he agree that although these minorities are being persecuted because of their religion, the debate should not be about advocating one religion or another? This is about the basic human right for all of us to pursue any faith we choose or none. Does he recognise that there are many people of different faiths in the House, but that there are also people of no faith, who will defend to the bitter end the right of others to exercise their faith and to do so without persecution?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which has not been made so far. As a practising Christian, I am happy to accept everyone’s right to express their religion, whatever it is, or none at all. It is important that in this Chamber today we stand up for everybody.

When Ekhlas closed her submission last night, she implored us to help—she said, “I’m asking for help.” Our responsibility to Ekhlas and everybody else means that we must heed that plea. What will we do for Ekhlas? We must stand up and support the call for the UN Security Council to confer jurisdiction on the International Criminal Court so that we can take action.

The peshmerga attacked the place where Ekhlas was being held, and she managed to escape, before being rescued by Yazidis. This brave young woman, who has faced so much and witnessed such utter horrors, wants to become a lawyer and to fight for women’s rights. Maybe, just maybe, if she fulfils that ambition, she can play her part in the legal team that brings her persecutors to justice. We must help her and those like her who have suffered from the genocide.

The situation in Syria and Iraq is catastrophic and has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises we have ever witnessed. ADF International says that the number of Christians in Syria has fallen from 2 million in 2011 to 1 million in 2015. The number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4 million to 260,000.

Daesh has documented in its official propaganda its specific intention to destroy Christian groups in Syria and Iraq. In February 2015, Daesh seized 35 Assyrian Christian villages and kidnapped more than 300 Christians, with more than 1,200 fleeing to safety. Thirty-five villages were cleared and deserted in that one act alone.

The atrocities satisfy the criteria established in the convention on genocide. Recognising that genocide has taken place and signalling that those responsible will face justice is an important tool in the fight to defeat Daesh. We need to send a clear message to all the minorities that are being attacked that we are not going to abandon them. We and other nations must stand shoulder to shoulder at the United Nations and show our resolve.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I agree with my hon. Friend that the perpetrators of this genocide should be brought to justice in the International Criminal Court. Does he agree that there also needs to be an international effort to find the Yazidi women captured by Daesh?

Ian Blackford: I fully agree. The young woman we met last night is a perfect example of that: the actions of the peshmerga managed to free her and she got into the safe hands of the Yazidis. We need to support the peshmerga and other like-minded people to make sure that we can get to safety the women and men captured by Daesh.

I hope that when the Minister sums up the debate, he makes it clear that the Government support the motion. Others have already taken a similar step. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised genocide in a resolution passed on 27 January. That was followed by a European Parliament resolution on 4 February, which recognised the crimes as genocide and sought a referral to the International Criminal Court. On 14 March, the US House of Representatives recognised the crimes against humanity and of genocide. Three days later, the US Secretary Of State announced that the US had determined that the Daesh actions against the Yazidis, Christians and other minorities constituted genocide.

Why have the UK Government been silent and why has no action been taken? The Foreign Secretary has said that the Government support the efforts of the International Criminal Court to end impunity for the most serious crimes of international concern by holding perpetrators to account, but the Court has to be enabled to do that, and the UN Security Council has to provide that enabling. We keep hearing about the importance of the UK’s membership of the Security Council, so today is the United Kingdom’s chance to show leadership and to take action—to stand up for Ekhlas and to respond to her plea for help for all those who have suffered. Are we going to do the right thing in 2016, just as we did in 1942, or are we just going to stand back, wring our hands and watch as Daesh reaps its bitter harvest?

The UK is a signatory to the convention on genocide. We have an obligation to recognise what has taken place. I hope and pray that this afternoon the House, collectively and united, does the right thing.
concentrated effort by Daesh not only to obliterate any minority presence, but to deny the cultural history of the territory that it seeks to occupy.

The number of Christians in Syria has halved, and in Iraq it has dropped from 1.4 million to just 240,000. Perhaps even more striking is that the historical settlement of 60,000 Christians in Mosul has entirely disappeared. Along with that, there has been a targeted destruction of sites, including St Elijah’s monastery, historic libraries and any representational art. Edicts have instructed Daesh troops to engage in the wholesale destruction of any non-Islamic sites of worship.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point, and Daesh’s ignorance and denial of the historical and cultural nature of the area is crucial. I studied the early caliphate, and in that period many leaders of the Muslim world described the classical world that they took over as a garden protected by their spears. Is it not tragic that Daesh’s perversion of Islam is so different from the vision set out by those early caliphs?

**David Warburton**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not only tragic but bizarre and unimaginable that Daesh has taken its own religion and turned it into something so distinctly different from what was intended.

**Robert Jenrick**: Last year I and several other Members persuaded the Government to create a £30 million cultural protection fund, and they are in the process of deciding the criteria for how that will be spent. Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the money should go to protect historic sites, churches and manuscripts for future generations?

**David Warburton**: I could not agree more. The cultural demolition is explicitly linked to the genocidal aims that we are discussing.

To say that Christians and Yazidis are victims of genocide is not to minimise the terrible suffering of others in the region. In a debate held on a similar motion in another place, Lord Bates was entirely right to point out that it is often Muslims who suffer the greatest brutality at the hands of Daesh. Over the past six months, the United States Congress, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the US Secretary of State have all declared that Daesh is committing genocide.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the bodies that have declared that genocide is being committed. Having heard from Daesh itself, and having been witness to so many young Yazidi women who come here to tell us their story, what more could it take for this House to form the view that this is genocide, and to have the courage to stand up and say so?

**David Warburton**: I agree with the hon. Lady, and the speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow East gave us an immensely powerful first-person perspective. I completely understand the Government’s approach, which is that a decision on whether the word “genocide” is applicable is for international judicial bodies, rather than Governments or other non-judicial bodies. However, as the open letter from a group of peers to the Prime Minister on 18 February stated, “there is nothing to prevent Her Majesty’s Government from forming and acting upon its own view”.

A vote for the motion would begin the process of a possible referral to the International Criminal Court from the UN Security Council. It would send a signal to the perpetrators that they will be brought to justice and it would, perhaps most crucially of all, act as a spur to the other 127 signatories to the 1948 convention to add their support. An émigré writer of a previous generation who fled persecution said: “Words without experience are meaningless.” The reverse is also true. When hundreds of thousands of people are suffering in such a way, we must apply the only word that is adequate for the job, and support this important motion.
given a “convert or die” ultimatum—that is genocide. Twenty-one Egyptian Christians were kidnapped in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte in two separate incidents in December 2014 and January 2015. In February 2015, they were beheaded on a Libyan beach in a chilling propaganda video produced by the self-declared Islamic State—that is genocide. After capturing the key strategic town of al-Baghdadi, which is just five miles from the al-Asad air base, Daesh rounded up 45 civilians from the town, some of whom were thought to be Iraqi security forces and their families, and burned them all alive—that is genocide.

On 10 June 2014, Daesh took some 600 male prisoners into the desert near Mosul in Iraq and initiated a mass execution. Approximately 30 men survived by rolling into the mass grave with the dead bodies. The pictures are absolutely chilling and call to mind terrifying memories of the worst genocide of the 20th century. A survivor recounts a Daesh leader saying:

“The Sunnis must stand on one side. The Shi’a, Kurds and Yazidis must stand on the other. If I find out that a Shi’a is among the Sunnis, I am going to cut off his head with a sheet of metal.”

Such words are spoken by those in Daesh who have a hatred for everyone who is not of their kind.

The men were interrogated about their beliefs, names, home towns and other details. Witnesses said that about 100 Shi’a prisoners were successful at pretending to be Sunni to escape further violence. The remaining Shi’a, Kurdish, Christian and Yazidi prisoners were then searched. Everything was taken from them: their money, their watches, their rings, their jewellery and their identity cards. One survivor said:

“The moment they made us give up all of our possessions, I knew they were going to kill us.”

The prisoners had been given no food or water for 24 hours, but Daesh militants promised them supplies as they drove deeper into the desert. When they arrived, the militants told them,

“you’ll have water in paradise.”

The militants then made the men kneel in a single line along the rim of a curved ravine six to 12 feet deep. They were asked to number themselves off, with each person forced to “raise his hand and say his number.”

Survivors said that many of the gunmen were young. Some appeared nervous, while others were excited, including some who joked at the end of the count, when they shot the prisoners, that they had “a nice-size head”, and some who said that they were going to “eat well tonight”. That is genocide.

Further documented incidents include the 1,700 captives executed in Tikrit in Iraq, the 650 people executed in Mosul in Iraq, the 1,000 Turks who were massacred, including some 100 children, and the more than 2,000 women and children who have been kidnapped. In the UN’s words, this is “systematic hunting of members of ethnic and religious groups”—that is genocide. Women have been raped and sold, and young boys have been executed. Girls have been enslaved for sexual abuse, and children have been recruited as suicide bombers. There are more than 1 million refugees, half of them children.

I am conscious of the time, but it might help the Minister—I hope it does—if I mention what has happened in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly asked the Attorney General for Northern Ireland for direction on

“whether the violence currently being perpetrated against Christians and other minority religious groups (notably Yazidis and members of certain Islamic communities) by Daesh...in territory controlled by them in Syria and Iraq constitutes genocide within the meaning of the December 9 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ‘the Genocide Convention’.”

He replied:

“If behaviour can be properly classified as genocide then a range of international law consequences ensue. The first of these consequences is the activation of the twofold undertaking by contracting parties contained in Article 1 of the Genocide Convention to prevent and to punish genocide. Article 1 reads as follows:

‘The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.’”

The day of reckoning for Daesh is here. The Attorney General for Northern Ireland has said:

“it seems to me that actual or potential victims of genocide have a right to truthful acknowledgement of their circumstances and that governments are under a corresponding duty to make such acknowledgements...I have no hesitation in saying that the violence perpetrated against these protected groups does constitute genocide.”

I hope that the Minister will keep in mind the words of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and what he has decreed in Northern Ireland because, legally, it might help the Minister to make a decision on this matter.

Amnesty International’s publication “Ethnic Cleansing on a Historic Scale: Islamic State’s Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq” details, with eyewitness testimony, several more Daesh atrocities in Iraq. At least 100 men and boys have been herded together and shot to death in Kocho. Scores of men and boys have been summarily executed in Qiniyeh. More than 50 men have been rounded up and shot dead near Jdali. The dead boys, the raped girls and the captive villagers gunned down for refusing to renounce their faith are the people who die every day at the hands of ISIS or Daesh.

This is not a horror movie—I wish it was. This is taking place just a plane flight away. It is time we called this what it is: it is systematic, it is calculated, and it is genocide.

4.13 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a great pleasure to take part in this extremely important debate. The Government must be in no doubt that if the motion passes on a vote, it cannot be ignored. Other Back-Bench motions come before the House, but this one is of the very highest seriousness and importance, and we will not let it be ignored. We will return to it again and again in this House until the Government properly make a justified referral to the Security Council.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—she has already received enormous tributes, and she should receive more. She is very much the voice of the voiceless and a champion of human dignity. It must be said that the same is true of the noble Lord Alton, who is watching in the Gallery. He has done sterling work in trying to encourage, cajole...
and entice the Government to do what is right in every sense. This is about being a voice. Indeed, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) made a passionate speech, not least by bringing to bear the voice of those with the harrowing experience of being the victim of the appalling actions of ISIS.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned the replica of the Palmyra arch, which hon. Members can see when they go up to Trafalgar Square. I had the privilege of seeing it unveiled. The head of antiquities from Syria made it clear that he was proud that we were able to stand in solidarity with the Syrians who have been the victims of appalling crimes. The replica of the Palmyra arch provides a declaration of that solidarity. Today, we are standing in solidarity by declaring that this is a genocide. However, he and the victims would want us to do more, and the motion will do more, because it has teeth and aims to ensure that there are legal obligations.

The hon. Gentleman said that the message of the Palmyra arch is that ISIS cannot win. The motion is about saying that it cannot win, that it needs to be held to account and that there must be justice. The head of UNESCO said that the destruction not only of the arch, but of churches, monasteries and shrines, which has affected many religious groups, is cultural genocide. These are war crimes and ISIS needs to be held to account. The Government have recognised that there needs to be an accountability mechanism for cultural destruction, which is why I look forward to the Queen’s Speech including the belated ratification of The Hague convention and its second protocol, the purpose of which is to show that there will be accountability for cultural destruction.

It would be extraordinary if we ratified The Hague convention and provided for accountability for cultural destruction, but did not ensure that there was accountability for acts of genocide. We need to ensure that the declaration that ISIS cannot win, which is being made in Trafalgar Square, is made again today by our passing the motion unanimously. We must also take action.

I will not repeat the examples that have been mentioned, but they make the clear case that there is a deliberate and ruthless targeting not only of culture, but of history and people, whether they be Yazidis, Christians or other religious groups. There is kidnapping and enslavement. A recent UN report stated that at least 3,500 people have been enslaved. Many people have been executed—this is on jihadist websites—with that chilling demand, “Convert or die.”

We are not simply acting in solidarity or making a position statement. It is important that we hold the Government to account, as is our duty as parliamentarians. What have the Government done over the many months in which this demand has been made? There was a concern that the Government’s response would have to be categorised as “walk on by”. I say that with sadness, but if one goes back to 16 December, the noble Baroness Anelay of St Johns gave a parliamentary answer in which she said:

“We are not submitting any evidence of possible genocide against Yazidis and Christians to international courts, nor have we been asked to.”

It would be extraordinary if our Government simply sat on their hands and did not make any referrals. There are obligations on the Government under the genocide convention to take a view and act upon it.

I welcome the fact that the Government have moved on since then. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who will respond to the debate, said this month:

“we are helping to gather evidence that could be used to hold Daesh to account appropriately.”

I ask him to confirm that the Government are doing that, and that they are referring evidence that comes forward to the Security Council.

How else could we categorise the Government’s response? In some ways, they are going around in circles. As we have heard, the Minister has stated:

“We as the Government are not the prosecutor, the judge or the jury. Such matters are determined first in the international courts and in the United Nations Security Council”.—[Official Report, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165.]

However, such matters are not determined by the courts first and then in the Security Council; the Security Council has a key role to play. The Minister gave himself a way through this. The Security Council can make a referral, and that is what the motion is about. The Government cannot simply defer to the international courts and go around in circles.

Many noble Lords and eminent Queen’s counsel wrote a letter to the Prime Minister making that very point, saying:

“there is nothing to prevent Her Majesty’s Government forming and acting upon its own view.”

The Government have decided not to take a view for policy reasons—I do not understand exactly why—unlike other Governments and authorities. They could ensure that there was a referral through the Security Council mechanism, as a permanent member. I therefore repeat the question of those eminent Lords and QCs: why will the Government not “reconsider its position and...clarify why it operates a policy of refusing to recognize acts of genocide, when so many other nations do not?”

That is the first question, but we cannot leave it at that. The Government have to ask themselves—the Minister has to explain—why they are not making proper plans and using their means to go to the Security Council to ensure that there is a referral to the International Criminal Court. Is the concern not necessarily about the evidence of genocide, but the legal consequences? Is it the concern, which was mentioned earlier, that this will, quite properly, have implications for victims, who at long last would have the assurance that there will be justice and that, if it can be achieved, they will see the perpetrators held to account before a court? Those people would also, importantly, have the opportunity to be recognised as victims so that there could be reparation and restoration—not in a digital form, as with the Palmyra arch, but in a real form for their lives that have been seriously damaged. There are also implications of settlement and safety for refugees, particularly from religious minorities, who are struggling to find proper routes of safe passage. Is that the Government’s concern? Please assuage my fears and say that it is not.
Today we are making a declaration of solidarity. We are all saying to the Government that they must hold ISIL to account for the gravest of grave crimes, namely genocide. Be assured that we will not let the Government ignore the motion. They must take action for the good of all the groups we have mentioned, and the good of the whole civilised world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I would rather not restrain this important and sombre debate, but I now have to reduce the time limit for speeches to five minutes.

4.21 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Like others, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Cynon (Nick Smith), and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes). This is a vital motion and an important moment for the Minister. We want no more weasel words; we want him to accept this motion; we want it to be committed against the Yazidi people? 4.26 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree with all of that, and I want to follow on directly from the speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes). This is a vital motion and an important moment for the Minister. We want no more weasel words; we want him to accept this motion; we want him to accept what this motion calls for in clear and explicit terms, which is for the Government “to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court.”

The Government’s attitude up to now has, I agree, been based on precedent, but I do not believe that precedent is enough in this case, given the horrors that are going on in the world. I would be delighted if the Minister—he can intervene now if he wants—accepted the motion on behalf of the Government. If he does, we have already won this debate, but there is absolutely no point in the Minister using his time to condemn Daesh, and mention all of that, and I want to follow on directly from the speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate, referred to the circularity of the argument—“the Government think it is for the court to take the initiative and that it is inappropriate for the British Government to take action.”

Mr Burrowes: There is one person who is waiting, and who says that he is there, ready to play his full part according to the proper statute: the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. He is waiting for a referral from the Security Council so that he can investigate properly and independently and hold these people to account.
Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. I see in his place the Minister, who is listening to what we are all saying. I know that he is about to deliver a strong and powerful speech. I know that he will not just condemn Daesh, but say “Yes, we have listened to the debate in the House of Commons, and we will act by making a referral to the Security Council.”

Let us look at the facts and the pure legal argument, which has nothing to do with the motion. The criteria set forth in the 1948 convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide are absolutely clear. The crime is defined as acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

The convention then lists five qualifying conditions:

“(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

It is clear—it is blatantly obvious—that conditions (a), (b) and (c) are in effect, and that those things are going on in the areas under Daesh’s control. It is vital to recall that even if just one of those conditions is met, the declaring of acts as genocidal is allowed. On the basis of the clear legal criteria, there is absolutely no doubt that genocide is being committed. It is therefore the duty of Her Majesty’s Government, in terms of humanity and not just in terms of legal arguments, to do their duty now, to stop prevaricating, to accept the motion, and to refer this to the Security Council.

It would be intolerable for the Government to whip against the motion and force members of the payroll to vote against their own consciences, or abstain. It would also be intolerable if the Government, by some sleight of hand, allowed the motion to be agreed to, and then said that it was not binding on them. If the motion is agreed to—I sincerely hope that the Minister will not speak against it, and that it will not be whipped against—the House of Commons will have spoken, and the Government should act.

So many powerful speeches have been made, but the most powerful of all was by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry). Why was it so moving? Why was it so powerful? Because it consisted of the explicit personal experience of someone who talked about girls of nine being raped and killed by this murderous cult.

I myself have visited the area. Of all the Christian villages that I visited, 19 have been taken over by Daesh, and only one remains. We visited the tomb of the Prophet Nahum, and we saw what he had written:

“Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them”,

and

“The gates of your land are wide open to your foes.”

Enough is enough. I call on the Government to act.

4.32 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I had not intended to speak in the debate, because, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the speeches have been so powerful, so poignant and so compelling that I felt that I could not add very much. For many years, however, I gathered evidence of Iraqi war crimes, and in the Chamber, week after week, I argued for the prosecution of those who had committed human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, and genocide. I am happy to support the motion today, because the case has been made over and over again.

In September 2014, I raised the case of Yazidis in the Chamber, and in the same month, I tabled an early-day motion calling for action, which stated

“That this House is extremely concerned about the genocidal campaign being waged against minorities in Iraq” by ISIS,

“and notes with alarm the evidence recently collected by Amnesty International about its brutal campaign to obliterate all trace of non-Arabs and non-Sunni Muslims that has turned the area into blood-soaked killing fields; is shocked by the barbaric treatment of Yazidi”—

and so on.

I met many Yazidis in northern Iraq after some of the peshmerga and campaigners for human rights there had rescued some of those women by buying them on the open market. They then called for additional assistance from us. We have given humanitarian assistance, but I think that we could have done much more. Many tears have been shed about the Yazidis, but I should have liked to have seen much more practical help given to the peshmerga to assist in the liberation of those thousands of women. Thousands of Yazidi women are still being held captive; we should be aware of that, and we should be ready to give whatever assistance we can.

I want to stress again the importance of collecting evidence. The Minister has said that questions of genocide “are determined first in the international courts and in the United Nations Security Council, but we are helping to gather evidence that could be used to hold Daesh to account.”—[Official Report, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 165WH.]

I hope that he will tell us exactly how we are collecting that evidence. When I was chair of Indict, that organisation collected evidence over a seven-year period, and we were not assisted by the Government of the time. We had money from the Americans and from the Kuwaitis, but we had to do the work ourselves. When Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid were eventually brought to justice, that was done using some of the evidence that we had collected.

I would be grateful if the Minister would be very precise about the way in which we are assisting in collecting evidence today, because that will be extremely important. It was important in the case of the Iraqis that culminated in Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid being convicted of the crime of genocide. I hope that the House will support the motion today, and I hope that it will be put to a vote, because it is essential that we make it clear that this is the view of the House of Commons, and that there is no more delay.

4.36 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am proud to be a signatory to the motion, which was so ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), to whom tributes have rightly been paid. I would also like to pay tribute to those Members of the
I want to finish by referring to the words of my constituent Major General Tim Cross, who said when giving evidence in the other place recently:

“There can be no doubt that genocide is being carried out on Yazidi and Christian communities—and the West/international community’s failure to recognise what is happening will be to our collective shame in years to come”.

I hope that the Government will listen to the collective words of this House and the other place and act on the behalf of the British people against the appalling genocide of our fellow Christians and so many others.

4.42 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In 1994, I was living a few hundred miles away from where nearly a million people were killed over the course of three months in a genocide in Rwanda. Both before the genocide and during it, the international community was too slow to act and too slow to recognise that crime against humanity. As a result, more people died than was necessary. This is another such occasion on which we have heard the evidence and need to say quite categorically that it is genocide. We should recognise that now. If not now, when?

4.42 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on bringing this important debate to the Floor of the House. Judging by the contributions that we have heard this afternoon, no one can be in any doubt whatsoever that this House believes that what has happened to the Christian and Yazidi communities of northern Iraq and Syria is genocide. What Daesh has been involved in is genocide, and we should not shy away from describing it as exactly that.

There have been some excellent contributions. I do not have time to highlight every one of them, but I want to point out one or two. It was welcome that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), Chair of the International Development Committee, brought his considerable intellectual weight to the debate. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) gave a compelling case for the situation to be called a genocide. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) told the Government that under no circumstances will the matter be allowed to be brushed under the carpet, forgotten or ignored. I was also extremely moved by the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry), who presented a personal and moving testimony. I heard that testimony for the first time last night, but it was equally moving to hear it again this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) drew a parallel between what happened in Germany and Europe in the 1940s and what we are currently witnessing in Syria and Iraq.

Much of the debate has been harrowing and, at times, difficult to listen to, but it is important that the voices are heard. If we do nothing else, we owe it to the victims of Daesh’s barbarism and to those who have been subject to a level of depravity that sometimes defies comprehension that we hear what they have to say and listen when they call for help.
What are these people asking of us? It is simply that the Government of the United Kingdom recognise that what has happened to them is genocide and refer their case to the UN Security Council, so that the International Criminal Court can bring those who perpetrated these awful crimes to justice. That is not too much to ask. All the evidence is there to show that what is happening in the areas of Iraq and Syria that are under Daesh control is indeed genocide. Genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity often tend to be put into one basket, and sometimes there is a reluctance on the part of government to recognise that genocide is taking place, but I argue that we have not only a legal obligation, but a moral obligation to say that this is genocide. When we recognise in this way that these atrocities are being committed, we will be in esteemed company; the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the United States Congress, US Secretary of State John Kerry and His Holiness Pope Francis have all recognised that this is genocide, and it is time we added our voice to that list—it is the very least we can do.

Genocide is a crime directed against a specific group of people because of what they are as an entity. The murders that inevitably follow are directed against people not because of who they are as individuals but simply because they are members of a group or a community. Genocide is not spontaneous—it is calculated, organised and planned. Genocide requires an intent to bring about the destruction of a group of people because of who they are or what they believe. That intent to destroy distinguishes genocide from other crimes. There can be no doubt that Daesh’s treatment of Christian and Yazidi minorities, and other religious minorities in Syria and Iraq, meets that criteria, as Daesh set out with the intent to destroy any culture or religion that differed from theirs.

In the summer of 2014, Daesh seized the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Almost the entire Christian community fled for their lives, meaning that for the first time in 1,800 years no Sunday mass was said in the city. As they fled, the Patriarch of Baghdad told the world: “Christians have fled their villages. They are walking on foot in Iraq’s searing summer heat. They are facing catastrophe and a real genocide”.

As we heard, the overall fall in the number of Christians living in Iraq is alarming. In 2003, there were a reported 1.5 million there but today there are barely 250,000, and the situation is similar in Syria. All of this is part of a deliberate, strategic campaign of fear designed to completely annihilate minority religious groups from the middle east.

Like my friend the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I had the fortune and privilege earlier this year of meeting a remarkable young Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad. We met because a constituent of mine, Fiona Bennett from Oban, had been up late one night with her child who would not sleep. She turned her radio on and was moved by the story she heard. It was a story of a teenage girl from northern Iraq who had been kidnapped by Daesh. Fiona was so moved by what she heard that she decided to do something about it. She raised awareness of the plight of the Yazidis, raised funds locally and contacted me, as her Member of Parliament. Together with others in this House, we organised for Nadia to come to the United Kingdom in February. I know that Members of both Houses attended that meeting and were all incredibly moved by her first-hand testimony. It was a harrowing listen and, if I may, I would like to share a few sentences from what she told us:

Nadia said:

“We, the women and children, were taken by bus from the school... They humiliated us along the way and forced us in a shameful way. They took me to Mosul with more than 150 other Yazidi families. There were thousands of families in a building there, including children who were given away as gifts. One of the men came up to me. He wanted to take me. I looked down at the floor. I was absolutely terrified. When I looked up, I saw a huge man. He was like a monster. I cried out that I was too young... He kicked and beat me. A few minutes later, another man came up to me. I was still looking at the floor. I saw that he was a little smaller. I begged for him to take me. I was terrified afraid of the first man. The man who took me asked me to change my religion. I refused. One day, he came and asked me for my hand in what they called ‘marriage’. A few days later, this man forced me to get dressed and put on my makeup. Then, on that terrible night, he did it. He forced me to serve in his military company. He humiliated me daily. He forced me to wear clothes that barely covered my body... That night he beat me. He asked me to take off my clothes. He put me in a room with guards, who proceeded to commit their crime until I fainted.”

Tragically, as we have heard in this place, Nadia’s story is far from unique. I, too, was there when Ekhlas gave her awful testimony last night.

Genocide is a deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political or cultural group. By any measure, what Daesh has been doing to the Christian and Yazidi minorities in Iraq and Syria is genocide. I urge the Minister to listen to the voice of the people, to listen to the voice of this House, to remember the barbarity suffered by the Christians and the Yazidis, and to declare that this is a genocide. Then we can start the process of bringing the perpetrators to justice.

4.51 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):

Let me start by congratulating the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing today’s debate, and on all they have done to raise this issue inside and outside the House.

I also personally thank the hon. Member for Congleton for arranging last night’s evidence session. Listening to the very harrowing testimony of Ekhlas touched all Members who were present. I also pay tribute to those Members in the other place who have been raising this issue for some time, including my noble Friend the Baroness Kennedy, who has led on the matter. There have been many excellent contributions in today’s debate from both sides of the House. It appears that the House is united in its view about what the Government should do next.

I want to start by saying something about the nature of the crimes against the Yazidis and others. As we have heard from many Members across the House, Daesh has perpetrated the most heinous of crimes against the Yazidis as well as against other ethnic and religious
minorities, including Syrian Christians and various non-Sunni people in the area of northern Iraq that they currently control.

The crimes include mass murder, torture, enslavement and unimaginable sexual violence including systematic rape, often of children. Just returning to what Ekhlas said in her testimony yesterday, the thing that will stay with me is hearing about that nine-year-old girl who was repeatedly gang-raped. When her body could not take the brutality of the assaults any more, she was murdered in the most horrific of circumstances. These are crimes that most of us will struggle to comprehend. As we have heard today, these are not crimes that are being randomly perpetrated; they are organised crimes, deliberately targeted at particular ethnic and religious groups. Amnesty International has described these acts as ethnic cleansing on an historic scale.

Many Members have referred to the first-hand testimonies that they have heard from survivors and from those who have worked directly with survivors. I pay tribute to the unbelievable bravery of all the survivors who have spoken out to alert the world to the plight of the Yazidi population. Meeting survivors has really brought it home to me that this is not some historic event; it is an ongoing atrocity affecting thousands of people. The plight of those affected is highlighted by this quote from Mirze Ezdin, who had 45 relatives—all women and children—abducted by Daesh fighters. He described to Amnesty International the daily hell that this situation has wrought. He said:

“Can you imagine these little ones in the hands of these criminals? Alina is barely three; she was abducted with her mother and her nine-month-old sister; and Rosalinda, five, was abducted with her mother and her three brothers aged eight to 12. We get news from some of them, but others are missing and we don’t know if they are alive or dead or what has happened to them.”

Mirze’s case is far from unique, which is why today’s debate is so important.

I now want to comment on the specific definition of genocide. Although there is no doubt that the crimes that Daesh has committed are horrendous, the motion asks us to consider whether they reach the threshold of genocide. Genocide is not a term we use often; it is one that we reserve for the most heinous crimes and it has a specific meaning. For a set of crimes to constitute a genocide, they must include the killing or serious harm, including sexual harm, of a group of people who have a specific ethnic, religious or racial characteristic. Labour has consistently argued that the crimes committed by Daesh appear to reach that threshold, so it is right for the UK to refer the matter to the UN Security Council for final determination by the ICC.

I am therefore pleased to say that we will be supporting the motion this evening. If this House passes the motion, as I hope we will, it will be an historic moment. I have not been able to find another instance of the House of Commons formally recognising an ongoing conflict as genocide. As we have heard, similar motions have been already passed in the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament. In March, a UN panel concluded that Daesh might have reached the threshold, and the US Government announced that they considered the actions of Daesh to constitute a genocide—this is only the second time that they have recognised an ongoing conflict as a genocide.

Now I want to turn to the question of protection for the Yazidis. The designation of genocide is important, not just because we do it rarely but because it shows intent to end the atrocities and ensure that the perpetrators face justice. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on both of these points when he responds.

First, the Opposition seek an assurance that the Government will recognise the wishes of the House if this motion is passed this afternoon and will refer the matter to the Security Council for referral to the International Criminal Court. The Minister told the House last week that the UK was assisting in the collection of evidence, and of course we welcome that, but I should be grateful if he would lay out in more detail the nature of that technical support. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) raised this point. I would also be grateful for information on the issue of forensic investigative support and how that will be provided, which was also mentioned by the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg).

Secondly, I want to ask the Minister about the action the UK is taking to protect the Yazidis and other ethnic minority communities in Iraq. It is clear that all states have a duty to prevent genocide. Primarily, this responsibility sits with the state where the genocide is committed. Tragically, Iraq has failed to protect the Yazidis and other ethnic minority citizens, so it is right that the UK and other states should offer support to Iraq in the fight against Daesh. Will the Minister explain what specific action the UK is taking to assist in the protection of the Yazidis and to offer them security?

I also want to press the Minister on the humanitarian assistance given by the UK to the survivors of the Daesh attacks. Many Yazidis are now in refugee camps run by the Kurdistan Government in northern Iraq. These people are not classed as refugees by the UN as they are internally displaced, but we must recognise that they have been displaced from their homes and feel incredibly vulnerable. Will the Minister explain what steps the Government are taking to support these people? It is important to note that none of the people we are discussing today is eligible for relocation to the UK under the Government’s scheme, and I am extremely disappointed that the Government have consistently refused to offer sanctuary to any of these groups. There are compelling arguments for recognising the special needs of these survivors and their need for a safe space and specialist psychiatric support. This is particularly true for the women and children affected.

Already Germany has done so. A few weeks ago I met a Yazidi woman who had been enslaved, had escaped and was offered two years’ protection in Germany and—this is key—specialist psychiatric support. At Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions last week the Minister wrongly said that the German scheme required women to travel to Europe before they could access the scheme. That is not true. The German scheme takes women from the region. I hope the Minister will go away, reflect on what Germany is doing and offer the same protection to victims of what we all agree is genocide.

In conclusion, the people of this country do not walk on by when they see evil being perpetrated against fellow human beings. What is happening to the Yazidis
and others is evil. We want our country to stand up and declare solidarity with those people, and refer what is happening to the Security Council. We believe genocide is being committed, and I hope the whole House can come together this evening in support of the motion.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): This has been an excellent debate. Time prevents me from answering all the questions, so I shall do as I have done on previous occasions and write to hon. Members in detail. Some excellent ideas and thoughts have emerged, such as the protection of mass graves and the appointment of a global envoy for religious freedom. I will be in touch on those matters.

I begin, as others have done, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this important debate. I have listened. No. 10 has listened and the nation has listened to the will of the Chamber today. That is important. I commend the efforts of Members in all parts of the House who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the voices of those who have been murdered, persecuted or silenced by Daesh are heard.

The harrowing accounts that we have heard today of the brutal persecution of Christians, Yazidis and other religious and ethnic minorities are heartbreaking. Some of those communities lived peacefully side by side for generations before that barbaric organisation forced them to flee their homes. Daesh’s crimes go beyond the horrors of rape and murder; it has destroyed a generations-old culture. The Government have repeatedly made clear our utter condemnation of the unspeakable crimes that Daesh commits against Christians, Yazidis and other communities, including Muslims, who still account for the majority of victims. We are working tirelessly to defeat Daesh and put an end to that violence.

This is not the first time that I have commented on this matter; it is the third time. I repeat what I said in Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions last week. I believe that genocide has taken place, but as the Prime Minister has said, genocide is a matter of legal rather than political opinion. We as the Government are not the prosecutor, the judge or the jury. Such matters are for the UN Security Council. However, we have a place—

Jim Shannon rose—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way.

We have a place on the UN Security Council. That is important. Any referral to the International Criminal Court by the UN Security Council will be possible only with a united Council and ideally with the co-operation of countries in which alleged crimes have been committed. However, I remind the House that when efforts were made to refer the situation in Syria to the ICC in 2014, that was vetoed by Russia and China. We expect that any Security Council resolution seeking to refer the situation in Iraq or Syria to the ICC against those countries could very well be blocked again, but further discussions are taking place. We are now in a different place from where we were in 2014.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way.

Although a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court is one option, there are other potential options for bringing Daesh to justice. In the meantime, we are supporting the gathering and preservation of evidence that could in future be used in a court to hold Daesh to account. I believe there is a very strong case to be answered, but we must clarify what we mean by genocide. As other hon. Members have mentioned, this refers to acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, religious or racial group. However, we must also consider crimes against humanity, which refer to acts committed as part of a widespread, systematic attack directed against any civilian population. That includes murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, imprisonment, torture, rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence. Furthermore, war crimes refer to grave breaches of the Geneva conventions. It may transpire that all three cases apply in this instance.

That is why we will do everything we can to help gather evidence that could be used by the judicial bodies, who are the appropriate people to judge these matters, to make a judgment. It is vital that that is done now, before evidence is lost or destroyed. Ultimately, this is a question for the courts to decide; it is not for Governments to be the prosecutor, judge or jury. The Prime Minister also said:

“Not only are the courts best placed to judge criminal matters but their impartiality also ensures the protection of the UK Government from the politicisation and controversies that often attach themselves to the question of genocide.”

It is essential that these decisions are based on credible judicial process, but that does not mean that we wash our hands of this issue. Right now, our priority is to prevent atrocities from taking place, and that is why we are playing a leading role in the global coalition against Daesh. I make it clear that, in the long term, we must hold Daesh to account for the atrocities it commits. The evidence that we are helping to gather now will ensure that the perpetrators of these crimes always know that the threat of prosecution is hanging over them.

We should make no mistake: British and international justice have a long reach and a long memory. We will track down those who commit these acts and hold them to account, no matter how long it takes. It took over a decade to track down Radovan Karadzic, but last month he was finally convicted and held to account for his crimes.

The UK is taking a lead on the international response to this issue. In September 2014, we co-sponsored the UN Human Rights Council resolution mandating investigation of Daesh abuses in Iraq. Working with international partners, we are seeking ways to support the gathering of crucial evidence that can be used by the courts to hold Daesh to account.

We must ensure that Daesh is held to account for its barbaric crimes against the majorities and minorities involved—Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Kurds and other groups. Ultimately, the only way to put an end to these crimes and to liberate the people of Iraq and Syria is to defeat Daesh. We must continue to expose it for what it is: a failing organisation that is losing territory, struggling to pay its fighters and betraying Islam in all it stands for.
On that note, as I said last week, if we look at the profile of any suicide bomber, from Bali to Sousse, we see that they are sold martyrdom by extremists as a fast track to paradise. People who have scant knowledge of the Koran are promised a ticket to heaven with little, if any, understanding of or service to God. If we are to defeat extremism and stem the churn of vulnerable recruits, we must all emphasise the importance of the duty to God in this life as well as the next. Indeed, the Koran forbids suicide.

As has been said or implied in the House today, the UK has the aspiration and means to play a significant role in world affairs. Our historical links, now forged into bilateral and regional interests, mean that we are expected not just to take an interest, but to show leadership on the world stage. We are seen as fair, knowledgeable and trustworthy. We are playing a leading role in defeating Daesh on the battlefield and in defeating its ideology. We will hold Daesh to account in the courts for its terrible crimes, no matter how long it takes.

5.9 pm

**Fiona Bruce:** At least 18 Back-Bench Members have spoken in this debate, and all of them, without exception, have not only supported the motion but made deeply moving and powerful speeches. We have today heard irrefutable evidence of genocide by Daesh in Iraq and Syria. The case has been made.

We have heard no good grounds for this issue not to be referred to the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court. The fact that other members of the UN Security Council may veto a referral is no reason for our country not to show a lead. The fact that Russia and China vetoed a 2014 referral—which related to general action in Syria, not to the specific point of genocide by Daesh—should not prevent this country from making a referral.

Several Members have called for a vote. We should have one. We have heard many reasons why this matter should be referred to the UN Security Council. We owe it to the victims to seek justice for those who suffer, to show an international lead, to be a voice for the voiceless and to hold the perpetrators to account.

This motion is simple: it asks the Members of this Parliament to recognise the genocide that is taking place for what it is. Can anyone who has listened to this debate deny that? If there ever was a vote on a matter of conscience, surely this is one. It is a matter of life and death. If there ever was a vote that should be a wholly free vote for Members of this place, surely this is one. Payroll Members should not be asked to abstain. In spite of the fact that the number of Members voting will not be as it should be, I trust that the Government will accept the will of this House and take the action stipulated by the motion, which I hope will receive overwhelming support from Members across this House.

**Question put.**

*The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 244**

[5.11 pm]

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Resolved,

That this House believes that Christians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are suffering genocide at the hands of Daesh; and calls on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a view to conferring jurisdiction upon the International Criminal Court so that perpetrators can be brought to justice.
Record Copies of Acts

5.25 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees with the conclusion of the House of Commons Administration Committee’s First Report of Session 2015-16; welcomes the view expressed by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General that government funds would be available to pay for the continued use of vellum for printing Acts of Parliament; is unwilling to amend or resile from the terms of the Resolutions agreed by both Houses on 12 February 1849; and accordingly instructs the Clerk of the House to convey to the Clerk of the Parliaments that the House of Commons has withheld its consent to the use of archival paper rather than vellum for the printing of record copies of public Acts of Parliament.

The motion is in my name and those of 43 colleagues from both sides of the House. If it is passed, it will send a strong message to the other place—the House of Lords—that its unilateral decision to end the ancient practice of using vellum to record Acts of Parliament is not accepted by this House. If that occurs, I very much hope that the other House will listen carefully to the views of this place. We have moved from a matter of grave significance to the world and to humanity—

[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. It is most discourteous of Members to gather at the end of the Chamber when someone is trying to make an important speech.

Mr Gray: I am most grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not certain whether my speech can be described as important, but I am nevertheless grateful to you for your flattering remark.

This debate is of less importance than the previous one, and I make no complaint about losing some time to that debate, which was about something of very grave concern to the world. None the less, this matter is important in terms of symbolism and for a number of other reasons, which I will return to in a moment. I feel no shame in bringing forward this matter.

I intend to be reasonably brief, not least because the main arguments in favour of saving vellum for the future have been laid out this week in an outstandingly good article in that outstandingly good magazine, The House. Unfortunately, because that magazine is printed on paper, those arguments will disappear within a matter of a year or two. If it were printed on vellum, they would still be in existence some 5,000 years from now. It is therefore important that I advance the arguments in a way that future generations will be able to remember.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has fought this battle for a very long time, and her Labour colleagues who, in 1999—the last time this matter was raised—were resolute in defeating the House of Lords. I also pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), is hoping to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to speak on the company’s behalf.

I would be the first to accept there are a great many more important matters that we should discuss in this place. I would not have wished to discuss the use of vellum were it not for the fact that the House of Lords unilaterally, without consulting us, decided to discontinue it. All I am seeking to do in the debate is to assert our right as the House of Commons to have at least a say in the matter. If we have a Division later and the motion is defeated—if the House of Commons decides to agree with their lordships to abolish the use of vellum—so be it. However, it is right that Members should have a say about how our laws are recorded for future generations, as we did in 1999, 1849 and throughout the generations.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend might not be aware of this, but I, as a fellow member of the Administration Committee, have changed my view on this matter, and I now very much agree with him because I believe that this change would be a false economy. We must hang on to this tradition and cherish it.

Mr Gray: It takes a big politician to say that they have changed their mind, and my hon. Friend is indeed a big politician. I pay tribute to him for being ready to change his mind.

Three broad arguments are advanced by those who would abolish the use of vellum, each of which can be easily dealt with. The first and main argument is the cost of using vellum to record our Acts of Parliament. It is alleged that the cost of printing Acts on vellum comes to £103,000 per year, whereas doing so on paper would cost £30,000 per year. The House of Lords therefore says that the saving would be in the order of £70,000 per year. However, I have been thorough in my research, and I have been in touch with the Archives and Records Association of the UK and Ireland. Its chief executive, Mr John Chambers, who is the authority on these matters, tells me that the cost of printing on vellum is identical to that of printing on paper. The cost of printing the laws of this land is approximately £56,000 per annum and the cost of vellum is a relatively small amount on top of that. In other words, the saving by changing to paper would be, at best, perhaps £10,000 or £20,000 a year.

William Cowley and sons, the last vellum manufacturers and printers, tell me that the most they have ever been paid in a year was £47,000, and that was a year when we made far too many laws in this place, including too many long ones, so it cost more to print them. If we keep ourselves under control, pass fewer laws and keep them short, the amount that we pay to William Cowley and sons will be even less than that £47,000.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the laws of the land that are printed on vellum? Such things as the Torah scrolls that are used by members of the Jewish community are printed on vellum. If the sole provider of vellum in this country were forced to close because of the House of Lords stopping our use of vellum, that might inconvenience other people and force them to
source their items from outside this country—assuming that they are not already doing so, which they might well be.

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. We think that the figures produced by the House of Lords are pretty bogus and that the difference in cost, if there is one, will be marginal. In any event, I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has announced that if there are any extra costs to be borne, Her Majesty’s Government, not this place, will bear them, which I welcome. I was also delighted that the shadow Chancellor indicated his support for the motion in discussions with me. He has authorised me to say that a Labour Government would also seek to fund the cost of vellum.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): In addition to the cost of vellum, there is the matter of the printing machinery, which is due to be replaced. Does the hon. Gentleman have an idea of the cost of the contract that would be required and the length of time the contract would need to be in existence to recoup that expenditure?

Mr Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising an extremely important point. She is quite right that if some complicated piece of machinery were required at great cost, meaning that it would take us years and years to pay that off, it would be important to take that into consideration. However, the fact of the matter is that any corner shop—any printer in the land—can print on vellum. I have been informed by printers—there are two in my constituency who would be delighted to do it—that the £56,000 that is currently spent is a great deal too much, and that they would do it for significantly less.

Melanie Onn rose—

Mr Gray: The hon. Lady will have a chance to make her points later. I am interested that she is apparently opposed to the motion.

The difference in cost will be pretty marginal, so let us move on to the substance of the matter. If we were to change to paper, I would be very surprised if the cost was as low as the House of Lords has indicated. The county of Hereford has announced this week that it has just opened a new archive centre at a cost of £11.5 million. Paper, of course, requires all sorts of special care over the years, whereas vellum, as can be demonstrated by a glance at the records in the Victoria Tower, survives for generations—hundreds of years—without any care whatsoever. It can be put in a cupboard and it will be as good as when it went in.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): When I last had a proper job, I worked in local history publishing. We published John Morris’s translation of the Domesday Book and relied heavily on other archives, such as materials in the parish chest, that were written on vellum. I will not ask my hon. Friend to comment on whether I would be much the poorer had those things been written not on vellum but on paper, and it had disintegrated, but does he agree that we would be much poorer as a nation in our understanding of our history had such things been written on paper?

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Were I a nimble enough speaker, I would leap from the place where I am in my speech to the point to which he refers. However, I will talk in a moment about the things we have today because they were made of vellum but which we would not have if they had been made of paper.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the debate in 1999, when Mr Brian White raised the issue, as a Milton Keynes Member, because the factory would have had to close. I made the point in that debate that down the other end of the building, there was an Act of Parliament dated 1497 that was on view to the public. It was not a facsimile or a replica; it was an Act of Parliament—it bore the sovereign’s signature and it was legible. We know that vellum lasts 500 years, but we do not know that any other material will last 500 years.

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes an extremely strong point.

The third argument that is sometimes advanced by those who are opposed to vellum is that this is some sort of animal rights or animal welfare matter because of the use of calfskins in making vellum. The answer to that point is that the calfskins are picked up from the abattoir. The calves are killed for the purpose of being eaten, so there is absolutely no animal welfare consideration of any kind at all. Indeed, we could argue that reusing the calfskins is a much more environmentally friendly approach.

In contrast to those three—rather weak, in my view—arguments in favour of abolishing vellum, there are three vastly stronger reasons for keeping it. First, vellum has for centuries been used for documents of significance and importance. University graduation certificates have always been on vellum, as have certificates of long service and military commissions. Every law in every Commonwealth Parliament throughout the world is on vellum. In America, West Point graduates get vellums. Knighthoods are on vellum, as are peerages. Any decent, important document that we have uses vellum. When we give a certificate to our Lord Mayor for his long service, it is always on vellum. Why should we be uniquely downgrading the laws of the land and saying that they are not important enough to be on vellum, despite the fact that our university graduation certificates are?

Secondly, vellum is hugely more durable than paper—there is no question about that at all. It cannot be crushed and it cannot be torn up. Of course, we are not allowed to use visual aids in this Chamber, Mr Speaker—I would not dream of doing such a thing—but I can show that it is true that vellum cannot be crushed or squashed, because it comes out just as it was before its crushing. It cannot be torn or burned, and it is not affected by water. It is durable in a very real sense.

As some of my hon. Friends have mentioned, we have good examples of how vellum has survived without any maintenance at all. It lasts for up to 5,000 years; by comparison, the maximum that can be achieved for the highest quality archival paper is 200 or 300 years.
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Perhaps my hon. Friend will be interested to hear the opinion of a former colleague of mine, Mrs Meg Ford, who is the head of books and manuscripts at Christie’s and one of the world’s foremost experts in this field. She advises the great collectors who spend millions of pounds purchasing books and manuscripts. She emailed me to say: “Vellum surely is the strongest, most durable writing material. Maybe there is some newly invented material lined with graphene, but if the choice is between even the best paper and vellum, vellum will win.”

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend speaks with passion from a position of great expertise, and he is absolutely right. When I was going through my personal archives recently, I was interested to come across my grandfather’s certificate as a graduate of Edinburgh University. I have it here—this is not an aide-mémoire, Mr Speaker. He graduated in engineering in 1903, and his certificate is absolutely as it was when it was first printed. It has simply been sat in a cupboard in my family’s house for 120 years, and it is as good as new.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the great campaign he has run on this issue. Is it not slightly ironic that the year after we celebrated the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta—a document that is essential to our constitution and was written on vellum—their lordships are considering doing away with vellum? Is he aware that while the laws in the Republic of Ireland are written on vellum, I am not aware of any plans to scrap that tradition there?

Mr Gray: They have plenty of cows in Ireland, as we do in this country, and my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Had Magna Carta been written on paper, it would have been lost by around 1465, before the birth of Henry VIII—it would not have survived to his times. Let us think of other great documents such as the Dead Sea scrolls, the Lindisfarne gospels and the Domesday Book—all were written on vellum. The Codex Sinaiticus in the British Library was commissioned by the Emperor Constantine in 350 AD. We can look at it today and turn its pages; it is exactly as it was when it was written, and it is as clear as anything. Can one imagine a piece of paper from 350 AD surviving? The oldest complete bound book in Europe, the St John’s Gospel, was put into the coffin of St Cuthbert in the year 687 in Durham cathedral, and it can still be read today as clearly as when it was written because it is on vellum. The use of vellum guarantees that no matter what happens in the future—war, floods, riots or anything else—Acts of Parliament will be preserved for all time.

The third reason why I think it vital to maintain vellum is that William Cowley and sons in Milton Keynes, the last remaining manufacturers of vellum, supply services to the British Library, the Bodleian and records offices up and down the land. If the parliamentary contract is withdrawn, there is at least a chance that the firm’s six employees would no longer be there, meaning that everyone who requires vellum services would have to go to America, because there are no other vellum manufacturers in Europe.

Why on earth, for the sake of some £20,000 a year, if that, should we be considering doing away with a craft of this kind? Why would we want to close down an ancient business? Why should we be considering changing a 1,000-year tradition of this place? Why should we downgrade Acts in the way that is suggested? To me, it is beyond understanding. If Members care for the traditions of this place, if they care for crafts and if they care for Acts of Parliament, they will join me in the Aye Lobby today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many Members wish to participate in the debate, so there will have to be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, which will be open to review, depending on progress. We must start with five minutes with the intention of not exceeding that limit.

5.41 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on securing this afternoon’s debate, and on spearheading the opportunity for this House to voice its concerns about the decision taken by the House of Lords and the House of Commons Administration Committee to end the centuries-old practice of printing Acts of Parliament on vellum.

My involvement came about after the issue was brought to my attention by Patricia Lovett—calligrapher, illuminator, vellum-user, and vice-chair of the Heritage Crafts Association. She was concerned about the impact on an important heritage craft in this country. It was our shared hope to see this decision reversed when the matter was first considered back in October, when the Administration Committee recommended that the Commons agree to the renewed request by the Chairman of Committees in the Lords that we print record copies of public Acts not on vellum, but on archival paper. This House, however, was never consulted on this, and neither was the sector on which the change would have the greatest impact—nor indeed were the wider public, who might have an interest in the future of this heritage craft.

It was with great dismay that, two months ago, we were informed that the printers had been given a 30-day notice to cease printing on vellum, with no public announcement or dissemination of this decision to parliamentarians; I found out from Patricia Lovett, as I said. That led to my point of order on 9 February, in which I raised my concerns about this shady back-room deal between the Commons authorities and those in the Lords.

After the points of order raised by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire and me, the Minister for the Cabinet Office intervened with the welcome news that the money necessary to continue printing on vellum would be found from Government coffers. Although I genuinely thank the Minister for his support for our campaign, I really think that printing, preserving and protecting our own archival history through our own budgets is a matter for Parliament.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): Let me make it clear at this stage of the debate that this is very much a matter for the House. Although we on the Treasury Bench offer our support, it remains a matter for the House.

Mrs Hodgson: That saving grace is very welcome.
Many of us from different parties might be described as strange bedfellows in this debate, but we have come together on this issue because we agree that the continued use of vellum is part of recognising our heritage and traditions. The Palace of Westminster is to undergo a potential £7 billion refurbishment to conserve this place for future generations to use, visit and admire; how can anyone argue for a saving that is so small by comparison, without considering what we would lose?

Our most important documents have been printed or written on vellum, from the Magna Carta to the Domesday Book and a piece of important north-east English history, the Lindisfarne gospels. All these historical manuscripts have been preserved for posterity because they were printed on vellum. They have lasted through the ages due to vellum’s durable qualities, which have ensured that future generations can appreciate and respect our shared history. Surely the legislation that we make here is worthy of this small additional cost. These are the laws of our land, and they should have the status and respect that is implied when they are printed on vellum. As Paul Wright from William Cowley said on the Jeremy Vine show last year, “If it is precious, put it on vellum.”

The crux of my concern about the change is the debate about the costs of printing on vellum. Both the Administration Committee and the Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords have claimed that ending the use of vellum would save Parliament, and the taxpayer, an average of £80,000 per year, but that figure has been disputed. William Cowley has said that, according to its books, the sale of vellum to Parliament is worth £47,000 per year. My question is: where does the proposed saving of £33,000 come from?

There is also concern about the use of archival paper. As we have heard, vellum manuscripts have lasted for centuries, and archival paper has not been proved to have that kind of longevity. There is talk of 250 years and of 500 years, but it must be borne in mind that those are estimates, not facts. It is a fact, however, that vellum lasts longer, and I therefore cannot support a switch to the inferior medium of archival paper.

Parliament is an important beacon of our history and heritage, and the fact that Members of either House can so easily dismiss a centuries-old practice is deeply worrying. We should remember that William Cowley is our last remaining vellum maker here in the UK. If it were to lose its contract with Parliament, that could be detrimental to the future of this heritage craft, and those who wished to buy vellum would have to look to other countries. It would not be just our medals that we would be buying from France. That is why I hope that today we can finally save vellum for good.

5.46 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on initiating the debate. It has forced me to do an awful lot of homework and get hold of some real facts and figures, so that I can pass them on to the House as they have been presented to me.

Vellum has been used to record Acts of Parliament for only about 170 years. The oldest surviving parliamentary records are on parchment, which is a very similar material. The oldest surviving archival paper records date back to 1510, which is just 13 years short of the date of the oldest parchment record. Those paper records are the manuscript journals of the House of Lords. It appears to me, on the basis of viewing and research, that records kept on vellum and those kept on archival paper in the same environment last equally well.

Mr James Gray: My hon. Friend is trying to make a distinction between vellum and parchment, but they are, of course, the same thing. The “Oxford English Dictionary” defines vellum as fine parchment.

Sir Paul Beresford: I am obviously talking too quickly, because, in effect, that is what I said: they are much the same.

Mr Gray: I beg my hon. Friend’s pardon.

Sir Paul Beresford: Before 1849, all Acts were written out by hand on rolls of parchment, in exquisite handwriting; it is really worth seeing. The motion refers to a resolution of both Houses dated 12 February 1849. At the core of that resolution was a proposed move from beautiful handwritten copies to the then cutting-edge innovation of printing. Perhaps my hon. Friend wishes that we could return to handwritten copies on vellum, as they do look beautiful. In 1999, the House of Lords announced that it wished to cease printing public Acts on vellum, having ceased to print private Acts on it in 1956. Two copies of each Act of Parliament are printed on vellum. One is kept in the Parliamentary Archives, and the other is sent to the National Archives.

The amount of money that would be saved by a move from vellum to archival paper has been disputed, but in the grand picture of public expenditure, it is not enormously significant. It is worth observing that we expect the saving to be more than the salary of a single Member of Parliament, which many of us probably consider not to be that great anyway. The National Archives has helpfully informed Parliament that it does not require vellum, and as it is part of the Minister’s departmental portfolio, I must take notice of that.

Vellum is an extremely expensive material, requiring an expensive and specialised form of printing. The cost of printing the Acts of 2014-15 on vellum—I asked about this specifically, in order to try to get it right—was approximately £107,000. The cost of using even the most expensive parchment-style paper would have been £8,000, a reduction of 92%. Unfortunately, however, the challenges associated with printing on vellum do not stop there.

As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), there are precisely two surviving printing machines that print double-sided on vellum to the standard that is required—note: to the standard that is required. One is in a museum, and the other is owned or utilised by the contract printer, but to put it colloquially, it is on its last legs and is probably being held together by Sellotape. Therefore, if the decision were made to continue to print public Acts on vellum, my opposite number in the House of Lords would have to provide a business case for a contract with the firm that was prepared to construct a new printer. The cost of that would leave Parliament contracted to a single supplier, which would negate the normal practice of competitive tendering.
Michael Ellis: If we put that onesupplier out of business, it is not just parliamentary Acts that will be affected. I understand from the Office of the Chief Rabbi that the Torahs used in this country are not in fact made here, but if that one supplier were to close down because Parliament stopped using it, Torahs and many other non-parliamentary items would not be able to be made here, and the work would have to be exported elsewhere.

Sir Paul Beresford: I have not had words with the Chief Rabbi, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we have made inquiries and we are just one of the contracts for this particular contractor. If we stopped using him, his profits would go down but he would not close.

During these complex discussions, the Minister for the Cabinet Office came along with his chequebook. I was surprised, as someone who has enthusiastically endorsed his admirable policies on cutting out waste, reducing red tape and improving Government efficiency. His Department believes that we should be “digital by default”, but that is a little different from what he is now talking about. A similar approach has been taken by the House; we also have everything digitised.

However, it is a legal requirement that quality prints of the original Acts be certified by the Clerk of the Parliaments in the House of Lords—the legal authority. Moreover, most modern Acts of Parliament are brought into force by statutory instruments at some point after receiving Royal Assent, and no statutory instruments are printed on vellum. The relevant information is available digitally.

I have huge respect for the Minister’s campaign, as he is aware. I must point out that we digitally store the Acts, and that he has ensured that if anything were to happen to the paper or vellum archive, the Acts could be reprinted.

Mr James Gray: My hon. Friend talks about the cloud. How confident is he that the cloud will be here in 5,000 years, when vellum most certainly will be?

Sir Paul Beresford: I will not be here in 5,000 years; my teeth will have gone long before that. However, my hon. Friend’s question ignores the fact that there will be progress. I doubt that we will be storing anything in the form that we do now, be it on vellum, on paper or digitally. There will be another way.

I was encouraged by the Minister’s offer to cover the cost of printing on vellum. For a moment, I thought he was offering a blank cheque to pay for all the printing in the House of Commons, because it would be logical to extend the offer in that way. I am not particularly well educated on the constitution, however, and it was pointed out to me forcefully that it would be inappropriate for the Government to play that kind of role in the business of Parliament. Of course, the Minister and the Cabinet Office could choose to fund the purchase of the material, the equipment and the managing of the contract, as well as the long-term storage, if they wished to produce their own copies on vellum from the digital records. Unfortunately, the record of Acts produced by Parliament, on whatever medium is chosen, are the legal authority. The Minister has been gracious in his benevolent offer, but it is not appropriate.

The printing of Acts over many years has changed as time and technology have progressed. We have moved from parchment to vellum to paper, and from handwriting to printing, all of which now have a digital back-up. The only recent backward step that I can think of has been the Ed stone, but that was just an unfortunate incident. I conclude simply by noting that, of the two Houses, it is the one that we would expect to make a stand purely on tradition that is suggesting to the House of Commons that we should progress.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I am afraid that I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on securing this debate and on ensuring that it has been held after the previous debate was postponed. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for doing so much to raise the issue’s profile.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On the subject of paying tribute, we should formally acknowledge the extremely important role played by Brian White, MP for North East Milton Keynes from 1997 to 2005, who took us through this whole business in immense detail and won the argument and the vote that kept vellum.

Dr Blackman-Woods: It is important that we acknowledge Brian White. Indeed, I will go on to say something about the industry in his constituency that he protected.

It is perhaps because I have a truly magnificent cathedral in my constituency that is over 1,000 years old that I feel strongly that tradition is important and that we should continue to record Acts of Parliament on vellum. The existence of so many beautiful old buildings in Durham has reinforced my belief that we should treasure our heritage and look after it for future generations, something which this country has unfortunately not always been good at. For example, beautiful Victorian terraces have been ripped down, apparently in the name of progress, for new blocks of flats that are demolished just years later because of poor construction and, most critically of all, their not being fit for purpose. We run the risk of doing something similar with vellum.

Our lack of respect for heritage is equally apparent in other areas. For example, we have lost many of our folk songs, dances, music, poetry and other aspects of our culture, because we have not kept them alive by using them. Were it not for champions of their causes, we would have lost many others altogether. We can be a champion for vellum today.

Rebecca Harris: Both Houses of Parliament will soon enjoy the ceremony and tradition of the Queen’s Speech. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would not be a favourable idea to save money by getting the Queen to make a webcast from her sitting room?

Dr Blackman-Woods: The hon. Lady makes her point extremely well.

When it is proposed that vellum must be discontinued because there is a cheaper alternative, I start from a perspective of great scepticism. Why should we change the practice when it has served us so well for centuries?
The issue is close to my heart because of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Everyone here will know their relevance to the north-east and to my Durham constituency. Produced in around 700, the gospels were written and painted on vellum, without which the gospels simply would not be with us today. Not just old relics, they are important living texts for our understanding of the culture and heritage of the north-east and elsewhere. When last on display in Durham a few years ago, over 100,000 people viewed them in just three months, most of them paying to do so.

Vellum is needed in the restoration of our ancient texts and for the recording of a range of important documents not only in the UK, but abroad. I hope that this House and the other place will take steps to protect the industry that supports that restoration, not put its future viability at risk by discontinuing the use of vellum. I pay tribute to the former Member of Parliament for North East Milton Keynes and the current Members of Parliament for Milton Keynes for trying to support and keep the industry alive.

I rarely agree with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, but I did when he told The Daily Telegraph:

“Recording our laws on vellum is a millennium long tradition, and surprisingly cost effective. While the world around us constantly changes, we should safeguard some of our great traditions and not let the use of vellum die out.”

I strongly agree with him on that and I hope that in this House today we can send a strong message to their lordships that they should think again about this decision.

I am not against modernisation—indeed, I think the House of Lords could do with some of it—but we need to get the balance right. Things do have to change, but we also need to preserve what is important about our past. Acts of Parliament fall into that category, and we should continue to use vellum. I hope that we all vote in support of that today.

6 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I should declare an interest, not only as a part-time historian who spent a large part of his youth burrowed away in the National Archives researching Tudor history, but also as the chair of the all-party group on archives and history. The group has more than 100 members in both Houses, and has been fortunate to have as its secretariat the Archives and Records Association of the UK and Ireland, the leading professional body for archivists, record managers and conservators in these islands. The ARA has about 2,500 paid-up members, who have naturally raised concerns over the possible change in the recording of Acts of Parliament from vellum to archival paper, which I wish to reflect in my speech.

There has been a lot of debate on this issue and strong feelings have, naturally, been expressed. That is entirely understandable, as vellum, and parchment, its sheepskin cousin, is at the core of our national heritage. Vellum has been used to record some of the most important events in the history of these islands, not just Acts of Parliament. It is still actively used by our conservation community to repair and extend the life of our existing ancient manuscripts. Vellum is also a highly practical material. It is durable, accessible and much more resistant to fire and water than any kind of paper. It is also an alkaline material. Paper is more fragile, and it is acidic and deteriorates much more quickly over time.

Michael Ellis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the even the highest quality archival paper is going to last only about 300 years, and even then it would cost a lot to maintain in the right humid conditions, whereas vellum can be kept just about anywhere on a shelf and will last 5,000 years?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: with vellum, we know it will last. It has already stood the test of time, as any historian or archivist will verify, through its continued existence over centuries. With paper, we can only guess how long a printed version will last; it depends on precisely what paper is used, what ink is used and how the resulting document is stored.

Sir Paul Beresford: I had better repeat what I said earlier. In this House we have been recording on parchment equivalent since 1497 and on paper from 13 years later. Having looked at the paper, the parchment and the vellum, I can say that they look the same.

Chris Skidmore indicated dissent.

Sir Paul Beresford: My hon. Friend is shaking his head, but I suggest he goes and looks.

Chris Skidmore: I want to talk from my own professional experience as a historian. Someone who goes to the National Archives and tries to order up SP1—the state papers of Henry VIII—will find that they are not allowed to do so. They will only be able to look at those on microfilm, because the paper is so fragile that it will crumble if touched. I have opened boxes and been amazed at how many documents have still not been looked at, but I know that paper from the 15th and 16th centuries is so fragile that it would crumble to the touch, and often those documents have to be returned unopened. That is not the case with vellum. People can order up stuff that is still in its original leather bag. It will be filthy but it remains there and people can study it, using ultraviolet light. That is the contrast I have seen as a historian. What if in 500 or 1,000 years’ time future generations of historians have this problem? It is simply not true to equate paper and vellum.

Europe’s leading expert on the subject, Dr Henk Porck of the Netherlands national library, has gone on record as saying that current ageing tests for paper “cannot be reliably predicted by means of the present artificial ageing tests.”

When it comes to printing our country’s laws, arguably our most important documents, we need to ensure that we have a clear assurance that the materials they are printed on will last the test of centuries, as vellum has. Paper-printed Acts of Parliament may last a long time—I do agree that they last a significant amount of time—but it is not long enough, and we need all the details of what is being proposed.

There has also been significant debate about the cost of using vellum and the prospective savings from printing future Acts of Parliament on paper. On 19 January, in a letter to the Archives and Records Association, Lord Laming, the Chairman of Committees, explained...
that the cost of printing Acts of Parliament is about £103,000 a year, yet we know, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) has said, that the only remaining UK firm involved in this, William Cowley Ltd in Milton Keynes, receives a maximum of £47,000 a year from selling vellum to Parliament. That means that associated costs are around £56,000 a year.

Lord Laming stated in his letter to the ARA that the expected cost of printing future Acts on paper, including the paper itself, is around £20,000 a year, so there is still a discrepancy between £20,000 and £30,000. It would be good to know precisely what the saving is meant to be.

We know from specialists in the sector, including the ARA, that the cost of printing on vellum and paper should be roughly the same. It has been confirmed to the ARA by specialist printers, including the Gregynog Press and the Westerham Press, that current costs of printing on vellum could be achieved for much less. People who work with vellum say that printing techniques have come a long way in recent years. They add that letterpress, litho and screen-printing are all used successfully for vellum and parchment, and they should know. Yet the Chairman of Committees has said:

"Vellum requires a specialist and time-consuming printing process, and uses equipment which is not used for any other purpose. It is firmly expected to be significantly cheaper to print on quality archival paper."

We have a difference of opinion here. First, will the Chairman of Committees set out the proactive efforts that he and previous incumbents have made to consult members of the heritage community on printing as it relates to vellum? Secondly, will he explain how often the contract for printing Acts of Parliament on vellum has been put out to tender, and—if known—what bids came in? Thirdly, will he publish the full cost-benefit assessment that he and his colleagues have carried out on this matter? We need this in order to give the issue proper scrutiny in this place, and for wider public transparency.

We all want to see value for money, but we should also be aware of false economies. Parliament should not subsidise vellum manufacture, but we should be mindful of the future cost of archival facilities, given the fragility of paper and the potential risk of damage to such important documents. We should also consider the impact on our conservation sector if the current Cowley contract is stopped.

Vellum, like sheepskin parchment, has played a key part at key points in the history of these islands in recording our most important events. Its continuous use over centuries should cause all Members to pause in sober reflection on the fact that we, as legislators, are the inheritors not just of a tradition of preserving our laws on vellum, but of a seamless legal tradition that goes back centuries. George Macaulay Trevelyan once wrote:

"The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are to-day, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we shall shortly be gone as ghost at cock crow."

We, too, will be gone. We will be replaced by new generations of Members, and become footnotes to the past. If we are to govern in prose, we should at least allow ourselves, in our responsibilities to generations to come, to be reminded that the poetry of history matters.

6.7 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): People watching this debate from outside will be convinced that this House is completely out of touch. We are talking about a vanity project. We could save £100,000 if we retain Acts of Parliament digitally. We do not need this project. The Paymaster General is very generous with taxpayers’ money and he has offered to pay that money. He was equally generous last year when he gave £3 million to Kids Company three days before it went bankrupt.

That was another vanity project that was run by Mrs Batmanghelidjh, who was the poster girl of the big society. So, there is money for vellum. There was also money to save an organisation that did great harm to the people with whom it dealt and that was run by a confidence trickster, but it had the imprimatur of the big society—the Government stung at the time.

Those outside can look at the decisions that we took on 2 March and at the way we have treated people in dire financial distress. Most of the Members who have spoken today on this matter voted in favour of taking £30 a week from the meagre budgets of disabled people.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman remember that we are talking about vellum and record copies of Acts?

Paul Flynn: We are talking about the priorities of this Chamber. Those outside will ask what on earth we are talking about, when we could not pay that money to the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign pensioners—the 2.7 million of them who have paid into their pensions and are being cheated. There is no money for that, but we save the vellum. What are we doing about the 500,000 overseas pensioners whose pensions are frozen? They paid all their dues. There is no money to give them justice, but there is money for the vellum. I think that people outside will certainly see that, and that we have one law that applies to ourselves—to our own vanities, our own history. It is history; there is no modern justification for using vellum now. This is part of the traditions of this place that should have been dumped along with top hats and quill pens.

Robin Cook tried to do it—it was an obvious saving. Remember the pressure we put on outside bodies to save money and make efficiencies. When we have a very sensible proposal from the House of Lords for an efficiency that will save £100,000, we turn it down because of sentimental, confused thinking, as though we were still living in past ages. It has no relevance for the future whatsoever.

Michael Ellis: I think that I have heard the hon. Gentleman refer in the past to the Chartist movement and to other historical aspects of this country. Vellum does not only record positive things. Vellum in society—history—records positive and negative things. If he hates most of the history of this country, perhaps he does not—does he not want to record that history, whatever it says?

Paul Flynn: I cherish the history of this country; I cherish the Book of Aneirin, Y Gododdin, presumably written on vellum:

"Gwy r aeth i Gatreat
Godidog oedd eu gwedd"."
That goes back to the early centuries, before English existed as a language. Of course we treasure the past, and our heritage, but it has nothing to do with this century. We have other ways of maintaining a record. How precious are what we think of as these glorious words we produce, the prose of the laws that we pass. In 13 years of Labour Government, 75 laws were passed by Parliament and went through the whole process but were never implemented fully—never. They are rubbish; they are litter. Another such Bill at the moment, on psychoactive drugs, will do positive harm. I am afraid that we commit this sin. It is said that when there are crises, dogs bark, children cry and politicians legislate. Much of our legislation—the Bill on psychoactive drugs is an example of this—has no right to be preserved in any way. That will be regarded in the future, when the harm the legislation will do is obvious, as a vanity and an extravagance.

There are many outside who feel the austerity implemented mercilessly by that Government over there, who have taken large sums from people's meagre incomes, with no attempt to make a case for that and no debate on it that makes sense. We have cut and cut again, and those people who are in financial distress will look at this House and laugh, and say, “There they go again: out of touch, looking after themselves and wasting huge sums of money—£100,000 for the parchment, £47 million for Kids Company—and for what?” Those on the Government Benches can say, “Oh yes, we have done that,” but we have 3.7 million children in poverty. We are not talking about them tonight, but we have saved the vellum. Contemptible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), I should emphasise that I am looking to call the shadow deputy Leader of the House at approximately 6.35 pm. I simply make the point that interventions are perfectly orderly and proper, but if there is a profusion of them colleagues on the list wanting to be called to speak will not be called. I am afraid colleagues will have only themselves to blame, to put it as bluntly but politely as I can. Let us help each other.

6.14 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am glad to have caught your eye, Mr Speaker, in this important debate.

I start by adding my congratulatons to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on putting the case so powerfully. I am happy to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for her work, and also to Brian White, the former Member for North East Milton Keynes, for his championing of the cause. Brian has just announced his retirement from Milton Keynes Council and has given many years of dedicated public service. I am happy to pay tribute here to all the work that he has done for this cause and many others.

My reason for speaking has been mentioned—Milton Keynes is home to the last British producer of vellum. William Cowley, founded in 1870 and family-owned throughout, which currently employs six people. It is in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who, if he were not bound by ministerial responsibilities, would be hoping to speak in the debate. My comments can be amplified by him.

It is rather ironic that the home to one of the oldest traditions and industries in this country is located in the borough that is perhaps the most modern, the newest of new towns, the innovator of matters digital, autonomous pods, smart cities and the rest, but we are very proud to have it in Milton Keynes. Although I am a great believer in innovating digital technology, records and so on, I believe that we should preserve for all time the laws of this place on an indestructible material, and not run the risk that everything gets wiped out one day by some cyber-attack. I take comfort from the fact that we will have a permanent record here.

We should not take a risk with one of the oldest industries. Most nations of the world use vellum from William Cowley to record their national history for future generations or to create documents and works of art. Britain is the world’s foremost authority on vellum. We should not underestimate the disbelief in other countries that we are even considering ending its use. Should we decide today to turn our backs on vellum, we are likely to consign another traditional craft to the history books. It will lead us to import more from overseas. It risks supplies to other bodies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) eloquently pointed out.

I cannot see good reasons to abandon the practice. Vellum is cost-effective. There is an opportunity cost if we move to other sources. Vellum does not require intricate monitoring of storage. There is no need for expensive systems of microbiological or insect control. It is non-combustible, so there is no need for expensive non-water-based fire prevention systems. It is 16 times more durable than the highest quality paper available. I represent Milton Keynes, but I come from Scotland. Thrift is important and I abide by the old adage, “Buy cheap and you buy often.” Vellum is eco-friendly. It is, as we have heard, a by-product of the meat and dairy industry. The skins not used for vellum would otherwise have to be incinerated or go to landfill. It avoids tree felling and the use of chemicals to treat the paper.

We should protect our heritage and tradition of skilled craftspeople. I cannot see a problem that needs to be fixed by abandoning the use of vellum. I therefore hope the House will enthusiastically back the motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire.

6.18 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I have been fortunate enough to represent Inverclyde in this House for almost a year. In that time I have welcomed a number of constituents to the parliamentary estate not only to give them a tour of these historic buildings, but to show them how this Parliament operates. While guiding my constituents through the Royal Gallery and Central Lobby, I have often thought that the Palace of Westminster would make a magnificent museum.

I am not against tradition and today I am proudly wearing my Innerkip Society tie. The Innerkip was established as a charitable organisation in 1798, and for over 218 years has survived to do its good work in the Inverclyde community by adapting and moving with the times.
Politically, Westminster means different things to different people, but this Parliament has had an undeniable influence on the history and culture of the UK’s nations over the centuries. Those centuries have led to the development of many important traditions, and I hope we can all agree that the history of any elected Chamber is worthy of respectful consideration.

However, I would caution that we should not let grand architecture and fine paintings distract us from the primary purpose of this building—as a functional centre of governance. It will be apparent to some Members that the UK Parliament does not always convincingly carry out that purpose. We need only look at the outdated estimates process, the antiquated upper House’s unelected bishops and hereditary peers or this Chamber’s box of complimentary snuff to see that every tradition is not worth continuing. Indeed, as Woody Allen said, “Tradition is the illusion of permanence.”

It is in that context that we are here today to consider whether it is appropriate to continue recording public Acts of Parliament on vellum. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the modernisers in this debate are those advocating the use of paper—a writing material that has been available in Europe since the middle ages. Westminster politics has never been known for its ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances.

Those arguing in favour of the continued use of vellum have cited its durability as one of the most important aspects of its use. I understand the point that original copies of records should survive so that future generations can enjoy them. I suggest, however, that the UK Government flatter themselves if they think that, 500 years hence, schoolchildren will clamber to visit this Parliament, eager to see an original copy of the Speed Limits on Roads (Devolved Powers) Act 2016. Whether or not legislation is written down on paper that is replaced over subsequent generations is inconsequential: it is the idea, principles and continued effectiveness of our laws, not the means of recording them, that are most worthy of our attention.

As Members are aware, the National Archives are one of two locations in which vellum copies of new public Acts are stored, and the National Archives, too, take the practical view that archival-quality paper is sufficient to maintain the public record.

Ultimately, there are risks associated with any form of recording, whether vellum, archival paper or full digitisation. We should be wary of anyone claiming that there is any one foolproof method of storage. Lack of foresight and unpredictable events have led to the destruction of records before and may do so again. It is worth remembering that the vellum records in the House of Commons archive were destroyed by fire in 1834, with the House of Lords records surviving only because they were housed in a separate building. Many nationally significant paper records have also been destroyed—particularly during the blitz.

Digitisation has also had its difficulties, as evidenced by the BBC Domesday project, which ran from 1984 to 1986, but which faced technological difficulties just 15 years later. My personal preference is for a combination of archival paper and digitisation. After all, the increased accessibility as a result of digitisation has undoubtedly improved the transparency of our public records.

I am sympathetic to those who argue that discontinuing the use of vellum would negatively affect the UK’s sole remaining producer. I would never argue lightly in favour of a measure that negatively impacted on the employment of any Member’s constituents.

None the less, Westminster is not a museum. It does not exist to propagate tradition for the sake of tradition. We are here to govern, to pass laws and to do so in a way that reflects the UK’s nations as they are today—not as they were in the past. For too long, this Parliament has doggedly refused to enter the 21st century. I therefore urge colleagues to vote against the motion.

Finally, if anyone from digital services is listening, could they please pop into my office and fix my printer? I have a sheet of vellum stuck in it—apparently vellum is not compatible with the 21st century.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry that I must now, with immediate effect, reduce the time limit on Back-Bench speeches to three minutes, but I do so with the purpose of trying to accommodate everybody.

6.24 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), who has been fighting the good fight to maintain the 1,000-year tradition of using vellum for the printing and preservation of Acts of Parliament. I confess that I have a vested interest: I successfully took a private Member’s Bill through this place and it became an Act of Parliament. However, you will be pleased to hear, Mr Speaker, that there will be no jokes about Peter Pan and Wendy this evening.

When I first came to this place, I was—I often still am—bewmused by its many traditions, but they are an integral part of everything that makes this place the mother of all Parliaments. The use of vellum is one such tradition. In a world of fast-moving technology, which we have heard about this afternoon, and of improvements in printing and processing techniques, and document storage, I agree that it is only right to review the practices for printing record copies of public Acts. Some might call me a dinosaur, but I do not think that there is anything wrong with holding on to a tradition of history.

Printing on vellum is a long-standing tradition. Record copies of public Acts have been printed on vellum since 1849. Vellum is far more durable than paper, even archival paper. Without vellum, as we have heard, we would not have Magna Carta, the Domesday Book, the Lindisfarne documents or many other important historical documents.

Time is pressing, so I will conclude my comments there, except to add that the anticipated savings do not justify a departure from this long-standing tradition. Although the world is, indeed, changing, it is important that we do not lose some of our great traditions, so we should not let the use of vellum simply die out.

6.26 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Traditions are an important part of our country, our way of life and, indeed, our Parliament. Without them, this House would be a duller, drearier place. As we know from history, once traditions are torn down, it is all but impossible to revive them.
On the question of vellum, I am tempted to defer to Edmund Burke’s view of society as a contract between the living, the dead and those who are not yet born. I have no wish to deprive future generations of the ability to touch and smell the records of their past. In fact, we have a duty to our descendants to leave behind an abiding physical record of our laws and customs, just as our forebears, in their turn, did for us.

Without doubt, vellum is the natural document to last the ages. Without vellum, we would not have the Domesday Book, nor would we have been able to mark more than 800 years of Magna Carta, with all the historical significance that the four surviving 1215 copies added to our celebrations in Odigham in my constituency and elsewhere. It is entirely due to vellum that awe-inspiring texts such as the St Cuthbert Gospel from the 7th century have survived for so long. Even by the most generous estimates, the archive paper that the other place has proposed as a substitute to vellum has nothing like its lifespan.

As our methods of documentation move into an increasingly digitised world, we will gradually lose the ability to experience historical artefacts and to immerse ourselves fully in the study of the past. Every time a dusty volume is replaced by a PDF, and every time a print newspaper transfers to the internet, we gain something—our lives become more efficient and the pursuit of knowledge becomes easier—but we also lose something: the tactile elegance, the timeless simplicity and the physical permanence of record-keeping.

When it comes to preserving this valuable tradition, I believe that Paul Wright, who works for the vellum manufacturer, put it best when he said, “If it’s precious, put it on vellum.” If we in this House have the confidence to make and enact laws, we must also deem them worthy of preserving through the ages.

6.28 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I wonder whether we are belittling ourselves slightly. Yes, vellum is almost immortally permanent and—from the Domesday Book to the equally wondrous Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2016—has faithfully freighted and defended its contents. If we ditch it for a ream of A4 80 gsm paper, or whatever it might be, our descendants will watch as the laws governing them gradually putrefy, wither and dissolve. Yes, that might be an advantage for many things, but is not this about more than a practical issue?

I am sure that hon. Members will agree that every day we sit in this place and hear soaring flights of Ciceronian oratory from both sides of the House. This place bears witness to an indefatigable tide of facts, figures and predictions, all of which are dispensed with rhetorical clusters of clauses and sub-clauses nesting like Russian dolls, and held up with towering eloquence. Is it not fitting for the laws, Bills and Acts in which those words are made manifest to be conveyed and preserved in a manner worthy of their breadth and nobility?

I am sure hon. Members will remember “Gulliver’s Travels”, in which one Lilliputian inspired awe in the others because he was taller than his peers by the breadth of one fingernail. We must not be guilty of the same—of thinking small and measuring ourselves against one another instead of taking the wider view and the historical perspective, and reflecting the enormous historical significance and distinction of this place.

We have faced this hurdle before when, with great irony, the distinguished and noble Members of another place sought to end a millennium-long tradition. While balancing precariously on a quivering tower of ritual custom and convention, they thrust their ancient swords in the direction of another small part of our heritage, and their efforts were thwarted. I, for one, hope we will resist them again.

In this place, the thought ought to be not, “Can we make do?” but, “Can we do no better?” I am delighted that so many Members support this motion. As negligible as a politician is, and however much today’s Lilliputian thoughts might seem perishable, it is incumbent on us today to uphold their imperishability.

6.31 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow that Ciceronian example of oratory from my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on their work.

I wish to address a point that I feel has been somewhat overlooked: these proposals represent the thin end of the wedge, and a general direction of travel away from physical storage and towards a digital-only future that I would want to avoid. I was concerned to read in a written answer from 9 November last year that in addition to reassurances that archive paper is a sufficient replacement for vellum—a claim I dispute—further re assurance was offered that Parliament maintains a comprehensive database of legislation, both “as originally enacted” and “as amended” on the website www.l egislation.gov.uk. I took that as a sign that some think that web-based archives can be the equivalent of hard copies, but they are not, for the simple reason that technology evolves far too quickly to serve as a permanent record for any sensible length of time. New and “better” devices and file formats come on the market every month, and it takes only a few years for technology to become redundant. If I handed you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a copy of your maiden speech from 1997 on a floppy disk, would you be able to access it readily? I doubt that you would, and let us not even begin thinking about transferring documents between PC and Apple formats.

Many computer devices that are sold now do not even feature CD-drives, such is the fashion for online storage—the “cloud”. While online storage might be the current flavour of the decade and it works fine for now, such is the pace of change that I ask whether we can really expect information to be stored sufficiently in that format in 10 or 20 years, let alone in 500 or 1,000 years. If we are not cautious, we could soon be facing a new digital dark age in which accessing digital files from a few years earlier will prove trickier and trickier.

Sir Paul Beresford: One difficulty is that although the law is printed on vellum, its implementation is done through statutory instruments, which are printed on paper and kept digitally. The other interesting thing
that I have found—being old enough—is that digital records are changed and moved as we go on with digital invention.

William Wragg: My hon. Friend raises a number of interesting points, although whether we should print the deliberations of statutory instrument Committees on vellum is a moot point.

I simply warn about this digital dark age that will soon be sweeping over us. We should resist the change and hold on to an established, prestigious, and time-tested physical form of record storage—the premier form of record storage which, of course, is vellum.

I am fortunate enough to have the honour that my private Member’s Bill has been passed by the House. It is currently making its way through the other place but, if these proposals go ahead, I could add to that honour the somewhat more dubious one that should my Bill receive Royal Assent, it could become one of the last few Acts of Parliament to be recorded on vellum.

Sir Paul Beresford: May I inform my hon. Friend that since 1956 that has been what happens? I am sorry, but if he gets his Bill through, it will not be on vellum.

William Wragg: I am hugely disappointed. I wonder whether I would be able to ask the fine procurer of vellum in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), to print the Act. I would be happier to forgo the honour of having my Act of Parliament printed on vellum if I knew that future Acts would be printed on vellum.

Mrs Hodgson: As a point of clarification, I also promoted a private Member’s Bill that became law, and it is printed on vellum. I have seen and held it, and it is definitely vellum. It is private Acts, not private Members’ Acts, that are printed on paper.

William Wragg: I am grateful for that helpful intervention from the hon. Lady. Lady, who is extremely learned in these matters. In conclusion, I say to the House that our predecessors in this Chamber resisted the change proposed by the other place in 1999, and I urge Members to do so again today.

6.36 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Anybody who is watching BBC Parliament today will be completely confused about why the House is spending the best part of two hours debating whether to continue spending £100,000 a year printing laws on goatskins. I am surprised that this is how we are choosing to spend precious time in the Chamber. When there is a refugee crisis in Europe, the country is facing a huge decision on whether to remain in the EU, and child poverty and homelessness are increasing, surely we could be putting this sitting to better use. It is embarrassing that time limits had to be imposed on speeches in the previous debate on genocide by Daesh against ethnic and religious minorities so that we could debate this motion. I am also quite surprised that the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is normally so eager to tell us of his prudence with taxpayers’ money, has said that the Government will find—

Mr James Gray: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady indicates from the Dispatch Box that the time for the previous debate, which was a grave and important debate about Daesh, was curtailed to accommodate this debate. That is not correct. I went to great lengths to say that the previous debate could continue for as long as was desired, because this debate was much less important.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That was not a point of order, but the hon. Gentleman has put it on the record. The problem is that I am struggling to hear because of the shouting.

Melanie Onn: If the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) had listened, he would have heard that I said that there were reductions in the time that people had to speak, which is a perfectly valid point—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: I will finish my sentence before I give way. I am surprised that the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is normally so eager to tell us of his prudence with taxpayers’ money, has said that the Government will find the extra money for this with no problem. I thought that the Government had a long-term economic plan, but it can hardly be called that if money can be found down the back of the sofa whenever it suits the Government politically.

Robert Jenrick: When I heard that the hon. Lady was opposed to the proposal, I took the liberty—I hope she does not mind—of looking up whether there are any important documents from the town of Grimsby that are printed on vellum and would not have existed had they been printed on paper. It turns out that in Grimsby town hall there are 14 boxes of them including, from 1227, the charter creating the town of Grimsby; from 1256, the charter granting the town of Grimsby its rights—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Sit down, Mr Jenrick.

Melanie Onn: I am delighted that the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) takes such a close interest in Great Grimsby’s fantastic history. However, we are talking about today, not the 1200s.

The Minister has said that the process is surprisingly cost-effective, and the hon. Member for North Wiltshire has said that keeping vellum costs little or nothing. However, the cost to Parliament of producing vellum in 2014-15 was £107,000. As the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) mentioned, using the most expensive parchment paper would cost just £8,000. You know what they say, Mr Deputy Speaker: “£100,000 here, £100,000 there—it soon starts to add up to real money.”
The Lords Committee cited a more conservative estimate of a saving of £80,000 a year from scrapping vellum. However, that does not take into account the renewal of the printing contract, under which the cost is likely to be greater than under the current arrangements, and nor does that take account of the cost of producing and printing the mammoth HS2 hybrid Bill, should that ever pass into law. At 49,000 pages long, I hate to think how many goats it will take to produce two copies.

Mr James Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: This expense is simply to continue a tradition because that is the way it has always been—that seems to be the only genuine argument that has been presented for continuing to print Acts of Parliament on vellum. A much more important tradition is the 800-year-old one that all Members of this House are equal, which the Government ended when they introduced English votes for English laws in such a shoddy way. Conservative Members were willing to let go of that tradition, and I see no reason why the tradition we are debating today is more worthy of retention.

The Minister and other hon. Members have said that vellum should be kept as it is the only way to maintain physical copies of Acts of Parliament for the long term, but the Parliamentary Archives contains paper records that date back just as long as vellum ones. The manuscript journals of the House of Lords, which date back to 1510, have been printed on paper, but the oldest vellum record is an Act of Parliament from 1497, which is a difference of only 13 years.

I know that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire likes to remind everyone that if Magna Carta had been printed on paper, it would have been lost in about 1465, sometime before the birth of Henry VIII, but we are not talking about Magna Carta. As the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) pointed out, we are talking about the Coinage (Measurement) Act 2011, the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 and every other Bill that is passed in this place. I might also point out that there was a greater need to print on vellum at the time when Magna Carta was drafted, given the surprise emergence of computers and print on vellum at the time when Magna Carta was drafted, given the surprise emergence of computers and the internet since the 13th century.

Several hon. Members raised concerns about the future of William Cowley, which is a serious point because the question of how, as a Parliament and as a country, we record the sovereign laws of our land, and whether the question of how, as a Parliament and as a country, we record the sovereign laws of our land, and whether we should protect the traditions by which we have done this for many centuries, is of great importance; and small because the financial sums involved and the savings offered by the change to manuscript paper, people might want to keep an eye on them.

I find it particularly surprising that the hon. Member for North East Somerset, who has written an article in The Daily Telegraph today, agrees with the argument that it is important for Acts to last 5,000 years. His lack of concern about rising global temperatures had led me to believe that he was not all that bothered about anything still being here in the year 7016.

Finally, there is the question of why on earth the Minister for the Cabinet Office is getting involved. This is a matter for the Lords, not the Commons or the Government. If the Government do wish to involve themselves, why is the Leader of the House not leading on this matter, rather than the Minister for the Cabinet Office? I am sure that there are much more useful things a Government Minister could be doing with his time, and there are certainly much more worthy causes on which £100,000 of taxpayers’ money could be spent each year. He should let the Lords end this archaic process and get on with something more important.

The world has moved on since 1497 and it is time that this place did too.”
further burdening taxpayers, to ensure that this tradition, which is of great symbolic and practical value, is not irrecoverably broken by a lack of funding on this small scale.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on his tireless campaigning. I have been buoyed by the support that we have received from across the House and, indeed, the other place. The case was set out powerfully by him, by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and by many Members across the House.

Sir Paul Beresford: It is absolutely inappropriate for the Government to dictate to the Houses of Parliament by a payment. The way in which it should work is that the Houses decide and pass on the bill, as traditionally happens every year. The Minister should know that. To tell us that he will pay for one specific thing is inappropriate.

Matthew Hancock: This is indeed a matter for the House, and this House is just about to make sure that its view is well known.

The speech by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), the intervention by the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Skidmore) brought his great and deep expertise to the debate, and told us why Dr Porck thinks we should prevent them from doing so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made the case for abolition, but his speech ended up as a haggle about the costs. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) railed against the rule of law, ultimately, arguing that it was not worth preserving laws. Well, I think that the rule of law in this country is important and should be preserved.

Paul Flynn: The Minister is distorting the point I made. This is a vanity issue. Does he not realise that the people outside this House who have been badly hurt by the austerity cuts of this Government will look at that £100,000, and the £47 million that his Department gave to Kids Company, and imagine what they could do with it? The Government have been so mean on the employment and support allowance and on the bedroom tax, but are saving the vellum.

Matthew Hancock: It is only because of the careful management of public finances that we can preserve and safeguard our best traditions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) brought his great and deep expertise to the debate, and told us why Dr Porck thinks we should print on goatskin. For that insight, I thank him. Also, I pay tribute to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), which was powerful and rhetorical, and made the point succinctly. All I think I can safely say about the speech by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is that she managed in her remarks to oppose the very material on which her own town’s charter is printed. I never expected to say this in the House, but her speech made me think, “Bring back Austin Mitchell.”

Why does this matter? First, because in a world racked by instability, volatility and change, we must safeguard our great traditions. I am an optimist about the power of human ingenuity, innovation and technology, and their ability to transform our lives. I passionately believe that modern tradition can radically improve the way we do almost everything in Government. I am responsible for digital transformation and for cyber-security. But this is not a debate that pits tradition against modernity, because a truly modern outlook does not put them up against each other. Novelty is no guarantee of improvement. Traditions matter precisely because they connect us with the collective wisdom of our predecessors. There are times when a tradition should and must be done away with, but traditions should not be broken lightly, especially those of the longest standing, for once discarded, they cannot be replaced easily, and sometimes cannot be replaced at all. Let us combine the best of the old with the best of the new.

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the Minister for letting me intervene, especially as I wanted to make a similar point to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who would not give way. I am pleased that the Minister is bringing the debate back to tradition. I come back again to my point about heritage craft. We are going to spend billions on saving this building, when it would be a lot cheaper to build a 21st-century building somewhere else. Heritage matters. The tiles that are being replaced out in Central Lobby are individually handmade; that money could have been spent on the poor. Why is no one making that argument? The same argument is not made about the fund for international development. Does he agree with me?

Matthew Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of our traditions. The Heritage Crafts Association, which sheloorably spoke for, has for many years supported the skills needed to keep these crafts going. I knew its work when I was Minister of State for Skills and Enterprise, and am delighted to support the skills of those who make and print on vellum now.

Committing our laws to this robust material underlines the point that the law of the land is immutable and that the rule of law is steadfast. We should never take that for granted. To those who say that this is symbolism, I say yes, it is vital symbolism. What else are laws but symbols on a page? What are these symbols? They are symbols of great importance that make up and underpin the fabric of our society. The vellum record copies of Acts—signed in Norman French, no less, by the Clerk of the Parliaments—are part of the rich character of this House and of our evolving constitution, just like Black Rod’s staff or the colour of the Benches of this Chamber. The symbolic power of vellum is undeniable. After the public outcry that followed the proposal to scrap it, it is time to reconsider. As Burke said, the British constitution is like an ancient house that “stands well enough, though part Gothic, part Grecian, and part Chinese, until an attempt is made to square it into uniformity. Then it may come down upon our heads altogether in much uniformity of ruin”. Let us not make the mistake of trying to square this great tradition into uniformity.
That is the symbolic case, but let me turn to the practical case for vellum. By any measure, vellum is far more durable and far stronger than archive paper, lasting thousands of years. It is hard to destroy, and without vellum, would we today have copies of the Domesday Book, the Magna Carta, the Lindisfarne gospels, Henry VIII’s certificate of marriage or Charles I’s warrant of death? I doubt that we would. Portugal is this nation’s most long-standing ally, and since 1373, the Anglo-Portuguese treaty has held the force of law, and it can be read. Why? Because it was written on vellum. We used vellum even for the town charter of Grimsby.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I would like to take the opportunity to add to that list the charter for the Salford Hundred, a document showing that Salford was of greater cultural and commercial importance than its neighbour, Manchester. Even in times of austerity, documents like that, written on vellum, are so important to the people of Salford.

Matthew Hancock: And to places around the country: Grimsby, Salford, Chester—you name it. [Interruption.] Ebbsfleet—are any more bids?

Let me deal with the costs. As has been noted, I bow to no one in my desire to save taxpayers’ money. For the first half of this decade, the drive for savings has been the backdrop to debate in this House, and I expect that to continue for some years yet. The Administration Committee estimates that the cost to Parliament of using vellum has been a little over £100,000 a year. Of course, any alternative would have its own costs, so all this amount could not be saved in any case.

Last year, the total costs of the House of Lords were around £100 million. If both Houses decide to sit for one extra day, the cost runs into tens of thousands. By comparison with the resources put into researching, debating and passing each Bill, the printing of an Act on vellum is negligible. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley called the costs “not significant”. The savings proposed are just a tenth of 1% of the budget for Mole Valley called the costs “not significant”. The savings proposed are just a tenth of 1% of the budget of the House of Lords, and one hundred thousandth of 1% of the total budget of the Government.

Vellum’s durability means that it is excellent value for money. At today’s prices, printing the Magna Carta on vellum would cost about £6 per century. I do not know of any other data storage system that can beat that, so I can give the House the commitment that, should there be any extra costs, taxpayers will be protected, and we will work with both Houses to find a solution that can work. I have heard the argument that there is only one printer and that it is being dismantled, but that is just not true. There are a multitude of printers; indeed, I printed the first page of my speech on vellum on a laser printer.

We have looked into the matter of suppliers, and one consequence of this debate and the scrutiny it has provided is that we can bring the costs of printing on vellum down. I have heard that we are running out of space for storage. That is not true. At the current rate, we could pass Acts for 500 years. And there would be space enough in the Victoria tower for them. On the basis of symbolism, cost and practicality, therefore, we should continue this great and long tradition.

Mr James Gray: What a fine debate this has been. It has been well informed and impassioned on all sides. I believe that 13 of the 15 speakers supported the motion, while the two or three who did not were very helpful to my case, so I was grateful to them. The fact of the matter is that children up and down the land are told that the laws of the land are important, and one symbol of that importance is that they are printed on vellum. The durability and traditional quality of vellum, the traditions of this House and the way in which vellum symbolises the importance of the laws of the land all make it crucial that, for a marginal cost, if any, we continue with this long tradition.

In 1999, we told the House of Lords that we in the House of Commons were the people who must decide these matters. I therefore call on Members once again to assert our House’s right to say how we wish the laws of the land to be recorded.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 117, Noes 38.

Division No. 245

AYES

[6.59 pm]

Hancock, rh Matthew

Adams, Nigel

Ali, Rushanara

Amess, Sir David

Argar, Edward

Atkins, Victoria

Bailey, Mr Adrian

Blackman, Bob

Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta

Bone, Mr Peter

Borwick, Victoria

Brady, Mr Graham

Brazier, Mr Julian

Bruce, Fiona

Buckland, Robert

Burns, Conor

Burns, rh Sir Simon

Churchill, Jo

Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey

Davies, Mims

Dinenage, Caroline

Dodds, rh Mr Nigel

Dowd, Jim

Ellis, Michael

Ellwood, Mr Tobias

Elphicke, Charlie

Fallon, rh Michael

Francois, rh Mr Mark

Ghani, Nusrat

Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl

Gillond, Mary

Graham, Richard

Gray, Mr James

Grayling, rh Chris

Green, Chris

Greening, rh Justine

Gummer, Ben

Gwynne, Andrew

Hancock, rh Matthew

Hands, rh Greg

Harris, Rebecca

Hayes, rh Mr John

Heappey, James

Heaton-Harris, Chris

Hinds, Damian

Hoa, Simon

Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hoey, Kate

Howarth, Sir Gerald

Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Mr Bernard

Jennick, Robert

Johnson, Gareth

Jones, Andrew

Jones, Mr Kevan

Keeley, Barbara

Kennedy, Seema

Kirby, Simon

Lancaster, Mark

Lefroy, Jeremy

Leigh, Sir Edward

Leslie, Charlotte

Leslie, Chris

Lewis, Brandon

Lilley, rh Mr Peter

Loughton, Tim

Mackinlay, Craig

Mak, Mr Alan

Malthouse, Kit

Matheson, Christian

McCARTNEY, Jason

McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

McGinn, Conor

Menzies, Mark

Milling, Amanda

Murrison, Dr Andrew

Newton, Sarah

Nuttall, Mr David

Offord, Dr Matthew

Patonson, rh Mr Owen

Perkins, Toby

Perry, Claire

Philip, Chris

Pincher, Christopher

Pound, Stephen

Pow, Rebecca

Pugh, Gwilym

Quin, Jeremy

Quince, Will
Ronnie Cowan: The first page of the Minister’s speech was of course not printed on vellum. It may have been printed on a product called vellum paper, which is a completely different synthetic product. It is not vellum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that that is not a point for the Chair, and I am certainly not going to reopen the debate after what we have just been through.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

EUROPEAN AGENDA ON SECURITY

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 8293/15, a Commission Communication: The European Agenda on Security, and its relationship to the Renewed Internal Security Strategy 2015–2020, and supports the Government’s approach of working with other Member States to support our international partners in the area of EU internal security, recognising that national security is a matter for individual nations through their sovereign Parliaments.—[Charlie Elphicke.]

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Sports Pitches at Shugborough Hall, Staffordshire

7.11 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I rise to present a petition about sports pitches at Shugborough Hall in my constituency of Stafford. I pay tribute to Jeanette Daly who, accompanied by many others from the area of Great Haywood, Little Haywood and Colwich, has done a tremendous amount of work on the matter. I declare an interest in that I am a member of the National Trust.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the sports pitches to the south of Shugborough Hall are well used and a valuable asset to local and area teams; further that the proposals put forward by the National Trust to close the pitches in order to create parkland would have a negative impact on sports provision in Staffordshire and make it harder for local people to pursue a healthy and active lifestyle; further notes that these proposals have not been consulted upon; and further that a local petition on a similar matter has been signed by 1,000 individuals.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call on the National Trust to work with the local community to arrive at a compromise where the sports pitches at Shugborough Hall can continue to be used by local sports teams.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.
**Butterfields Estate**

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Charlie Elphicke.*)*

7.13 pm

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Tonight, we are holding a debate about the future of the Butterfields estate in Walthamstow, but I want to tell the Minister about the properties and the residents who live in them. The story is not unique to Walthamstow: it is a story of what is happening in our housing market around the country due to a lack of properties, and speculative developers and letting and estate agents, who seek to maximise gains without any thought to the consequences of exploiting people in this uncompetitive market. I hope to persuade the Minister to help not only to change the future for the residents of the Butterfields estate, many of whom are in the Gallery this evening, but to tackle the underlying problems that enabled the situation to arise in the first place. I expect that he has not heard the story of Butterfields, so I intend to set that out and then ask a series of questions.

Last November, Butterfields E17 Ltd, a company formed just a few months before by Jasbir Singh Jhumat and Pardeep Singh Jhumat, bought the 63 flats on Shernhall Street and Butterfields in Walthamstow from a landlord who had owned the flats for almost 80 years. Hon. Members may have seen this part of my constituency on TV or in the newspapers—I am sure that for the landlord who had owned the flats for almost 80 years. The property hotspots in the Evening Standard—because it is at the edge of Walthamstow village.

The tenants were not told at the time that their homes had been sold by their previous long-term owner, the Glasspool Charity Trust, a charity whose charitable purpose is to prevent destitution—I will return to that irony later. No one told them their landlord had changed. They learned of this when some tenants started getting notices to quit in January 2016 from their new landlords, telling them they had just two more months to live in Walthamstow. Sixteen tenants have so far been served with notices to quit, and they are mainly people on fairly low incomes. Almost half of them have young children, and two have retired. Most of them have lived on the estate for a long time—up to 16 years, with an average stay of seven years.

This is a real community. It is not just those 16 households who are at risk; the owners have made it clear that they wish to sell on all the homes eventually. Like one in five households in this country, the only crime these people have committed is not being able to afford to get on the property ladder and so they are having to rent, meaning that they can be moved on at any time. Their good record on paying rent and taking care of these properties matters little to the new owners—businessmen with a slew of companies recorded at Companies House set up one after another and dissolved just as quickly, some with health and safety breaches recorded against them, too. The only concern of these companies has been to try to get the residents out as quickly as possible so that they can sell on these properties to make a profit in London's overheated housing market: to capitalise on the gentrification buzz that puts Walthamstow at the top of so many housing lists.

To that end, these people have even sent the residents letters claiming they were no longer tenants because they had been served with an eviction notice, and suggesting they could face fines of thousands of pounds in the courts, as well as having their career prospects damaged if they fight the evictions. Despite the legislation on revenge evictions, these good tenants, mostly with assured shorthold tenancies, now have to fight for their very rights, including the right for their deposits to be protected—this company also failed to tell them about that when it bought the properties. No current legislation is stopping the juggernaut of these developers riding roughshod over these residents' rights as they chase a quick profit. In March, the new landlord put six of the flats up for auction with Savills, without telling the occupying tenants or telling the people seeking to buy those properties that they had tenants in them. They were sold, for £300,000 each, which we think is about £50,000 more than the price paid for them. I also want to come back to that point when talking about the charity that sold the estate.

This is not necessarily a bad news story for the Minister, because today I can reveal that Dolphin Living, part of the Dolphin Square Charitable Foundation, has formally stated that it is prepared to make an offer for the entire estate, helping to keep these hard-working residents in their homes and working for this city. Yet still the owners refuse to negotiate, hoping that by their tactics residents will go quietly and they can continue to flog off the flats to push up their profits. They have pound signs in their eyes, but good business sense has gone out the window. They are bullying, misleading and riding roughshod over the rights of these people. The question is: just how did they end up being able to buy all these properties? That is where NatWest comes into this story.

It was NatWest that financed the purchase of this estate. This is the same NatWest bank that we, as taxpayers, own 73% of. Yet it is financing the break-up of a community. Ironically, it is doing so during a Treasury consultation about the Bank of England’s role in regulating buy-to-let lending. This is at a time when UK productive corporate investment is low by historical and international comparison. NatWest bank owns a separate charge on each of the 63 flats, linked to its loan. No other funder has a charge on the flats. It is simply inconceivable that it did not know of the plans to evict the tenants, as how else would this loan be repaid? One would have hoped compliance would have flagged up the chequered history of the people who took out the loans.

NatWest policies explicitly state:

“Our firm commitment is to lend responsibly. It is not in our interest to enter into unsustainable commercial agreements, or to lend to organisations, or individuals, which could damage the bank’s reputation.”

I hope we can all agree on one thing across the House tonight: if making 63 families homeless is not bad for your reputation, what is? Yet NatWest tells me that its executive response team has not found any evidence that the bank did not act in accordance with its policy and procedures.

I am here not to discuss the pros and cons of the bail-out, but to say very plainly that we will pay the price twice for NatWest’s conduct. We will pay the cost of the bail-out and the cost of helping these families if
they are made homeless. I hope that the Minister will agree to act and to raise this matter with NatWest directly. The Government have taken an active interest in the future of Butterfields, but that is now in the Cabinet Office; now it is time for us to use our muscle with this institution to make it live its values in its lending policies.

That multi-million pound loan given to Butterfields E17 Ltd diverts resources away from meeting the serious costs of funding the needs of small businesses. That bank is also fuelling the speculation in higher housing costs, which is so detrimental to my local community, without funding any building work despite the challenge of building houses in this country. It is not too late for NatWest to act. NatWest is entitled under the terms of the charge to withhold consent from any sale and to prevent any other charge being put on the property. It can ask its clients why they did not seem to understand tenancy rights, which puts them at risk of lengthy court proceedings. It could ask why, when a serious organisation such as Dolphin Living wants to work with them, they do not negotiate or even pick up the phone. I know all this because I have spent the past month trying to do that deal for them.

If we cannot save this estate with the help of Dolphin, the fate of these residents is unlikely to be happy. Local rents have rocketed to close to double the amount that these tenants were originally paying and far above what most of them can afford. Claiming housing benefit even if they were willing to reduce their net income is no longer feasible in a London where the limits on housing benefit are below local market rents. Indeed, many of my residents in Walthamstow pay nearly 60% of their monthly income on rent—little wonder that personal debt continues to rise in Walthamstow. Most would have to move away, losing out financially with higher travel costs or having to give up work. Their children would no longer be able to stay in our local schools. A well-established community would be broken up to the detriment not just of those residents but of Walthamstow itself.

Some have suggested that the council could buy the estate—as though, under this Government, it has a spare £16 million going—or put the residents at the top of its already stretched housing waiting list. Although Waltham Forest Council has been trying to help the residents with housing advice, the honest truth is that we already have 2,500 residents in our community in temporary accommodation. The lack of properties in the private rented sector as gentrification rips through both prices and local provision makes it even harder to keep people in our community.

I ask the Minister to raise this issue with his colleagues in the Cabinet Office, because I do not believe that the charity who sold this estate in the first place should be absent from its obligations to these residents. As I said at the start of my remarks, this charity’s explicit remit is to prevent destitution and homelessness, yet that is precisely what its actions are likely to cause.

Charity rules require that a charity should consider the impact of the disposal of assets such as this. Given that the tenants of Butterfields would have been, and could still be, direct beneficiaries of this charity, the consequences of this deal should have been consulted on, yet that did not happen. It did not happen because the charity listened to Clarke Hillyer letting agents, which acted for both itself and Butterfields E17 Ltd, no doubt making a healthy profit for both without any sense that there was a conflict of interest. It encouraged the charity to sell the estate without any consultation with the residents.

We can accept that the charity wanted to raise funds for its charitable purpose, but to have sold these properties as a block in 2015 and seen them resold on at a higher price not six months later raises serious questions about the value of this deal to the charity. Indeed, we estimate that it is possible that it has lost around £3 million in pursuit of a quick windfall, which made it so blind to the interests of either the tenants or its supposed beneficiaries.

I have been told today that the Charity Commission is now investigating the matter, but that the charity did not need to seek permission for the sale to go ahead. Yet it is clear that when such a hypocritical deal takes place, where the charity looks for a £16 million windfall thereby putting its charitable purpose in a secondary position, it can only damage the confidence that all of us have in the concept of charitable status.

I have a series of questions for the Minister and a request that he makes a commitment to raise these matters explicitly with his colleagues and also with NatWest. Can he tell us what the conditions are of the bail-out to which banks must adhere, especially as they are lending in property markets, given that 60% of their books is mostly property? The Chancellor claimed that under his watch the banking system had been “reset”, that banks should “work for customers” and that the changes would mean that when mistakes were made it would be the banks, not the taxpayers, who would pick up the bill. If the Chancellor was serious about that, in this instance—with 63 families who will be made homeless and will therefore require help and support from the state—I presume that the Minister will recognise that this is a mistake and that there is a cost to not acting. What does he believe the consequences should be as a direct result of this decision?

Indeed, how will Ministers ensure in future that lenders such as NatWest, which is still owned by the taxpayer, will instead increase credit for the real economy and for productive purposes, not for the kind of speculation we have seen, which is skewing our housing market in London? The developers can do this because there is no protection for tenants from such shady landlords. Will the Minister not only change his mind on landlord licensing, which is having such an impact in Waltham Forest in helping to address the quality of our housing and in dealing with landlords such as these, who seem to think that health and safety is optional for a rental property, but reconsider powers in the Housing and Planning Bill to protect tenants such as those from the Butterfields estate who are facing no-fault evictions caused by the threat of fees?

It is clear that the landlord is seeking to use the threat of fees in the same way as it could have used the threat of eviction to try to pressurise the residents to void their rights. I hope that the Minister will recognise that it is time to protect those tenants who, through no fault of their own and in the London housing market, face possible eviction. Finally, will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Cabinet Office about the regulation of this charity, Glasspool, and how we can ensure that
[Stella Creasy]

charities do not act to undermine their purpose and that the Charity Commission is robust in its approach to such situations?

Gentrification has undoubtedly bought benefits to my community—new shops, new investment, even new people—but it also clearly has costs and consequences. Without action, those costs will be borne by those who can least afford it and we will all pay the price. Developers, charities and banks that are so blinded by pound signs that they cannot see the damage they are doing require strong Governments to speak for the public interest. I hope the Minister will not just watch the TV shows or read the property pages but act today and in future to help to ensure that communities such as Walthamstow can be a top location for all concerned.

7.27 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing this debate about the future of the Butterfields estate. I also take the opportunity to extend my sympathies to the residents affected, as I recognise the difficult position in which they have been placed, which they must feel is quite precarious. I shall deal with some of the key issues the hon. Lady has outlined, as well as some of the wider general issues.

I appreciate the hon. Lady’s comments about Walthamstow and know the area fairly well—as she might know, I went to school just down the road. It is a fabulous part of the country and a great part of London. She made some political comments, and I appreciate that we sit on opposite sides of the House. She talks about the opportunity to ensure that there are homes for people and that we have housing supply coming through, but I would make the point that we have a good track record, having doubled the number of first-time buyers since 2010 and having seen house building increase by 25% just last year. I gently remind her that next time she raises housing supply she might want to bear in mind that the previous Labour Government—in fact, the current shadow Housing Minister—left the country with the lowest level of house building since 1923. We have had quite a lot of work to do to get from that paucity 88,000 a year back to 181,000 over the past year. I am proud of that work.

To move on to this specific case, the decision by Glasspool to sell the estate is, as she will appreciate, a private matter relating to the charity’s management of its assets. However, as she outlined, Dolphin Living, which I know and which is an excellent organisation, is the residents of the Butterfields estate in their new homes at the correct rent. I am happy to do what I can to support driving forward that negotiation to get the parties to the table. I cannot imagine that the residents could be in better hands than if they had Dolphin Living as an organisation to work with. The fact that Dolphin Living wants to be involved is good news and I encourage all parties to get involved. If I can play a part in helping with that, I will happily do so.

The Government recognise that people want the security of a home that is stable and sustainable. The residents in this case will feel that poignantly. Most people strive to have their own home and we are determined to do all we can to deliver for them, both in terms of supply and, as the hon. Lady outlined, by making sure that people are protected. I will come on to that in a moment.

It is right that the local authority should do all it can to support and encourage the parties to work together. Despite the hon. Lady’s comments, she may want to go back and talk to her council about whether it will consider spending some of the £90 million that it has in reserves to be supportive and helpful. I am sure the council will want to help the residents in that situation.

We have embarked on the largest Government house building programme for 40 years. Over the past few years we delivered almost a million new homes, and we will deliver a million more by the end of this spending review, helping hundreds of thousands of people take the first step on the ladder to home ownership. We are also committed to building a bigger, better private rented sector, providing security and stability for both tenants and landlords. Increasing supply is the best way of improving quality, choice and, more importantly, affordability for tenants, but that will not be achieved without a significant boost to the investment coming into that sector. That is why we have put Government support behind it through our £1 billion Build to Rent fund, making sure that we are using our economic record to offer up to £10 billion of innovative housing guarantees. The affordable housing guarantee scheme has already provided more than £2 billion of investment.

On the existing legislation and how it is moving forward, the hon. Lady touched on the Housing and Planning Bill. Before shorthold tenancies were introduced by the Housing Act 1988, the private rental market was in decline. Regulated rents and lifetime tenancies meant that being a landlord was simply not commercially viable for many property owners. Since the changes in 1988, that sector has grown steadily, responded to the flexibility and created changes in the wider housing market. Private sector landlords play an important role in meeting the housing needs of many households. Of those who choose to live or have to live in the private rented sector, the vast majority will have an assured shorthold tenancy, which gives them certain rights under that Act. These include the right to live in the property as their home, and tenants can enforce their rights, for example, to get repairs done.

The legislation enables a landlord to regain possession of their property at any time after a fixed term comes to an end or at any time during a contractual or statutory periodic tenancy, provided it is at least six months since the start of the original tenancy. The landlord must give the tenant at least two months’ notice that they require possession. Without the certainty that landlords can do that when required, landlords and lenders would be reluctant to allow those properties to be let. We believe that more restrictive and excessive legislation, such as forcing longer tenancies or notice periods, would mean that fewer homes were available in the market to rent. That would not help landlords or tenants.

I agree with the hon. Lady’s comments about charities in the sector being very aware of their charitable purpose and their duty to their clients and beneficiaries.

Stella Creasy: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that he will help with the negotiation with Dolphin. That will take time. May I press him on no-fault evictions?
One of the things that residents present here tonight are afraid of are letters telling them that they could generate thousands of pounds in court fees. I am sure that many of them would love to be able to save for their new home, but sadly they will not be able to get on the housing ladder, given the prices in Walthamstow. The thought that they might incur several hundred or even several thousand pounds of fees is a stick that the landlord is using to beat them with. Just as we dealt with revenge evictions, I encourage the Minister to think about no-fault evictions. These tenants are paying their rent and they are not at fault, but their rights are being undermined. Is there a way of dealing with that?

Brandon Lewis: I will come to some of the provisions of the Housing and Planning Bill. I hope the hon. Lady will consider, possibly for the first time, supporting the Government’s work to provide more homes at an affordable rate for people in Walthamstow by delivering starter homes—homes for first-time buyers at a discount on the market price, which make house buying affordable again. Our increase in shared ownership also aims to do that. I hope she will get behind the Bill when it returns to the House in the next few weeks, before it gets Royal Assent, as we hope it will.

I will come to the wider issue of legislation in a second, but increasing the supply of private rented homes is only part of the picture, as the hon. Lady rightly says. The private rented sector is currently dominated by small landlords, with larger landlords owning 10 or more properties accounting for only 1% of the market. Many landlords provide a very good service, and by far the majority of tenants are happy with it, but I share the hon. Lady’s view that we want standards to rise across the board so that we drive out every last bad and rogue landlord, regardless of their position.

The Government therefore published the “How to rent” guide so that tenants know what they should expect from their landlords. The guide improves transparency, making more information available, and helping tenants to make informed decisions and to know their rights. That in itself can prevent more poor and substandard accommodation from being rented. Empowering tenants is key to our approach.

We have introduced legislation requiring all letting and management agents in England to belong to one of the three Government-approved redress schemes. We have also required them to publicise prominently in their offices and on their websites whether they are a member, for example, of a client money protection scheme and which redress scheme they are a member of, giving landlords and tenants a clear route to pursue complaints against agents and helping to drive up standards.

Just today, we have introduced an enabling power into the Housing and Planning Bill to make regulations to require letting agents and property management agents to belong to a client money protection scheme. That will protect the money of landlords and tenants if an agent goes into administration or from theft while the money is in the agent’s control.

We are determined to do all we can to protect people who rent privately against a tiny minority of rogue and criminal landlords who exploit their tenants by renting out their accommodation, or which is substandard and unsafe. We have also made millions of pounds available to local authorities to identify and successfully prosecute rogue landlords.

We have introduced legislation to protect tenants against retaliatory eviction where they have legitimate complaints about the standard of their accommodation. We have placed restrictions on repossession when a landlord has failed to comply with legal responsibilities on, for example, gas safety and the provision of information to tenants.

We are going further by introducing measures in the Housing and Planning Bill to tackle rogue landlords and property agents. That includes establishing a database of landlords and property agents who have been convicted of serious offences; introducing banning orders for the most prolific and serious offenders; issuing civil penalty notices of up to £30,000 for some breaches of housing legislation, and ring-fencing those resources for housing-compliance activity; extending rent repayment orders to cover situations where a tenant has been illegally evicted, or where the landlord has failed to rectify a serious health and safety hazard in the property or breached a banning order; and applying a more stringent “fit and proper person” test for landlords letting out licensed properties, such as houses in multiple occupation, to help ensure that those landlords have the appropriate skills to manage such properties and that they do not pose a risk to the health and safety of their tenants.

As with the penalties introduced through the Immigration Bill, those measures are meant to make sure that we target criminal landlords who ignore their existing legal obligations. The penalties will not have an impact on the vast majority of good landlords who comply with the law and who rent out good-quality and well-managed accommodation.

However, we need to do all we can, and the Government are going further than any Government before us to crack down on rogue and bad landlords. I am happy to continue to make the case to the hon. Lady that landlords who behave in a manner that is not fair or appropriate, and who do not provide the right services and accommodation to their tenants, should be driven out of the market.

Stella Creasy: I do appreciate what the Minister says about wanting to tackle rogue landlords. May I press him, then, to use his good offices to engage with NatWest because of the concerns about this landlord, its previous business history and its behaviour towards residents of the Butterfields estate? In particular, its use of the idea of residents will somehow incur thousands of pounds in fines is evidence that those involved are not fit and proper people. If they will not engage with Dolphin, at least their bank might. May I therefore press the Minister to say whether he will engage with NatWest—yes or no?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady has great experience of dealing in this House with issues relating to the financial markets. She will appreciate that there is a difference in legal terms between the landlord and property owner on the one hand and the bank that has a financial agreement with the landlord and property owner on the other. The hon. Lady has outlined the situation, but the reality is that NatWest will not have any legal ability, as it is not the property owner.

I am very happy, through my office, to contact NatWest to see whether we can get it to involve itself in making a point of looking at the situation with the landlord. We have to be very clear, however, that there is a difference between the landlord and NatWest.
between a bank’s financial agreement with the landlord, which is purely a financial agreement about lending money, and the landlord or property owner’s duty to their tenants. I hope that, ultimately, the charity will talk to Dolphin Living, to get the right result for the tenants.
House of Commons

Thursday 21 April 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: On the front page of today’s Order Paper, it is noted that, on 23 April 1916, Lieutenant and Adjutant the Hon. Michael Hicks-Beach, Viscount Quenington, Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry, Member for Tewkesbury, died of wounds received in action at Quatia in Sinai, Egypt. We remember him today.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Local Authority Plans for Culture

1. Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What steps he is taking through the culture White Paper, published in March 2016, to ensure that culture forms a core part of local authorities’ plans and priorities.

Mr Vaizey: I join the Minister in wishing Her Majesty a very happy birthday.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has announced the publication of a draft culture White Paper. It is noted that, on 23 April 1916, Lieutenant and Adjutant the Hon. Michael Hicks-Beach, Viscount Quenington, Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry, Member for Tewkesbury, died of wounds received in action at Quatia in Sinai, Egypt. We remember him today.

Neil Carmichael: I join the Minister in wishing Her Majesty the Queen a very happy birthday today. I know that the whole country will be celebrating.

I am delighted to have published the first culture White Paper for more than 50 years and I am also very pleased that at the core of that White Paper stands our Great Place scheme, which is exactly designed to encourage local authorities to put culture first.

Neil Carmichael: I join the Minister in wishing Her Majesty the Queen a very happy birthday.

Does the Minister agree that devolution combined with the possibility of an elected mayor, as we hope to have in Gloucestershire, would be a really good thing, providing more scope, more leadership and more resources for culture, media, music and everything else that a good community needs to have?

Neil Carmichael: I join the Minister in wishing Her Majesty the Queen a very happy birthday.

Mr Vaizey: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. It is quite clear that local leadership plays an absolutely crucial role in ensuring that the power of culture makes a real impact on local communities.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister’s Government have implemented £685 million of cuts to Lancashire County Council, resulting in massive library and museum closures. When will his Government take responsibility for this attack on our heritage and culture, which amounts to treachery when we lose them forever? It is disgraceful. When will his Government take responsibility?

Mr Vaizey: The amount of cash going to local authorities is going up. The hon. Gentleman should look to his own Benches first, because it is Labour local authorities that are overwhelmingly closing local libraries, and it is Conservative ones that are keeping them open.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not be standing while the exchanges take place. I can perfectly well see them, and I may or may not come to them in due course.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I join the Minister in wishing Her Majesty a very happy birthday.

“Even if councils stopped...maintaining parks, closed all children’s centres, libraries, museums, leisure centres...they will not have saved enough money to plug the financial black hole they face”. That was a quote from Lord Porter, the Tory chair of the Local Government Association. That black hole is of the Government’s making and local cultural institutions lose out doubly, because councils can no longer afford to match-fund European, Heritage Lottery or Arts Council grants. Our creative industries generate £84 billion per year. They are drivers of growth, economic regeneration as well as inspiration, hope and future jobs. Why are this Government starving their local roots?

Mr Vaizey: I certainly do not agree that we are starving local roots. We are increasing the amount of national funding that is going out of London, which is something that the last Labour Government never did at all, and I see examples of success all over the country. Hull, for example, is preparing to be the City of Culture next year. The Great Exhibition of the North the year after will celebrate our culture rather than doing it down. I ask the hon. Lady to have a word with her colleagues in Labour local authorities and ask them to stop closing their libraries.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Where is a sense of reality from the Minister? My local authority, Kirklees, is desperately fighting to keep libraries open and to keep the museums going, and it is a very tough cull indeed. I know that there are problems—I am not making a cheap political point—but is it not about time that we put more resources into local government and also into universities so that they take their local communities more seriously in terms of innovation and the arts?

Mr Vaizey: The hon. Gentleman’s point about universities is very well made. Universities play an increasingly important role in local cultural provision. That is something that they themselves have driven, and it is very welcome. They are very important partners.

Leveson Inquiry

2. Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): What progress is being made on implementation of the Leveson inquiry recommendations.

Mr Vaizey: On the front page of today’s Order Paper, it is noted that, on 23 April 1916, Lieutenant and Adjutant the Hon. Michael Hicks-Beach, Viscount Quenington, Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry, Member for Tewkesbury, died of wounds received in action at Quatia in Sinai, Egypt. We remember him today.
The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Around half of Sir Brian Leveson’s recommendations focused on press regulation and we have implemented those via the royal charter. The Government have delivered, or are in the process of delivering, the majority of the other recommendations directed at them.

Simon Danczuk: The Secretary of State must realise that press abuse victims want him to implement section 40. Indeed, even the Prime Minister personally promised victims of press abuse and this House that it would be enacted. Why is the Secretary of State breaking the Prime Minister’s promise?

Mr Whittingdale: I have considerable sympathy with the victims of press abuse and have had a number of meetings with some of them and with others who are rightly following this matter with great interest. Having had my faith tested perhaps to the utmost, I still believe that press freedom is a vital component of a free society and we should tread very carefully. Some of the recommendations of the Leveson report have been implemented and the new system is coming into effect.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the exemplary damages provisions of section 40 have now been enacted. The remainder are still under consideration and we do not yet have a recognised press regulator in place, but we will continue to consider these matters very carefully.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State believe that we have sufficient press regulation or would he like to see further regulation of the press?

Mr Whittingdale: We now have two potential press regulators, both of which are independent, running self-regulatory systems with sanctions, and certainly represent a considerable improvement on the Press Complaints Commission, which went before. It is still early days and obviously we will watch carefully to see how the new system operates and whether it is delivering the proper protection that we all want to see to ensure that the abuses that have taken place in the past do not happen again.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): We all support freedom of the press and broadcasters, but in the case of the BBC we also expect our national broadcaster to reflect the society in which we live. I am sure that the Secretary of State will have seen highlights of the House’s recent debate on BBC diversity. All sides were in complete agreement that there is a striking shortage of black senior managers, an inexplicable lack of openly gay and lesbian presenters in high-profile news and current affairs roles and a shocking absence of older women on screen anywhere. The House agreed that the time for BBC studies and targets had passed and that action was overdue. Has the Secretary of State had a chance to pass that on to the director-general?

Mr Whittingdale: I have quite a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s comments. Obviously, we are still in the process of drawing up the new BBC charter but I can assure him that this issue will feature in the White Paper when we publish it. I hope quite soon. It is something we take seriously. I do not believe in instructing the BBC or setting quotas for the number of ethnic minority faces, older female faces or, indeed, Scottish faces that appear on screen or behind the camera, but all those groups, and others that are currently underrepresented, need better representation and that is what we are working to achieve.

Grassroots Sport

3. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his Department’s spending review settlement on funding for grassroots sport.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): The Department secured a very positive spending review settlement last year. Over this Parliament we will invest more money in grassroots sport than ever before. The settlement reflects the Government’s continued support for the positive outcomes that sport can bring and will be spent in line with the new Government strategy, Sporting Future, which sets out how we will encourage more people from every background to engage in sport and physical activity.

Mims Davies: What assessment has the Minister made of councils intervening and affecting grassroots sports participation, such as Parkrun, by insisting on charging for wear and tear?

Mr Evennett: This is obviously a matter for the council and Parkrun, but the decision to charge for an event that is free in locations across the UK and around the world is one that we, as a Government, think should be reconsidered. We want to remove barriers to participation and encourage more and more people to get involved in sport. That is the key message that the Government want to get across.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): If my hon. Friend were to speak to our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, he would become aware that in Chelmsford there is thriving grassroots sport in the form of ice hockey. Does the result of the spending review offer any hope of benefits for ice hockey at a grassroots level?

Mr Evennett: Obviously, decisions on local authority budgets are decisions for those authorities. We welcome what is happening in Chelmsford and I know how assiduous my right hon. Friend is in speaking up for his constituency. There are many examples across the country of local authorities spending on sport. For instance, Central Bedfordshire Council continues to invest in sport and physical activity provision. We encourage that.

Press Regulation


The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): As I indicated a moment ago, no decision has been taken regarding commencement
of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. The matter is under consideration and I am meeting a variety of interested parties with different views to discuss the issue.

Paul Farrelly: I thank the Secretary of State for taking us no further forward. Implementation of the costs incentives was promised by the then Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). They were promised as a key part of the Leveson reforms specifically by the Prime Minister, not only to Parliament but to the victims of press abuse, including the family of Madeleine McCann, so in signalling already that he has no intention of taking that step, has the Secretary of State reflected at all that he is thwarting the will of Parliament, breaching a cross-party agreement, and breaking clear, firm and unequivocal promises made by the Prime Minister and his colleagues?

Mr Whittingdale: I have not indicated that I have no intention. I simply said that I was not minded, which means that the matter is still under consideration and my mind and that of my colleagues is open on the matter, which is why we are continuing to have meetings. Only this week I had a meeting with some of the hyperlocal publishers who have signed up with the Impress regulator and they made some interesting comments, and we will continue to listen to all those with an interest. We will in due course make a decision. However, section 40 and the costs provision will not come into effect fully until there is a recognised regulator, even after the order is signed. There is not yet a recognised regulator so we are not yet in that position, and we will continue to consider the matter.

Mr Speaker: We trust that the Secretary of State's minded state was nevertheless intentional.

First World War Commemoration

5. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the greatest possible engagement by children and young people in the commemoration of the first world war.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): The three key themes of our first World War centenary are remembrance, youth, and education. We know that to date around 1.5 million young people have taken part, including via schemes like the Battlefield Tours and Legacy 110 programmes, 14-18 Now, and protecting war memorials. We are ensuring that young people are visibly catered for and involved in all our national commemorative and cultural events.

Mark Pawsey: It is important that children and young people understand the sacrifice made by earlier generations, so will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating pupils at Newbold Riverside Academy in my constituency, who were given the opportunity to name a fantastic new recreation facility in their area and chose to call it Newbold Centenary park to reflect the commemoration of the start of the first world war?

Mr Whittingdale: We should perhaps be relieved that the name chosen was not Parky McParkface.

I join my hon. Friend in congratulating pupils of Newbold Riverside Academy on deciding to commemorate all those who gave their lives in the first world war by choosing the name of the park. As I said, there are hundreds of projects taking place and it is particularly important that young people have the opportunity to visit the first world war battlefields. It is extraordinarily encouraging that young people have shown such enthusiasm and interest in marking this very important centenary.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): These matters are obviously extremely important, but the Department is also responsible for protecting children online. This morning the Internet Watch Foundation said that child abuse images are appearing behind adult pornography sites. Can the Secretary of State explain to the House why he personally intervened to block the Tory party manifesto promise to enable internet service providers to block websites where there is not a proper age verification system?

Mr Speaker: Order. No. That is a very serious matter and could properly be raised at topical questions, but it is something of an abuse of the main thrust of this question. I let the hon. Lady finish because I did not know quite where she was headed and I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but having given her the chance, I am afraid, if I may say so, she was hanged by her own rope. We had better move on to Mr Rob Marris.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): On Tuesday this week, Mr Speaker, I had the great pleasure of attending your State Rooms to celebrate the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi, and I thank you for your generous hospitality. You know, sir, that Sikh soldiers made huge contributions to our country in two world wars, and many people now want a permanent monument in central London to commemorate that sacrifice. Will the Minister today promise the Government’s support in principle for this project?

Mr Whittingdale: We do have memorials to a number of the different communities that contributed in the first world war, many of whose members lost their lives. A few weeks ago, on Commonwealth Day, I was privileged to attend the ceremony that took place at the Memorial Gates, which mark the contribution of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities in the first world war—that contribution was extremely important and perhaps does not always achieve recognition. We will of course keep an open mind. To some extent, this would also be a matter for other authorities, but if there are specific proposals, I will of course look at them.

11. Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): I was grateful to William Pritchard and Billy Green from the Rawlett School, who laid a wreath in memory of my great-grandfather, who was killed on the first day of the battle of the Somme in 1916. In this, its centenary year, may I ask my right hon. Friend to encourage school visits to the Somme battlefield memorials, to remember the men who made such a sacrifice all those years ago?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend illustrates what has become very clear: that almost every person in this country will have had a relative who served in the first
world war, many of whom died. I am delighted to hear about the tribute that was paid to my hon. Friend’s great-grandfather. It is incredibly important that young people learn about the first world war, which is why we put in place the school battlefields tour programme, under which two pupils and one teacher from every state-funded secondary school in England can visit the first world war battlefields. More than 3,500 pupils and teachers have already been on that programme.

UK Anti-doping Agency

6. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Whether he plans to reform the UK Anti-Doping agency. [904602]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): I have no plans to reform UK Anti-Doping, but following The Sunday Times allegations, an independent review has been launched into UK Anti-Doping’s handling of the information that it received. It is important that we allow that review to conclude before considering what action must be taken.

Gavin Newlands: Last week, the Prime Minister suggested that doping in sport could be criminalised in the UK. Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with other Departments about the criminalisation of doping in sport?

Mr Whittingdale: It is a matter that we are considering very actively. The allegations that were printed in The Sunday Times suggesting that doping may be taking place among UK sportsmen are very serious and something that we want to examine very carefully, but also urgently. If it becomes clear as a result of that that further action needs to be taken—possibly including the criminalisation of doping in sport—we will not hesitate to act.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that we should be leading the way on anti-doping? Does he also agree that sportsmen and sportswomen have a responsibility to be honest and clean, particularly as they inspire so many young people? What is his Department doing to work alongside the agency to promote clean sport and to inspire our young people?

Mr Whittingdale: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman: it is absolutely essential that sport is seen to be clean. That is something for which we in this country have, until now, had a very good reputation, and I hope that we will still have a good reputation. We are talking to all the UK sports bodies, and we intend to draw up proposals, which I hope all of them will adopt. Beyond that, we are taking a lead internationally. The Prime Minister is holding an anti-corruption summit next month, and this is one of the issues that will be discussed.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that his forthcoming anti-corruption summit will consider whether doping in sport should be made a criminal offence, but before anyone can be convicted, we have to have an effective testing regime in place. Despite the billions that go into sport through TV rights and sponsorship, precious little money is going to fund research into sports science, which would keep us ahead of the cheats. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on the Prime Minister to discuss research funding at his summit, with the aim of setting up a funding body that is independent of sports governing bodies, so that we can have effective testing in place and stay ahead of the cheats?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree that this is a very important matter, which is why the Government invest more than £5 million per annum in UK Anti-Doping; and by the end of this Parliament that sum will have gone up to £5.4 million. National governing bodies of sport are doing quite a lot. For instance, I visited the British Horseracing Authority recently to hear about the work it has been doing to ensure that its sport remains clean. Other sports are also investing in this area. Of course, there is more that we can do, and I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in urging the national governing bodies of all our sports to give the issue the serious attention it deserves and to invest more if required.

Night-time Industries

8. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support (a) restaurants, bars and live music venues and (b) other night-time industries. [904605]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I was delighted last month to work with my hon. Friend the planning Minister and the Night-time Industries. The Value and Leisure Agency to get planning regulations changed so that we can protect our music venues. It is very important that we recognise the huge economic contribution they make to the night-time economy and that we take action where required.

Nigel Huddleston: According to figures recently released by the industry body, the Night Time Industries Association, the UK’s restaurants, bars, pubs and music venues employ 1.3 million people and serve millions of Britons and tourists every year. Will the Minister join me in recognising the important role played by this sector, which contributes £66 billion to our economy each year?

Mr Vaizey: Yes, I will. Its contribution is not only economic, but cultural. In the light of the visit of the President of Indonesia this week, I note that Indonesia counts food and restaurants as part of its creative industries. I think that that is something we should consider very seriously.

First World War Commemoration

10. Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that events to commemorate the centenary of the first world war take place in all regions and constituent parts of the UK. [904608]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): We recently launched an appeal to encourage communities, businesses, organisations and individuals across the UK to mark the centenary of the battle of the Somme on 30 June and 1 July. We will continue to find ways to encourage commemoration of this most poignant first world war event through media activity and direct approaches.
Guidance is available on the Government website, and special information has been published by the Royal British Legion, which contains information on hosting a Somme remembrance event.

**Byron Davies:** The first world war was, of course, an enormous UK-wide effort, where millions of men and women served our nation with distinction. What additional advice can the Minister give the Welsh Government so that the people of Wales, in particular young people, can mark and honour the great sacrifices made in the first world war?

**Mr Evennett:** The Wales Remembers 1914-18 programme was launched in January by the First Minister. It shows details of the commemorative events taking place in Wales and further afield during 2016. There will be an overnight vigil at the Welsh national war memorial in Cardiff on 30 June to commemorate the centenary of the battle of the Somme, and Caernarfon castle will host the “poppies weeping window” from 11 October to 20 November.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): On 25 June the armed forces day national event will be held in Cleethorpes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that armed forces day is an opportunity not only to mark the continuing bravery of our armed forces, but to link it to the sacrifices of the past?

**Mr Evennett:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are so grateful to those who continue to serve in the armed forces for what they do, but we must never forget those who gave sacrifice in the first world war.

**Nuisance Calls**

12. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to reduce the number of nuisance calls.

**The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy**

(Mr Edward Vaizey): Since we published our action plan two years ago, we have taken a range of measures, including lowering the threshold for what constitutes a nuisance call and increasing co-operation between the two regulators, namely Ofcom and the Information Commissioner’s Office.

**Bob Blackman:** Despite Government action, nuisance calls are a real concern to residents all over the country. What further steps can my hon. Friend take to ensure that we bar nuisance calls and prevent elderly people in particular from having to suffer this curse?

**Mr Vaizey:** This is a very important issue that annoys a great many people and frightens the elderly and vulnerable in particular. We have announced a fund to allow call-barring equipment to be given to the elderly and vulnerable, and we are about to announce the results of our consultation on calling line identification.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): There is a real danger that increasing the small claims limit in civil court cases will lead to yet more unwanted nuisance telephone calls from claims management companies. Will my hon. Friend liaise with Ministers in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that steps are taken to prevent that from happening?

**Mr Vaizey:** My hon. Friend takes a close personal interest in this issue, and he has been very supportive. He makes an extremely important point. In my view, when Government are considering the impact of changes in legislation in any Department, they should consider the potential knock-on effect on nuisance calls. I will certainly take up his point and see whether we can make progress.

**BBC Governance**

13. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What his policy is on reforming governance of the BBC. [904612]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport**

(Mr John Whittingdale): The Clementi review reported on the governance and regulation of the BBC on 1 March 2016.

Sir David’s ideas for the principles of simpler governance structures and streamlined regulatory arrangements that have public interest and market sensitivity at their heart are ones that it would be difficult for this, or indeed any, Government to overlook. The Government hope to set out plans for the future of BBC governance in a White Paper next month.

**Daniel Zeichner:** A recent YouGov poll commissioned by 38 Degrees, which is doubtless the Government’s favourite campaigning organisation, showed that 62% of over-60s had no confidence in the Government to protect the BBC during charter renewal, and that more than half of them felt that the BBC was the most trusted source of news. In the light of that, how can increasing the level of government control over appointments to the new board possibly increase confidence in the independence of the BBC?

**Mr Whittingdale:** We do take the views of 38 Degrees, and, indeed, all others who have submitted responses to our consultation, seriously. Certainly, the BBC’s reputation for integrity and impartiality is one of the key things to protect and enhance as a result of the charter renewal. In terms of governance, Sir David Clementi made very specific proposals about this. It is a matter that we are currently discussing with the BBC, and I hope that we will be able to announce agreement about that in due course.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): The BBC’s 39 local radio stations face the prospect of further cuts as part of the corporation’s attempt to meet the £700 million cost of free TV licences. Regional radio is a unique and greatly valued public service that tackles issues close to the hearts of its listeners, who feel a very long way from the London-centric national news coverage. Will the Secretary of State oppose any cuts to BBC local radio, particularly in the north-east?

**Mr Whittingdale:** It is not my job, or the job of the Government, to tell the BBC how to allocate the resources available to it, but I completely agree with the hon. Lady that BBC local radio is one area of BBC activity that is hugely valued and that would not be delivered by any other means. I am less familiar, obviously, with
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Mr Whittingdale: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. It is, of course, a matter of editorial judgment for the BBC, but the BBC has a duty to set an example and behave responsibly. I simply say that I am sure that the senior editorial management of the BBC will have heard what he said, and I encourage him, if he has concerns, to express them directly to the BBC.

Tourism

14. Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What plans his Department has to increase tourism in England from domestic and foreign visitors. [904616]

Mr Whittingdale: The Prime Minister’s five-point plan for tourism sets out how this Government will grow the tourism industry in England and across Britain. I am pleased to say that in 2015, we saw a 10% increase in the number of domestic overnight visits in England compared with the previous year. To boost English tourism further, the Chancellor announced a new £40 million Discover England fund at the latest spending review. Department has to increase tourism in England from domestic and foreign visitors.

Mr Mak: Alongside Government action, community groups such as the Emsworth Business Association in my constituency play a key role in increasing tourism. Will the Minister join me in congratulating it, including those who have been released from jail to front a prime-time youth talent show on the BBC? What were they thinking in that appointment?

Mr Whittingdale: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. It is, of course, a matter of editorial judgment for the BBC, but the BBC has a duty to set an example and behave responsibly. I simply say that I am sure that the senior editorial management of the BBC will have heard what he said, and I encourage him, if he has concerns, to express them directly to the BBC.

Topical Questions

T1. [904577] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Since the last oral questions, my Department has published the first cultural White Paper in 50 years.

Sadly, we have seen the passing of a number of distinguished figures, including the “voice of Cornwall” Ted Gundy, the playwright Arnold Wesker, the architect Zaha Hadid, and the national treasures Ronnie Corbett and Victoria Wood. On a happier note, we saw England reach the final of the men’s T20 cricket world cup and the semi-final of the women’s competition, and Danny Willett become the second Englishman to win the Masters in Augusta.

We warmly congratulate Her Majesty the Queen on her 90th birthday today. We look forward to commemorating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death on Saturday, and we look forward to the London marathon on Sunday, in which I understand that eight hon. Members of this House will be participating.

Mr Speaker: And we note that Jamie Murray is now the world’s No. 1 doubles player.

Patricia Gibson: The Department has indicated that it wants the BBC to allocate £100 million of its annual budget for local news and children’s TV to outside suppliers. Which outside suppliers are meant, and what impact assessment has been made of that?

Mr Whittingdale: At the moment, the BBC is subject to the 25% independent production quota. It is not specified which particular genres that should cover, but there is a general requirement for 25%. The extent to which the BBC offers up the rest of its schedule to competition from outside independent producers is a matter we are considering very carefully. I do think there are some very good independent production companies in the sectors she mentions, and I hope that the BBC will take maximum advantage of competition to ensure that we have the best possible programmes available to the licence fee payer.

T3. [904579] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My constituents in Crawley appreciate lower prices and improved service, so will my right hon. Friend tell us what his Department is doing to improve competition in both the telephone and broadband markets?

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): While we are on anniversaries, may I congratulate Charlotte Brontë on her 200th birthday, which falls today? [Interruption.] I do not see anything wrong with congratulating her. [Laughter.] Shall I get on with it, Mr Speaker?

We have done a lot. I want to welcome Ofcom’s digital communications review and to congratulate Ofcom on it. The review is not 200 years old; in fact, it is extremely fresh—straight out of the box. It will promote competition, and we have issued a very clear statement that we will back Ofcom all the way on this.
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I am starting to realise why this Department is known as the Ministry for fun.

We all know that the Secretary of State has been distracted from doing his job as Culture Secretary lately by his extracurricular activities. I am talking about his moonlighting for the leave campaign. Last November, he promised the UK music industry that he would support clarifying EU law to level the playing field between online platforms and content providers, which would hugely boost the benefits to the UK of the digital single market. He reiterated that undertaking in writing last week. He know that my hon. Friend has particular experience in this area and speaks with that knowledge. To give a single example, during the recent flooding crisis in the north of England, both BBC and commercial local radio played a vital part in ensuring that communities were kept aware of what was happening and were given advice as to what to do about it. That is where local radio becomes incredibly important. I of course want to see it sustained and maintained.

Mr Whittingdale: That is something to which I attach great importance. I discussed that matter with Vice-President Ansip of the European Commission not that long ago. I was reassured that he shared our concern that action should be taken to ensure the music industry receives the returns it is entitled to from intermediaries that are currently underpaying. I have to say that that is not something from which my Department has backed away. Indeed, I am determined that we will continue to press the European Commission on it.

Maria Eagle: UK Music has written to the Secretary of State about this. I have the letter here—it has fallen into my lap. After expressing surprise and concern about this turn of events, it seeks your explicit confirmation that the UK Government remains committed to a clarification of EU law on the liability of online intermediaries and the use of safe harbour provisions.

Is it not true that he has spent more time running around arguing that Britain should walk away from the biggest single market in the world than he has looking after the interests of UK creative industries in these crucial negotiations?

Mr Whittingdale: The answer is no. Whether we will be subject to the regulations and directives under the digital single market, and indeed any other measures of the European Commission, is something that the British people will decide in two months’ time. In the meantime, I assure the hon. Lady that I discussed the matter on Tuesday evening with the chairman of UK Music. I reassured him that in no way had we reduced or diminished our support for the UK music industry, and that we share its determination to make sure that, if proper clarification of the rules on this point was necessary, we would be pressing for that.

T6. [904584] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): In times of community crisis, challenge or indeed success, listening to the local BBC radio station and watching local TV are vital for many of our constituents. Having worked in local broadcasting, I can say that it sometimes feels like a Cinderella service. Does the Minister agree that BBC and local commercial radio play a crucial part in the life of our communities and both should be supported, promoted and funded appropriately?

Mr Whittingdale: As I indicated a little earlier, local radio plays an absolutely vital role in communities. I know that my hon. Friend has particular experience in this area and speaks with that knowledge. To give a single example, during the recent flooding crisis in the north of England, both BBC and commercial local radio played a vital part in ensuring that communities were kept aware of what was happening and were given advice as to what to do about it. That is where local radio becomes incredibly important. I of course want to see it sustained and maintained.

T2. [904578] Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Like the Secretary of State, I have had my experience of the press tested, but—and this is not about politicians or celebrities—the years are rolling on, so when should victims of press abuse expect him to make his mind up on deciding to protect them?

Mr Whittingdale: We covered this a little earlier. As I said, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that people who have not chosen to enter public life but who find themselves the subject of press abuse deserve protection most. That is why the Government were extremely keen that a new, independent and tough regulator should be put in place. Two regulators are now being established, and we will see how effective they are. We have already implemented part of the provisions of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. We are keeping an open mind about when to implement the remaining provisions. I accept that we will need to reach a decision about that relatively soon, and I will ensure that the House is kept informed.

T7. [904585] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is good to see the hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) in their places, because they have turned out for the Commons and Lords rugby club, which has distinguished itself this season by actually winning a game. In addition to engaging with other Parliaments, the club has raised substantial sums of money for charity. Will the Minister join me in congratulating its members on the sums they have raised, in particular for the Rugby Football Union’s wonderful Injured Players Foundation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): I of course would like to join my hon. Friend in congratulating not only him on all the work he has done for rugby—

[ Interruption. ]

Football is my game. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) always likes to make fun from a sedentary position—

Mr Vaizey: Come on, Palace!

Mr Evennett: I shall be supporting Crystal Palace on Sunday, because they are my local team, unfortunately for the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on the work he has done, as well as the parliamentary rugby team on all its charitable work, and on winning a game. I hope the team has more success in future. I also offer my good wishes to all those participating in the London marathon on Sunday, particularly those who are Members of this House.

T4. [904589] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Responsible Gambling Trust has indicated that it received £7 million from the betting industry as a
voluntary donation. How much annual funding does the Department provide for research, education and treatment for gambling-related harm?

Mr Whittingdale: This is an important matter. It is already a requirement on all gambling licence holders to make an annual financial contribution to one or more organisations that perform research into the prevention and treatment of gambling-related harm. The vast majority choose to make that contribution to the Responsible Gambling Trust, which raised £6.5 million from the British-based gambling industry in 2014-15. I entirely agree that we need research into this matter, and we must take decisions based on the evidence.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As always, I appreciate your patience and guidance, Mr Speaker. On the occasion of Her Majesty’s 90th birthday, will the Minister join me in acknowledging the Queen’s vital contribution to the UK tourism industry?

Mr Evennett: I would be delighted to add my congratulations to Her Majesty on her birthday, and I commend the tremendous service that she has given to the country in so many fields, including tourism.

T5. [904583] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The UK video games industry is a fantastic UK success story, thanks in no small part to access to a huge European market. If we stay in the European Union, we will influence the future digital single market, which rules over app stores, for example. What say would we have if we walked away from the table?

Mr Vaizey: What can I say? I think it would be a disaster if we left the European Union. Thanks to the fantastic support for our introduction of tax credits and putting coding in the national curriculum, and our backing for e-sports, Britain is forging ahead in the video games industry. However, we must work with our European partners.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last night you and I, Mr Speaker, attended the 10th anniversary of *Asianlite*, an Asian newspaper that is online and in print. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State join me in congratulating it on 10 years of wonderful publication, and in looking forward to at least another 10 years of its celebrated works?

Mr Whittingdale: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating *Asianlite*. I have had several recent meetings with representatives of Asian media organisations to talk about how we can support them and work with them in tackling problems such as extremism. It is essential that those communities have thriving media, so I am very happy to hear about this latest edition and wish it every success.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto pledged: “to stop children’s exposure to harmful sexualised content online, by requiring age verification for access to all sites containing pornographic material and age-rating for all music videos”.

Why did the Secretary of State exclude that from the consultation document on child safety online, which he published in February?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for advance warning of her question, and she is right to say that this is a serious matter. We think that age verification should be in place for adult pornographic websites. Images of child abuse are absolutely illegal and we must take every measure to counter them, and I share the hon. Lady’s alarm about the figures today. However, there is a big distinction between those sites, and sites that are legal for adults but where we need to increase protection for children. The manifesto was clear that we will introduce measures to ensure age verification, and I hope that we will bring those forward very soon in legislation in the next Session.

**LEADER OF THE HOUSE**

The Leader of the House was asked—

Reform of Standing Orders

1. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward proposals to reform the Standing Orders of the House. [904587]

6. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward proposals to reform the Standing Orders of the House. [904593]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government have implemented significant change to Standing Orders since the beginning of this Session. On 22 October 2015, the House voted to approve new Standing Orders to implement English votes for English laws, delivering on a key Government commitment by giving England and Wales more control over decisions by which they alone are affected. Standing Orders undergo frequent revision. The Procedure Committee, the Clerks and the Government monitor their use to ensure that they reflect how business in the House is conducted in practice.

Patricia Gibson: The Procedure Committee, on which I sit, published a report this week on private Members’ Bills, calling for amendment to the Standing Orders because the present procedure has been brought into total disrepute due to the frequency with which Bills are talked out. Does the Leader of the House agree that the procedure is in total disrepute, or does he think that filibustering is democratic?

Dr Coffey: In this case, he is a she. We debated this last week in Westminster Hall, as the hon. Lady will be aware, as she participated in the debate. It would be remiss of me to answer before the Government published their response to the Procedure Committee’s report. We will publish our response in due course.

Peter Grant: The Deputy Leader of the House referred to English votes for English laws. It is clear that we will not make the Government see sense on the fundamental wrongness of that measure. The Government will not budge on what they want to achieve, but does the Minister not appreciate that the way this is being done is unworkable? It has managed to make this House’s
procedures even more intractable. They made a significant change to the constitution of the House on a Wednesday afternoon as if it were a minor change to the spelling in the Standing Orders. Will she tell us when the issue of the Standing Orders will be brought back before the House, so that at least if the Government are going to do the wrong thing, they do it right?

**Dr Coffey:** The Government implemented their manifesto commitment, which referred to the Standing Orders of the House, in this process. I think the procedures are perfectly workable, and I pay tribute to the Clerks and the Speaker for applying them appropriately.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** My hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House referred to the excellent report on private Members’ Bills by the Procedure Committee, on which I sit. When will the Government bring forward a response, and when can Members have a debate and take a decision on reforming private Members’ Bills?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend should be aware that it is usual for the Government to respond within two months of a report being published, and we intend to stick to that timetable.

**Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** I wonder whether the Government will, in retrospect, look at private Members’ Bills in a dispassionate way. In 1987, the late Enoch Powell wanted to introduce a Bill—and nearly got it through—to ban all stem cell research. I discovered on the morning that I could move the writ for Brecon and Radnor, and I spoke for nearly the whole day. Every time I hear on the BBC about stem cell research saving people’s lives, I know that that filibuster was not a bad thing at all.

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Gentleman talks about filibusters, but I am sure that if he really had been filibustering, the Speaker for applying them appropriately.

**Mr Speaker:** Pete Wishart. No? I thought the hon. Gentleman wished to intercede on this matter, but apparently not. No doubt we will hear him speak with force and eloquence at the appropriate time.

**Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab):** As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made clear this week, we welcome and support the Procedure Committee’s recommendations for changes to the private Members’ Bills procedures. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) has said, the majority of Members of this House, as well as interested members of the public, will be disappointed to hear that the Government have not yet committed to providing time to debate these proposals, because Bills on far too many issues that people care about, such as hospital parking charges for carers or cheaper cancer drugs, have been talked out by the filibusters. Will the Government follow the Procedure Committee recommendations and allow us to debate this matter on the Floor of the House?

**Dr Coffey:** As I have just said, the Government will respond in due course, within the expected time. I argued in the debate last week that private Members’ Bills can provide an important means of raising issues. They used to be the only way a Back Bencher could get a debate on any particular matter. We now have many more ways to raise these issues. Important pieces of legislation have both gone through this House as private Members’ Bills, and have, as private Members’ Bills, been stopped in highly appropriate ways that are allowed by the procedures of the House.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

**The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—**

### Family-Friendly Parliament

2. **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What progress the Commission has made on making Parliament more family-friendly.

3. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What progress the Commission has made on making Parliament more family-friendly.

8. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What progress the Commission has made on making Parliament more family-friendly.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Commission is committed to making the House family-friendly to the extent to which that rests within its remit. It is for the House itself to decide on, for instance, sitting hours and the annual parliamentary calendar, which I understand the Procedure Committee is to address shortly. The Commission’s diversity and inclusion strategy builds on earlier initiatives such as the opening of the House of Commons nursery in 2010. The recently introduced formalisation of flexitime for staff offers one example of family-friendly policies in action.

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** The staff of this place are often asked to work very long hours at extremely short notice; moreover, the Government have taken to, on occasion, releasing recess dates at extremely short notice. Has the Commission received any representations on how that might affect the family lives of the staff of the House?

**Tom Brake:** Those are important matters that, as I have said, are for both the Commission and the House. The Leader of the House is present, and has heard what the hon. Lady has said about the short notice that is given of recess dates.

**Gavin Newlands:** Given that a number of Members are parents of young children and are often called on to work unpredictable and long hours, a crèche facility might be more suitable than a nursery. Will the Commission consider following the example of the Scottish Parliament
in that regard? Will it also consider providing assistance for Members with school-age children whose school holidays fall almost entirely within parliamentary Sessions?

Tom Brake: As I said earlier, the nursery was opened in 2010 following consultation with Members and other stakeholders. It was decided to set up a nursery rather than a crèche because of the difficulties that arise as a result of the short notice that is given when children need to use the crèche. However, I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman’s concerns are passed on, and I am sure that the nursery governance committee will want to consider them.

Carol Monaghan: Many workplaces are taking steps to ensure that employees on maternity or paternity leave are able to keep up to date with their work. Is the Commission taking any steps to ensure that Members on maternity or paternity leave can continue to serve their constituents, such as allowing remote electronic voting?

Tom Brake: That, I think, is another matter that is as much for the House as for the Commission. Clearly the House can ensure that this place is as accessible to Members who are away as to those who are present by means of, for instance, the IT provision, but I think that issues such as e-voting need to be considered by a much wider range of organisations than just the Commission.

House Employees: Training

4. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Commission is taking to ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for training and retraining of House employees.

Tom Brake: The Commission takes the learning and development needs of staff seriously. The House of Commons Service is an investor in people, and it invests significantly in training to ensure that all staff have the skills that they need to do their jobs and develop their careers. House staff should agree a development plan with their managers each year, and they are able to select from a wide range of learning opportunities including online and face-to-face training, coaching and mentoring.

Mr Sheerman: As my right hon. Friend knows, we benefit from fantastic and dedicated staff. Over the years, I have observed our capacity for enabling people to start on quite a lowly grade and then progress to senior management, but I am afraid that I now look around and see very talented people who are unable to follow that track. Can we ensure that if there is talent, we give it a chance to grow?

Tom Brake: I echo what the hon. Gentleman has said about the dedication of House of Commons staff. I am sure that he will be aware of the training opportunities that are regularly publicised through the “Learning News and Activities” brochure. Staff have plenty of opportunities for promotion and, for instance, retraining, if that is something that they wish to undertake.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to put on record my support and gratitude for the amazing work that the House employees do for us all. We are grateful to them, and we should do all we can to support them in any ventures in which they want to take part. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it should be a priority to provide further training opportunities for employees who want to progress, both in the House and outside it?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. If he is aware of any staff who have put in a request for a particular type of training that is not currently available, I would certainly like to know about that, and I would be happy to pursue the matter.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Private Members’ Bills

5. Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of procedures for dealing with private Members’ bills. [904591]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): I have now received a copy of the Procedure Committee report, which I shall study carefully. I obviously want to respond constructively to it, and I think the House would expect me to take a little bit of time to consider what it says.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for his reply. Some of the recommendations in the report are more controversial than others. As my observant right hon. Friend will have noticed, there are 67 private Members’ Bills listed in the future business section of today’s Order Paper that stand no chance at all of being given further time for consideration. As one of the proposals in the report relates to private Members’ Bills, may I urge him to introduce measures to deal at least with the uncontroversial parts of the report as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: I have sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. Members of the public looking at that list of private Members’ Bills will believe that those measures could still make progress, but we know that, given where we are in the Session, that is not now possible. There is a lot that is good in the report, and I can give him an assurance that we will respond carefully and thoughtfully to it. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who chairs the Procedure Committee, for the excellent work that he and his team have done on the report. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) that it will get a proper response.

Departmental Question Times

7. Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the effectiveness of departmental Question Times in holding the Government to account. [904595]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Departmental Question Times are a valuable opportunity for Members to scrutinise the Government.
Topical questions add an opportunity for pressing events of the day to be covered, and of course the Prime Minister is here weekly to answer questions from any Member of the House.

Mr Allen: I want to try yet again to stem the growing blight of planted questions from Members on both Front Benches, which has now reached oppressive levels. Back Benchers are treated as though they are in bazaar in Marrakesh, having questions thrust at them—this operates on both sides of the House—and then getting emails to remind them to ask those questions. Parliamentary questions are meant to enable Back Benchers of all parties to hold the Government to account, not to enable games to be played between the two Front-Bench teams. This practice is now extending to planted Adjournment debates and planted Westminster Hall debates and, if we are not careful, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) will be seeing planted Back-Bench debates very soon. Will the Leader of the House meet the Speaker and the Chair of the Procedure Committee and have another look at this, so that what should be Back-Bench time can once again be as much about Back Benchers as about Front Benchers, as it was when I first started in this House?

Dr Coffey: I do not think that the Government should interfere in what Members can or cannot submit as questions. That is for Members to decide—

Mr Sheerman: It is the Government! It’s the Whips!

Dr Coffey: I can honestly say that I have never been handed a question by a Whip. Dare I say that, on today’s Order Paper, the Scottish National party has tabled two sets of the same question? Members will want to work together in this way to pursue a particular theme. I do not think it is right for the Government to try to tell Back Benchers what questions they can or cannot submit.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Perhaps the most dysfunctional departmental question session is Scottish questions. We have English votes for English laws, but Scottish Question Time is still very much dominated by English Members of Parliament. I have written to the Leader of the House with a few modest reforms that we could perhaps work on, given that we now have English votes for English laws, including the proposal that a little part of that session be devoted exclusively to Scottish Members, to enable us to ask our departmental questions. Has the Leader of the House had an opportunity to consider these modest reforms, and is he in a position to respond to them?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman opposed the proposals for English votes for English laws. The Government strongly believe in the United Kingdom, and therefore it is absolutely appropriate for any Member to ask a question on matters that are not devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government. That also applies to Welsh and Northern Ireland matters—and, indeed, any matter for which this United Kingdom Government are responsible.
**Business of the House**

10.35 am

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):**

The business for next week is as follows:

**Monday 25 April**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Immigration Bill, followed by debate on a motion relating to education funding in London. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Tuesday 26 April**—Remaining stages of the Policing and Crime Bill (day 1).

**Wednesday 27 April**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Trade Union Bill.

**Thursday 28 April**—Debate on a motion relating to world autism awareness week, followed by debate on a motion on Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ “Building our Future” plan. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 29 April**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 May will include:

**Monday 2 May**—The House will not be sitting.

**Tuesday 3 May**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill.

I remind the House that on Tuesday 3 May we will be sitting according to the normal Monday timetable.

**Chris Bryant:** Today is the birthday of a towering figure in British public life who has served the country for decades and is a pillar of the constitution, so may I wish the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee a very happy birthday? May I also pay warm tribute to Victoria Wood? I do not know what your favourite line was, Mr Speaker, but mine was her definition of middle age, which is when you walk past a Dr Scholl’s shop and think, “Ooh, those look comfy.” Perhaps it was her sitting at the piano belting out,

“Let’s do it,
Let’s do it...
Not bleakly,
Not meekly.
Beat me on the bottom with a Woman’s Weekly”,

which sounds like a good time had by all at last week’s Tory party away day.

I had expected that the Leader of the House would have had some kind of musical accompaniment when he arrived today. After all, when he bounced up on the stage at the leave rally in Stoke on Tuesday, the theme tune from a Hollywood western was being pumped out. I must confess that I thought it was “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”, which is a bit unfair on the Leader of the House, but it turns out that it was “The Magnificent Seven”. I presume that Nigel Farage thinks of himself as Vin, played by Steve McQueen, and that the Leader of the House sees himself as Chris Adams, played by Yul Brynner—he has the head for it. I can just imagine the two of them—the only ones alive at the end—sitting on their horses on 24 June, the day after the EU referendum, acting out the final scene. Chris gets the final words:

“We lost. We always lose.”

I hope that that will be the case.

Incidentally, did you hear the sound of silence that evening, Mr Speaker? It was the great silence that descends on the leave campaign when it is asked what Brexit would look like. The Lord Chancellor spluttered on Wednesday about the great free trade area that apparently runs from Iceland to Turkey. His solution is that we be like Bosnia, Serbia, Ukraine and Albania—Albania! The Lord Chancellor seems to think we can have free trade with the EU without free movement. Let me point out that in the 500 years since the former Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, published “Utopia”, no one has ever actually found it.

As we have heard, the Procedure Committee has published its report on private Members’ Bills. Its Chair is quite right when he says that the system is completely bust and that the Government are in the last-chance saloon. I note that the Deputy Leader of the House seems hesitant about reform, while the Leader of the House seems a bit more inclined towards it, so will the Leader of the House guarantee that the House will get a proper chance to debate changes to the Standing Orders? I do not mean just some insubstantial debate, but a proper one that can lead to change.

The Leader just announced that we shall be considering Lords amendments to the Trade Union Bill on Wednesday. The Trade Union Political Funds and Political Party Funding Committee, a cross-party Lords Committee, has made some important suggestions and I urge the Government to act on them. Otherwise, fair-minded people might conclude that that Government are engaged in a nasty, partisan attempt to hobble anyone who disagrees with them.

Will the Leader of the House clarify the Government’s position on genocide and the Yazidi Christians? The deliberate massacre of thousands upon thousands solely because of their religion and their ethnic origin is an evident barbarity. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) put her case admirably yesterday and carried the Division unanimously, with 278 votes, but surely the Government should act upon it. Mysteriously, the Government sat on their hands last night, and they have a habit of ignoring such unanimous motions. Will the Leader of the House pledge that just this once the Government will take the voice of the House of Commons seriously and act?

Do the Government have any plans at all to reform the House of Lords? The bizarre Lib Dem hereditary by-election on Tuesday brought back Viscount Thurso, a man who is clearly a master of the parliamentary hokey-cokey. He was a hereditary Member of the House of Lords and then an elected Member of this House. Then he was thrown out, and he will now be an elected hereditary peer for life. We have now had 29 hereditary peerage by-elections. My favourite was last September’s, when the ninth Duke of Wellington won, meaning that there are four times as many dukes in Parliament today under Elizabeth II as there were 450 years ago under Elizabeth I. Wellington defeated, among others, the seventh Earl of Limerick, who might well have written:

“There was a hereditary peer.
Whose attitude was very queer.
He stood for election.
Considered defection.
And ended up sitting in here."

I am particularly disappointed in the Leader of the House because this Saturday is the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and, apart from a production of Richard II in the Members' Dining Room on Saturday evening, this House will barely acknowledge it—or, for that matter, St George's day. That is profoundly unpatriotic and the Leader of the House should hang his head in shame.

Let me use the words of the bard to couch my message to those “strange bedfellows” Boris and Nigel on the EU. This is not “a foregone conclusion” and I do not want to “lay it on with a trowel”, but if we leave the EU, we will be “in a pickle” and all their talk of freedom will be “cold comfort” to those who lose their jobs when companies leave the UK, “bag and baggage”. I say this “more in sorrow than in anger”, but their “pomp and circumstance” offers “a fool’s paradise”, because “that way madness lies”. “More fool you”. Nobody wants the UK to leave the EU more than President Putin of Russia, so it is Brexit, “pursued by a bear”.

Chris Grayling: Shakespearean words from the Bottom of the Labour party.

The Prime Minister will be in the Chamber shortly to speak on behalf of the Government on this occasion of the Queen's 90th birthday, but what I wish to say today is that as the Lord President of the Council—the person who presides over the Privy Council—and previously the Lord Chancellor, I have had extensive dealings with Her Majesty over the past few years and she is a fantastic lady. She is an example to us all. She has done amazing service for our country, and I am sure I will be joined by the whole House in wishing her a very happy birthday.

May I also echo the happy birthday wishes to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and wish everybody a happy St George's day this weekend? It would also be appropriate for me to wish all the very best to the eight Members across this House who are running the London marathon this weekend. It is a feat of endurance, to say the least. They are raising good money for charity and we should be proud of all of them, on both sides of the House.

Chris Bryant: Why aren’t you running?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure that the shadow Leader of the House is running either.

Let me deal with the specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised. On private Members' Bills, the report is thoughtful, as I said earlier, and welcome. It gives us a lot of food for thought and we will respond in due course. I want to read it carefully and decide how best to respond. I have already indicated to my hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will consider carefully what was said yesterday and take account of the views of the House.

On Europe, I will never take seriously the views of a man who, a few years ago, was expressing such dismay at Britain not joining the euro. I will never take his views seriously, having listened to what he said then.

The shadow Leader of the House gave an interview a few days ago in which he accused me of telling the same joke five weeks in a row. I can only say that when I kept asking why he was still on the Labour Front Bench, I was not joking. He represents a party that wants nothing to do with Britain's largest provider of apprenticeships; a so-called democratic party that apparently supports direct action to bring down the Government; a party that wants to dismantle our nation's defences; a party led by a man who believes we have not had enough immigration into this country already; and a party that, despite his own wise words, for which I pay tribute to him, is clearly riddled with anti-Semitism. The people of principle in his party now sit on its Back Benches; the fact that he is still on the Front Bench speaks volumes.

Mr Speaker, there is perhaps good news for those people of principle on the Labour Back Benches. You might not have seen the advert that appeared yesterday for the position of media spokesperson in the Leader of the Opposition's office, but regarding the duration of the post, it said:

"Fixed-term contract for the period only that Jeremy Corbyn is the leader of the Labour Party, or until 31st December 2016, whichever is sooner."

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the status of foreign politicians visiting this country? I am not referring to Barack Obama. The Maldivian high commissioner has told me that members of the Maldivian Democratic party who are visiting this country face very serious criminal charges at home. I simply do not understand what they are doing here.
Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will make sure that his concerns are drawn to the attention of the Home Office and the Foreign Office. When we admit people to this country, it is obviously right and proper that we understand the context of their arrival, who they are and what they are doing.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business and join him in acknowledging the Queen’s 90th birthday. I know we spend the opening parts of business questions looking for significant events from history, but there can be nothing more significant. I know we are having the formal debate later, but may I wish her now a very happy birthday and recognise her lifetime of duty and service?

It is good to see the Leader of the House back as a solo act following his laugh-a-minute duo with Nigel Farage—not so much “The Two Ronnies” as “The Two Groanies”. I am pretty certain that following the referendum, when the day of reckoning comes, it will be good night from him. The debate around the EU referendum has been utterly appalling. For most people in Scotland, it seems like two bald Tories fighting over a comb. As we go forward, can we drop “Project Fear” and the UKIP-ification of the leave agenda, and instead have a rational, sensible debate so that we can do justice to something that is critical to this nation?

I welcome our newest parliamentarian, the noble Lord, Viscount Thurso, who won a stunning victory when he secured all three votes among the massed ranks of the Liberal aristocracy. Labour Members drone on about the House of Lords, but may I gently ask them what they are doing about their Labour peers? Labour has the second biggest group down there, and there are Labour aristocrats, too—do not let us forget that. The minute Labour joins us in trying to address this, we will start to make progress. Viscount Thurso is practically politically indestructible. Booted out of that place and booted out of this place, he is still here, as an unelected parliamentarian. Is there no way to get rid of these people? I now appeal to the Tories: join us in trying to address this, we will start to make progress. Viscount Thurso is practically politically indestructible. Booted out of that place and booted out of this place, he is still here, as an unelected parliamentarian. Is there no way to get rid of these people?

The hon. Gentleman does not agree—[Interruption.] Clearly the shadow Leader of the House does not agree either.

On Scotland, may I say that we have clear political ambition there? My view is that Ruth Davidson would be the best First Minister for Scotland. If the SNP is successful in May, it will be interesting to see how it adapts to having the powers that it will have to wield and the decisions it will have to take, including tax decisions. So far the SNP has studiously avoided taking tough decisions in Scotland. It has demanded more powers, which it seldom uses, and tried to convince us that somehow it can rise above the practicalities of government, but being in government means having to do tough things. If the party is successful in May, we will see whether it is really up to governing; I suspect we may find it wanting.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): This week E.ON signed up to support my constituent Jackie Woodcock’s Dying to Work campaign, an initiative that would change the law to stop employers from extending the criteria for dismissal on the grounds of capability to terminally ill workers. May we have a debate on what more can be done to encourage businesses to sign up to this much needed law change?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I know she has raised before. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will be in the House in 10 days’ time. I will alert him to the fact that she has raised the issue today and she might want to bring it up with him, as it is a matter for that Department.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on the junior doctors contract? On Monday, the Secretary of State for Health said that he was defending two legal cases against him. Now would be a good time to suspend the imposition of the contract. After all, the Secretary of State is not above the law.

Chris Grayling: This matter was debated and discussed in the House on Monday.
Valerie Vaz: It was an urgent question.

Chris Grayling: It was, but the Secretary of State for Health was here and he did take questions, and I have no doubt that he will be back in the House to address the issue in due course. It is simply my hope that a resolution can be reached. He and his colleagues in the Department of Health have put in extensive efforts and have held something like 75 meetings with junior doctors' representatives. None of us wants to see a strike, particularly not one that involves emergency services. I would call on all doctors not to take industrial action next week and I hope a resolution can be reached quickly.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Just weeks after the co-chairman of the Oxford University Labour club stepped down, saying that a large proportion of both the OULC and the student left in Oxford “have some kind of problem with Jews”, I am sure my right hon. Friend will be incredulous to hear that students who attended the National Union of Students conference in Brighton yesterday debated boycotting Holocaust Memorial Day and then went on to elect as its president someone who described the University of Birmingham as “something of a Zionist outpost” in British higher education. May we have a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to set out measures that the Government will take to counter the rise in anti-Semitism that is being fomented on university campuses?

Chris Grayling: That is simply unacceptable in our society. The views expressed yesterday are not acceptable. The shadow Leader of the House was absolutely right when he talked about anti-Semitism in his own party. All of us from all political parties should work to stamp it out across our society, as it is simply unacceptable.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate in which we can hear the views of those who have decided to support our membership of the EU, such as President Obama, and indeed the views of those who have recently decided to support the campaign to come out, such as Marie Le Pen from the Front National, the far-right party in France? We could also use it as an opportunity to hear the views of the members of the Scottish National party, who, as far as I can tell, want Scotland, but not the United Kingdom, to stay in the European Union.

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman and I will have the opportunity to debate these matters in my constituency shortly, and I am grateful to him for taking part in that debate. It is of course a lively discussion across our society, and one on which, no doubt, the people will reach their decision on 23 June.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Local parish councils are invaluable for bringing together communities, and for representing communities at that very local level. May we have a debate on the rare but concerning occasions when one person sits on multiple parish councils as well as on district or borough councils, thereby reducing broad and effective participation on those local parish councils?

Chris Grayling: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important point. I am aware of the situation in her constituency. I pay tribute to her for the work that she is doing in Eastleigh. She is right to say that those who enter public life should take their responsibilities seriously, commit to the organisation of which they are part, and be active in the community according to their responsibilities, particularly on a parish council where it is very much the smallest local matters—they are often essential matters to small communities—that are the focus of its work.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for their birthday wishes. I am in the fortunate position of sharing a birthday with Her Majesty every year. I am afraid to say, though, that we are getting to the state of play where the candles are costing more than the cake. May I just point out to the Leader of the House that, on occasion, Members from across the House ask him for a debate in Government time, and he almost always refers them to the Backbench Business Committee, but some of those requests come from Members who are not Back Benchers, and that makes it rather difficult for us to deal with those requests. Will he bear that in mind for future business? On a personal note, I represent the constituency of Gateshead, and I live in the heart of the community of Gateshead where there is a very orthodox and learned Haredi Jewish community, which I am very proud to represent.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point, and I support him in making it. On the allocation of time, the challenge for the Government is that we have now allocated to the Opposition and to the Backbench Business Committee around half the time in a particular week, but it is about ensuring that the Government can also pursue their business. Opposition Front Benchers will typically have a substantial block of time this week, and the Backbench Business Committee has time each year for Back Benchers, so we do attempt to achieve the right balance according to the Standing Orders agreed by this House.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend arrange a statement about the efficiency and speed with which visas are granted to business people from African countries? We are trying to expand exports in that area and often find that its business people are delayed for weeks in coming here, when often their own embassies in this country issue visas to business people from the UK within a matter of days.

Chris Grayling: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will have heard my hon. Friend’s words. There are exciting economic developments happening across the Commonwealth and it is really important that we are able to maximise those opportunities to trade, to do business and to invest. I will certainly ensure that she is aware of the concerns that he has raised.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate on the importance of the teaching of science, technology, engineering and maths in school? Porthcawl Primary School has a team called the Porthcawl Power Formula 1 team, made up of five girls and one boy who
[Mrs Madeleine Moon] have designed and constructed a Formula 1 racing car using their skills in STEM subjects. They got second place in south Wales and are going forward to the UK-wide competition in Coventry. Does not such creative work make possible the creation of the scientists, mathematicians and technicians of the future that this country so desperately needs?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and what a great project. I congratulate the young people involved, who will no doubt go on to great things and to make some great innovations in the future, as well as competing in the near future. I absolutely agree on STEM subjects, which are of paramount importance to us. I am proud of the work that the Government have done to encourage the teaching of STEM subjects and that is something that we all, on both sides of the House, should encourage for the future.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): On Tuesday, I will be co-hosting an event with my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), along with Brian May from Queen, to promote the Amazing Grace hedgehog challenge. This, along with my petition to save the hedgehog, will go a long way to raise the profile and plight of Mr and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. May I urge you, Mr Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and other Members to join us at 10 o’clock in the Attlee suite on Tuesday?

Chris Grayling: You might be able to, Mr Speaker, but unfortunately I will be in Cabinet at the time. I send all my best wishes for the event. The work that my hon. Friend has done is tremendous and I see that the petition is now past 30,000 signatures. My one slight concern is that he might remind Brian May that occasionally badgers kill hedgehogs.

Mary Glindon (Newport West) (Lab): The civil servants at the Cabinet Office took a very unusual decision last year when they publicly published their advice saying that Ministers should not give a grant to Kids Company, run by Ms Batmanghelidjh, the poster girl of the big society. Ministers defied that advice, gave £3 million to Kids Company and the charity collapsed three days later. As that money has been lost, presumably irretrievably, should not this matter be reported to the adviser on Ministers’ interests, who is responsible for dealing with such egregious breaches of ministerial conduct?

Chris Grayling: The matter has been investigated in detail by the appropriate Select Committee, and any Member of this House and any member of the public is free to lodge any complaint they wish to lodge.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a full day’s debate in Government time on the Treasury’s analysis of the effect of the UK leaving the European Union? That will give all Members the opportunity to explore the various forecasts made in that document—the opportunity, for example, to explore the likely accuracy of a prediction as to how well the UK economy will be doing in 15 years’ time.

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend will know, there is a debate in Westminster Hall on Government communications about the referendum on 9 May, and I am sure the Chair of that debate will be happy to allow him to debate those matters as well.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May we have a statement or a debate on the availability of life-changing drugs to members of the public? I have constituents who are having great difficulties in getting those drugs because of a lack of funding.

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, we provide access to new drugs. Through the cancer drugs fund, we provide specific funding centrally for new drugs, but it is right and proper that the health service considers the merits of each new drug as it comes on to the market and forms a view as to whether it can make the difference that its originators claim.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Further to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), the United States would rightly never cede its sovereignty to a supranational body, so may we have a
debate on the protocol that international leaders should not involve themselves in commenting on domestic elections?

Chris Grayling: I suspect that President Obama will have picked up the different sides of the current debate before he arrives. We will all wait with interest to see what he has to say.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Before Christmas, this House debated and agreed a nuclear agreement with Iran. One of the conditions was that human rights, including religious freedom, would be preserved and protected. In January 2016 a revolutionary court in Golestan province in Iran reportedly sentenced 24 Baha’is to a total of 183 years in prison in connection with the peaceful exercise of their faith. Another 80 Baha’is were reportedly detained on 31 December 2015. The Government said that followers of the Baha’i cult enjoy citizens’ rights pursuant to the country’s laws, and that allegations presented to the contrary in the report were baseless. Clearly, that is not the case. May we have a statement or a debate on the subject?

Chris Grayling: It was the view of the Government that it would be better for us to engage with Iran to try and address the nuclear issue, but by engaging we can also try and influence Iran on human rights matters. Of course there are human rights concerns, and of course the Foreign Office and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary would always raise concerns on human rights matters with countries where such concerns existed, but I think the Government are right to say that we are better to engage than stand away from Iran, in the hope that we can influence improvement there.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), it is ironic that the Holocaust Educational Trust was holding a reception and information session in this place at the same time as the National Union of Students was debating a motion to boycott Holocaust Memorial Day, and that speakers in favour of that were applauded for saying that Holocaust Memorial Day was not inclusive enough. Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done on education to combat the scourge of anti-Semitism, so may we have a debate in Government time on what action we are going to take to root that out once and for all among all political parties and among all sections of society?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right. We are seeing that happen time and again—statements about the Jewish population in this country, statements about Israel, that are unacceptable in a democratic society. Of course, there are legitimate debates to be had about the future of Israel and Palestine and the peace process, but some of the anti-Semitic views that are appearing in our society are simple unacceptable.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent Munir Butt arrived in the UK as an eight-year-old child with his parents and siblings 48 years ago, in 1968. He has lived his whole life in the UK; he has been educated here, and he has married and has two grown-up children. When applying for a new job last year, he was asked to produce a passport—something he never had before—and he was then told that he is here illegally. I have written to the Home Secretary about the issue, and I have yet to receive a response. The Home Office approach seems to centre on my constituent’s parents’ marriage certificate from rural Kenya in the late ’50s. All his siblings have passports. My constituent has no income now and cannot apply for benefits because he is believed to be here illegally.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say very gently to the hon. Lady that I recognise this is an extremely serious matter, but—this is by way of a tip to her and other Members—it is always a good idea, whatever the matter at hand, to get in the request for a debate or a statement early in one’s inquiry. In any case, I feel modestly optimistic that the question mark is on its way.

Carol Monaghan: Thank you for your tip, Mr Speaker. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the residential status of historical immigrants?

Chris Grayling: I clearly cannot give details now about the case concerned, but if the hon. Lady would like to write to me with more details about her constituent, I will make sure they are passed directly to the Home Secretary. I understand the concern she raises, and I am sure this is a matter we would all want to resolve quickly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I associate myself, on my behalf and that of my constituents, with the birthday congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen? I was going to ask for a regular debate in the House about manufacturing after the silly remarks on the “Today” programme saying that manufacturing in our country is finished. However, after the unfortunate remarks by the Leader of the House about the Labour party being riddled with anti-Semitism, may I ask, as someone who has fought anti-Semitism in the Labour party and in this country all his life, whether we can have an early debate about that issue? That is so important on a day when the people who want to take us out of Europe have invited Marine Le Pen to come here and speak.

Chris Grayling: On the issue of anti-Semitism and the Labour party, I would encourage Labour Members to have a debate. The shadow Leader of the House is absolutely right to have written the article he did, saying that anti-Semitism is not acceptable, but, of course, his words have to be turned into action by the Labour party.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): One of my constituents, Ewan Gurr, would be delighted to become unemployed. Why? Well, he is Scotland’s network manager for the Trussell Trust. The latest figures he has published show that over 133,000 people depend on food banks—they would twice fill Murrayfield stadium—and we have seen a 20% increase in my constituency in the last year.
alone, due to the recent benefit cuts and sanctions. One constituent has just been sanctioned for an appalling three years—three whole years—and is depending on £36 a week. May we have an urgent debate in the House to discuss that Dickensian situation and to make food banks a thing of the past so that Ewan Gurr can move on to new employment?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman’s constituent can have been sanctioned for three years only if he has turned down three reasonable job offers and so has basically refused to work. In a society that is compassionate but believes that people should get back to work, that is simply unacceptable. On food banks, there are some fantastic projects around the country linked to churches, where people are doing really good work in our community. It is worth saying that the use of food banks in this country is much lower than in other countries, such as Germany. However, I pay tribute to those who work on behalf of people going through hiccups in their lives, and it is right and proper that we have a strong voluntary sector that does that.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate about the time it is taking the Department for Work and Pensions to determine whether to include Dupuytren’s contracture on the list of prescribed diseases covered by industrial injuries disablement benefit? The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council gave the Department its recommendation on 14 May 2014—nearly two years ago—and a Minister said in correspondence that a decision would be forthcoming within a year. It is now April 2016. Will the Leader of the House advise that the former miners in my constituency have a transparent system of fares on our railways, and may we please have a debate on what can be done to create a more equitable system of rail fares in this country?

Chris Grayling: I have tapped the microphone and it is working, Mr Speaker.

The Transport Secretary will be here next Thursday. I know that he is very concerned to make sure that we have a transparent system of fares on our railways, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will raise that important point with him.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): In January I asked the Leader of the House why the Government had allowed disability discrimination to take hold in the civil service. Recent analysis by Keele University has found that in all Departments disabled staff were less likely to receive “exceed” performance ratings than their non-disabled colleagues. That means that, on average, disabled workers are 74% more likely to be in the bottom performance management category, which puts their jobs at risk. Will the Leader of the House please now push for a statement to explain why his Government are content to allow disability discrimination to continue?

Chris Grayling: Whatever the research may say, I simply do not accept that. I have been a Secretary of State in one Department and a lead Minister in another, and my experience of the way in which we work with people with disabilities and of the role they play in our Departments is nothing but positive. We have some fine disabled civil servants who are role models to others with disabilities and who make a real difference to this Government, and I hope they will continue to do so in the years ahead.
90th Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen

11.18 am

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty to offer the heartfelt good wishes of the House on the occasion of Her Majesty's ninetieth birthday, expressing its deep gratitude for Her Majesty's lifelong commitment to the service of the country and the Commonwealth, and praying that Her Majesty may long continue in health and happiness.

That Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister, Chris Grayling, Jeremy Corbyn, Chris Bryant, Angus Robertson, Mr Nigel Dodds, Tim Farron, Hywel Williams, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Danny Kinahan, Caroline Lucas and Mr Douglas Carswell do wait upon Her Majesty with the said Message.

The motion stands in my name and those of the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Scottish National party.

Today we celebrate the 90th birthday of our country's longest reigning monarch. Her Majesty the Queen—our Queen—has lived a life of service that began long before her accession to the throne. In 1940, at just 14 years old, the then Princess Elizabeth made her first BBC radio broadcast, to bring comfort and hope to children who had been evacuated from Britain's cities during the war. At 18, she became the first female member of the royal family to join the armed forces, joining the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service, training as a driver and a mechanic. At just 21, she made the exquisite and defining broadcast from Cape Town in which she uttered the famous words “my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service”. Never has such an extraordinary promise been so profoundly fulfilled.

As I said when we gathered in September to mark Her Majesty becoming our longest reigning monarch, for all of us in this Chamber who seek to play our part in public service, it is truly humbling to comprehend the scale of service that Her Majesty has given to our country over so many years. If we think of the vital landmark in completing our journey to democracy when everyone over 21 was finally given the vote in 1928, it means that Her Majesty has presided over two thirds of our history as a full democracy. In that time, she has met a quarter of all the American Presidents since independence. She has provided counsel to no fewer than 12 Prime Ministers, and that is just in Britain. She has worked with well over 150 Prime Ministers in her other realms. If anyone can come up with a collective noun for a group of Prime Ministers, it is probably Her Majesty. I think I will leave it her to make some suggestions.

I know that, like me, every Prime Minister has found Her Majesty's counsel an incredibly valuable part of the job. Her perspective and length of experience are unique and utterly invaluable. Her first Prime Minister, in 1952, was Winston Churchill. Like him and all those who have followed, I can testify that she is quite simply one of the best audiences in the world. There is no one else in public life to whom any Prime Minister can really speak in total confidence, and no other country has a Head of State with such wisdom and such patience. There are some who suspect that, at times, I may have put her patience to the test. In the play “The Audience”, the character who portrays me goes on and on about Europe so long that she falls asleep, but I can guarantee that that has never happened. I may not have kept my promise not to bang on about Europe in every forum, but this is certainly the one where I try the hardest.

As some have pointed out, Her Majesty is now entering her 10th decade and starting to take things a little easier, which is why in the last year alone she has only undertaken 177 public engagements. In 90 years, Her Majesty has lived through some extraordinary times in our world, from the second world war, when her parents, the King and Queen, were nearly killed as bombs were dropped on Buckingham Palace, to the rationing with which she bought the material for her wedding dress; from presenting the World cup to England at Wembley in 1966, to man landing on the moon three years later; and from the end of the cold war to peace in Northern Ireland.

Throughout it all, as the sands of culture shift and the tides of politics ebb and flow, Her Majesty has been steadfast—a rock of strength for our nation, for our Commonwealth and, on many occasions, for the whole world. As her grandson, Prince William, has said: “Time and again, quietly and modestly, the Queen has shown us all that we can confidently embrace the future without compromising the things that are important.” As Her Majesty in her first televised Christmas broadcast in 1957, it is necessary to hold fast to “ageless ideals” and “fundamental principles”, and that requires a “special kind of courage...which makes us stand up for everything we know is right, everything that is true and honest.” In this modern Elizabethan era, Her Majesty has led a gentle evolution of our monarchy. From the first televised Christmas Day message, more than three decades before cameras were allowed into this House, to the opening up of the royal palaces and the invention of the royal walkabout, she has brought the monarchy closer to the people while retaining its dignity.

Her Majesty's role as head of State is also immensely important to her. She has often said that her life is inspired not only by her love of this great country but by her faith in God. As she has said, “I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God.” In standing up for Christianity, she has been clear that the Church of England has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in our country.

Her Majesty always performs her constitutional duty as Head of State impeccably, but as head of our nation she is held in even higher regard for the way in which she represents the United Kingdom. It has rightly been said by some constitutional experts that Her Majesty the Queen is the only person born in the United Kingdom who is not English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish; she is all and none of those things and can represent all the nations of the United Kingdom on an equal basis in a way that no President ever could.

The Queen has also constantly represented the nation when abroad. Foreign leaders from President Truman to Nelson Mandela and Ronald Reagan have all testified to her extraordinary ability both to represent this country and to understand the world. On her hugely important and healing state visit to Ireland in 2011, Her Majesty began her remarks in Irish and spoke about the history of the troubled relationship between the UK and Ireland.
Today, we are talking about a highly respected individual who is 90. Whatever differing views people across this country have about the institution, the vast majority share an opinion that Her Majesty has served this country, and has overwhelming support in doing so, with a clear sense of public service and public duty, as the Prime Minister has indicated.

Her Majesty has carried out that duty with great warmth. My dear friend Mildred Gordon, the former Member for Bow and Poplar, who recently died aged 92 and whose funeral is tomorrow, met the Queen at the opening of the docklands light railway. The Queen asked Mildred how she was getting on as a newly elected MP, and Mildred replied, with the devastating honesty with which she replied to everything, by saying that she felt she had very little power to help her constituents. The Queen took her on one side and said, with her customary wit:

“Once they find out you lot can’t help them, they all write to me”.

Her Majesty was born less than a month before the general strike. A first daughter, who would later unexpectedly become heir to the throne, she was born two years before all women in Britain got the vote, as the Prime Minister pointed out. Her childhood was during the mass poverty of the long slump of the 1930s and she had her teenage years during the brutal carnage of the second world war. At war’s end, she experienced people’s joy first hand, as the young princess walked through the streets of London; I am pleased that this morning Radio 4 replayed that very moving oral history of our time and lives—indeed, of before the time of most of us in the House.

Her Majesty became Queen at just 25, following the death of her father, and has reigned for nearly 64 years. She is the longest reigning monarch in our history. In that time, our country has become a better and more civilised place. We have enacted equality legislation, ended colonialism and created the national health service, the welfare state and the Open University. As Head of the Commonwealth, she has been a defender of that incredible multicultural global institution. We are all very grateful for the way in which she has stood up for the Commonwealth; she has visited every Commonwealth country, I think. The Prime Minister was quite right to draw attention to her historic visit to Ireland in 2011, and her speaking in the Irish language at the reception held for her in Dublin during that visit.

Today I am welcoming two nonagenarians from my constituency to Parliament. Both have a link with the celebrations that we are conducting today. They are Iris Monaghan and George Durack. Iris was born in what is now the Republic of Ireland, but was then part of Britain. She came to London in 1951, before the coronation, and was a Crown civil servant in the Inland Revenue. She has helped to collect taxes since 1951, keeping us all in the state to which we are accustomed.

George fought in the second world war, serving in the 1st Battalion of the Rifle Brigade, attached to the 7th Armoured Division. He had a daily close affinity with Her Majesty throughout his working life, as he worked for the Royal Mail, delivering Her Majesty’s head through letterboxes all over north London.

Yesterday, I was present at the graduation of a 91-year-old constituent who has just completed her third degree—a master’s no less—at Birkbeck, University of London. That proves that it is never too late to take up a new career and learn something else.
It is their generation—that of the Queen and of my parents—that defeated the horrors of fascism in Europe, endured the privations of the post-war era and built a more civilised and equal Britain. We have much to be grateful to them for.

On the day of her coronation in 1953, Her Majesty was driven through Upper Street in my borough. But her crowning achievement in Islington was to come some years later—you will enjoy this, Mr Speaker. In 2006, she was due to open the new Emirates Stadium in my constituency, but had to pull out due to an injury. Unfortunately, that is a fate that has afflicted far too many of Arsenal’s squad in subsequent years, so we must congratulate her on her prescience. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) was then leader of Islington Council. As the Queen could not attend the opening, the whole squad was invited to Buckingham Palace to meet her, and my hon. Friend accompanied them. We know that the Queen is absolutely above politics. She may be above football, too, but many locals harbour a quiet, secret view that she is actually privately a gooner.

In her reign, the Queen has seen off 12 Prime Ministers. I recently attended my first state dinner; she has received over 100 state visits, and, as the Prime Minister indicated, visited well over 100 countries on our behalf. I admire her energy and wish her well in her continuing and outstanding commitment to public life. I wish her a very happy 90th birthday.

11.34 am

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I associate myself with the excellent tribute paid by the Prime Minister to the Queen, and on behalf of myself and my constituents, may I congratulate the Queen on this great milestone in a life of service and punctilious duty, dedicated entirely to her people in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, and as the most formidable ambassador to the rest of the world that this country has ever had? It has been a life of devotion, fortitude, good judgment, selfless duty, great good humour and uncomplaining hard work. In all that, she has been supported by a loving family, and blessed with a happy marriage to a remarkable consort who has done so much for her and for our country. The Queen was crowned in the same abbey church as William the Conqueror, and at the age of 26—the same age as Queen Elizabeth I had been 400 years earlier. She embodies all the best qualities that are most important to our country, and lends such distinction to our nation.

The Queen brings to our national life an experience and knowledge of government and events, and of men and women all over the world, which is truly unrivalled by any other person in the land. Throughout her long reign, she has displayed judgment of the first order, great tolerance, and absolute neutrality at all times. When she ascended to the throne, her first Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was of an age to have charged with the 21st Lancers at the battle of Omdurman in 1898, armed with a sword and a pistol, yet her current Prime Minister was not even born in 1952. Such is the scale and breadth of the life that she has so triumphantly lived through. During those extraordinary 90 years of some of the most tumultuous social, economic and technological change that Britain has ever seen, she has provided a very firm hand on the tiller.

The Queen is a source of powerful influence for this country throughout the world. She is the Queen of 16 countries, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the Head of the Commonwealth—a greatly undervalued organisation that includes more than a quarter of the world’s population. She thus brings a vital and often unrecognised addition to our efforts and influence overseas, and the House should pay great tribute to her work down the years in that remarkable organisation since 1949.

Every country needs someone who can represent the whole nation. That may seem primitive—and indeed it is—but if nationhood is to mean anything, it must have a focus. In our case, for many years that focus has been and remains the Queen. Nations have values, and they should be proud of them and willing to express that pride. That is what we are able to do with our monarchy and our Queen.

It is my firmly held belief that the Queen is the single most important, respected, admired and loved public figure in the world today, and if I may, I will conclude with a vignette that I have told in the House before but that bears repeating. On the night of 4 April 1955, on the eve of his resignation as Prime Minister, Churchill gave a dinner at No. 10 in honour of the Queen. It was agreed between the private offices that there would be no speeches, but the Queen, greatly moved by the impending retirement of her first Prime Minister, whom she had known since she was a very small child, rose in her place and lifted her glass with a toast to “My Prime Minister”. And Churchill, a very old man in the full-dress evening uniform of a Knight of the Garter, completely unprepared, pulled himself to his feet, and this is what he said to the Queen:

“Madam, I propose a toast to your Majesty which I used to enjoy drinking as a subaltern officer in the 4th Hussars at Bangalore in India in the reign of your Majesty’s great-great-grandmother, Queen Victoria. I drink to the wise and kindly way of life, of which your Majesty is the young and gleaming champion.”

For 90 years of her life and 64 years of her reign, she has always been the same. God save the Queen!

11.40 am

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is an honour to co-sponsor today’s motion with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, and to follow the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) who spoke so eloquently.

I would like to take the opportunity to put on record the appreciation of Her Majesty by the people of Scotland, with whom she has had a lifetime connection and a commitment to the country. While she has managed to serve as Head of State to a remarkable 32 independent countries during her unprecedented and successful reign, her association with Scotland is enduring and it is special.

Just last year, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh marked the day she became the UK’s longest-reigning monarch with a steam-train ride from Edinburgh to the opening of the new Borders Railway. When the Queen was born, she was delivered by a Scottish nurse, Nurse Barrie, and since then she has made regular visits north of the border. Her youthfatest days were spent at Glamis in Angus, where her mother and grandparents were from, and much of her childhood was spent at Balmoral, while part of her honeymoon was at nearby Birkhall.
On becoming Queen after the death of her father King George VI, one of her first official tasks was to plant a cherry tree at the Canongate Kirk in Edinburgh, the parish church for the Palace of Holyroodhouse. After her coronation, crowds lined the streets of the Scottish capital as the Queen received the honours of Scotland: the Scottish crown, the sceptre and the sword of state. Notwithstanding concerns from some in the 1950s about how her Majesty could be Queen Elizabeth II of Scotland when we have never had a Queen Elizabeth I, an elegant solution was found on postboxes north of the border, where there is a Scottish crown rather than the ER II royal cypher.

Throughout the decades of her reign, the Queen has been a regular visitor across Scotland. For me, the most remarkable events have been in recent years, including the 1999 re-opening of the Scottish Parliament after a recess of nearly 300 years. Who could forget the entire chamber, all MSPs of all parties, the public gallery, Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh all singing “A Man’s a Man for A That” by Robert Burns?

As Head of the Commonwealth, the Queen attended the Glasgow 2014 games opening ceremony and, always good at keeping up with the times, Her Majesty went viral on Twitter following a trip to the Glasgow national hockey centre after appearing to “photobomb” a selfie by an Australian player by smiling in the background.

While the Queen’s official visits and functions in Scotland are well received, there is an appreciation that it is at Balmoral that she likes to be most. Queen Victoria described Balmoral as her “heaven on earth”; while the current Queen is said to be “never happier” than when spending her summer break at the north-east estate, her private home which was handed down through generations of royals. The usual two-month stay in August and September traditionally includes a visit to the nearby Braemar Gathering where the Queen is Chieftain of the Highland games event and attends Crathie Kirk as a member of the Church of Scotland.

Her Majesty also has a love of the Hebrides and cruising around the islands and coastline. One story I particularly recall is from 2006 when the royal party was moored by the island of Gigha off the west coast of Kintyre. The Queen wanted to see the famous Achamore Gardens. However, no advance arrangements had been made, so Princess Anne apparently cycled to the local newsagents to see if there was a way for her mother to be transported around. That duly happened in the newsagent’s people carrier by the newsagent—now that must have been a sight to behold.

There is a legion of stories of tourists and visitors encountering a lady bearing a striking resemblance to Her Majesty walking her dogs alone on Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh or by the Palace of Holyroodhouse, or being offered a lift as she drove her Land Rover on Royal Deeside. I am sure that, if he is able to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson), whose constituency includes Balmoral, will have more stories of that kind to recount. Her Majesty’s connections with Balmoral and the north-east of Scotland are abiding. She is a reader of the Aberdeen Press and Journal, and we have learned in recent days, from an interview with her cousin, that she is an accomplished speaker of the Doric, which is no mean feat. The Queen’s connections with the north of Scotland are also highly prized by leading small and large companies and businesses, including Speyside firms Walkers of Aboyne, Baxters of Fochabers and Johnston’s of Elgin. More than 80 Scottish companies hold royal warrants, and no doubt many others would like to be warrant-holders as well.

A 90th birthday is a remarkable milestone for all who reach it, but particularly for our Head of State and her ongoing lifetime of public service. We wish her, the Duke of Edinburgh, and all her family well, and look forward to many further years of outstanding public service.

11.46 am

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me, on what I think is a momentous day, to celebrate the birthday of our longest-serving monarch. I have to say that it is also today that I celebrate my birthday, although I am a little younger than Her Majesty. I feel that a Beatles song would be most appropriate if I find it among my birthday presents.

I have always been tremendously proud to share the date of my birth with our monarch. When I was very little, in Cardiff, my father always used to kid me that the 24-gun salute in Sophia Gardens was, in fact, for me, but I found out fairly soon that it was for a much more important lady.

Like many who are here today, I am a modern Elizabethan. We have never known any other monarch, and we are staunchly proud to live in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. She is truly a beacon and an exemplar of dedication to the people of the United Kingdom, and an exemplar of devotion to duty. She is also a wonderful role model for women not just in this country but around the world, particularly as women try to take their place in public life and to have a voice in the Governments of their countries.

In this House and in Parliament, we know about public service, but none of us will ever equal what our Queen does as a matter of course in caring for all the people of this kingdom and across the globe, in the countries of the Commonwealth. The Queen’s achievement in drawing all those countries together for their mutual support and benefit is truly magnificent. It is a notable achievement in this day and age, and one that is a testament to her gentle guardianship and powerful advocacy.

The poet John Milton lived for a while in Chalfont St Giles, in my constituency, and his cottage is still there, preserved as a monument to his work. He was a parliamentarian and a person who argued against the restoration of the monarchy—a servant of the then Commonwealth—but I would like to think that had John Milton known our monarch, he would have altered his view. As it is, I turn to the words that he wrote about Shakespeare, whose 400th anniversary we celebrate in two days’ time. He wrote that the poet and playwright needed no monument, because “Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a live-long monument.”

Throughout the ceaseless work of a long life, with the welfare of her people always at the heart and centre of her being, Her Majesty the Queen has created such a monument.
This place is often described as “the mother of Parliaments”, but Her Majesty is truly the mother of our parliamentary democracy, and easily commands our love and respect. Long may the Queen rule over us, and, your Majesty, a very happy birthday too.

11.49 am

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This morning, when I was buying my muffin in Portcullis House, I noticed Elizabeth II on the coin with which I paid. However, today is not about the Elizabeth on our coins; it is about the Elizabeth in our hearts. She is of course Her Majesty the Queen, but today is not a royal occasion, even though it is an occasion about a royal. Turning 90 is a marvellous signpost in life, as I hope to experience myself before long. Not long ago, one of my sisters turned 90 and we had a huge family celebration. Today, the national family is celebrating, and that very much includes those in this House.

I remember the celebrations of King George V’s silver jubilee. I was five years old at the time, and I was in hospital recovering from having my tonsils out. I remember the ceremony of the jubilee being broadcast on the wireless throughout the ward. It was very impressive, even to someone of my age. It was respected, but it was remote. Over the generations, Her Majesty the Queen’s family has had its share of vicissitudes, some of which have been handled with greater adroitness than others. However, over the years, Her Majesty the Queen has sustained and increased the potency of the monarchy. That emerges from her own personality and from the fact that she has been brought up to serve and to associate.

The basis of these celebrations today is that Her Majesty the Queen has turned the nation into a united family in a way that has never been achieved, or even attempted, by any previous monarch. We are all together, and that is why people feel so strongly about the celebrations and so happy about them. As shown in the photographs of a recent visit by Her Majesty to my constituency, which I have in my house, people are not only honored to meet the Queen but delighted to do so. They are honoured by the position, but they are delighted by the person, and that is the reason that we celebrate so gladly today. It is not just “Congratulations, your Majesty”; it is “Happy birthday, Elizabeth.”

11.53 am

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Two of my best memories of seeing the Queen are at schools and academies. In 1999, she came to the Durrington High School in Worthing, and it was a delight to see the young people and all the staff—academic staff and support staff—so pleased by her recognition of what they were doing together.

On 26 October 2012, she came to the Drapers Academy in Harold Hill, and I do not think I have ever seen young people chatting so amiably during their school lunch as they did with her when they got her talking about her experiences during the war.

I look on the Queen as someone who provides a focus for voluntary service, the civil service and the military service. One of my best friends was very proud to have held her warrant as a police constable. That is something he had in common with chief constables; they are all equal in serving their country through the Queen. My father held her appointment as an ambassador and, previously, a royal warrant as a second lieutenant in the Army.

To be in a country where we can change our Prime Minister during a war without everything falling to pieces, as we did during the great war and the second world war, shows the value of having a monarchy that is accepted by people on all sides.

There are many other things that one could say, but I shall be brief in adding my congratulations to those offered by Members who have spoken already. They have set a tone that will be welcomed by the Queen. If we can live up to her example, we will be doing pretty well for the country. She has helped to lead this country through difficult times and good times. Most of all, she has given a great deal of pleasure to those who are trying to do their duty to others.

11.54 am

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): We gather today not only to rejoice in the Queen having lived a long and glorious life, but to celebrate the reign that encompasses so much of it as well as the lives of almost everyone over whom she rules today.

We must remember that the Queen was not born to this role. She was not an heir and not expected to ascend the throne. Instead, with her mother, father and sister, she was part of a loving and contented family, growing up in devoted respect for her grandfather, King George V, and in the shade of her glamorous uncle, the Prince of Wales. That peaceful life came to an end for the Duke of York and his family with the trauma of the abdication. With the support of Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, and their loyal daughters, His Majesty King George VI ensured that the Crown remained at the heart of its people’s affections. Together, they embodied our will to defeat the supreme evil of living memory and win the war that ensured that civilisation, decency and democracy prospered, rather than perished, in Europe and across the world. Her Majesty, iconic and perpetual as she sometimes seems, is not a symbol; she is a reminder to us all of the generation who did great things and stopped terrible things being done to us. The great history of our nation, of which we can be truly proud, is not something that our Queen merely symbolises; it is something that she and her generation lived for us. Thank God that she and they did.

In deserved and romantic fashion, the Queen saw a dashing young hero enter her life after the war. In her choice of husband, Her Majesty has kept us all alert, invigorated and—more than once—amused. Their life together, rising to some 70 years, is a tribute to the character of both our Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. Only yesterday, we saw the wonderful picture of Her Majesty, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Cambridge and the young Prince George all together—continuity and change in one loving and beloved image. The gift of the Queen’s long life includes seeing the future that assuredly lies in store. We in the Commonwealth that she has done so much to sustain see that the Crown rests securely on a sure line of succession.

In a country such as ours and in the other realms over which she reigns, the crown worn by the Queen embodies our unity. In my corner of this kingdom, Northern
Ireland, it will never be forgotten how steadfast the Queen was in her support for and affection towards our afflicted Province. From my time as Lord Mayor of the great city of Belfast, I can personally attest to her compassion and concern for those affected by the violence. Those dark days are, we pray, now over, but Her Majesty’s enduring interest and contribution towards peace in Northern Ireland continues. Her frequent visits and those of other members of the royal family are always warmly received right across the community. For that and so much more, we from Northern Ireland are immensely grateful.

Like most, I have known no other sovereign. We have been blessed through the generations to have one so dedicated to the service of our country and the Commonwealth. The nations of the Commonwealth are joining with us today in our tributes to the Queen. As we have been reminded, the Commonwealth is a powerful expression of the unifying and inspirational spirit of its great Head. It is but one of Her Majesty’s enduring legacies. She has been the rock upon which this country has continued to flourish and built a modern democracy so envied across the world. Her shining faith has been a constant and unwavering inspiration through times of national celebration and national occasion. In times of personal sadness, Her Majesty has exhibited the great grace that comes with great faith.

We are thankful for the wonderful life that God has given us in His servant Queen Elizabeth, and may He in his great wisdom and His great mercy be pleased to grant Her Majesty and we her people the continued blessing of having her reign over us for many, many more years to come. We wish her a very, very happy birthday. God save the Queen.

11.59 am

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you very much indeed for calling me, and I hope that in the event that the Whip on duty on the delegated legislation Committee that I am supposed now to be attending chastises me, you may come to my aid. I am delighted to join my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in, once again, saluting Her Majesty’s extraordinary, dedicated service to the nation and to the Commonwealth, and in wishing her many happy returns on her 90th birthday.

I do so as the Member privileged to represent Aldershot, home of the British Army, and I am authorised by the most senior officer in Aldershot, Lieutenant General James Bashall, to associate the garrison most warmly. Soldiers, sailors and airmen, like Members of Parliament, swear an oath of allegiance to the sovereign. It is she they serve, and that bond between the sovereign and the men and women of the armed forces is a very special one, not least because in her is personified the ideal of service and duty. Although King George II was the last sovereign to lead his forces into battle—in the battle of Dettingen, in 1743—Elizabeth II has led from the front by example, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, not least in upholding her commitment to defend the faith, our Christian faith. My own modest commission in the Royal Air Force volunteer reserve hangs prominently on my study wall, to remind me of the duty I owe to my sovereign.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows how important the support of a spouse is as he discharges his duties, and I am sure that he obtains advice, welcome and sometimes perhaps unwelcome, from his spouse—I certainly do. It is therefore right today that we should reflect also on the support that His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh has given the Queen throughout her life. Although we have not been privileged to know the nature of any advice he may have had the temerity to proffer to Her Majesty, we can be sure that his immense reservoir of common sense and capacity for candid, plain speaking, which has so endeared him to the British people, will have been an added blessing to her.

As others have said, not least the Leader of the Opposition, Her Majesty does have a wonderful sense of humour. I recall the story, as many others may do, of the Privy Council meeting where, unfortunately, a Cabinet Minister’s telephone had not been switched off. When it rang, the Cabinet Minister took the phone out of her handbag and duly moved away to answer it. When she had finished the call, Her Majesty turned to her and said, “Somebody important, was it?” [Laughter.]

Finally, Mr Speaker, I conclude with the admirable editorial in this week’s Country Life, which has just relocated to Farnborough in my constituency: It said:

“Often accused in the past of being too traditional, it is now her old-fashioned values and steadfastness that have made her someone to be admired and emulated the world over. Her long reign and vast accumulated wisdom have helped to stabilise relations across the world, especially within the Commonwealth.”

We owe Her Majesty a great debt of gratitude. God save the Queen.

Mr Speaker: In the extremely unlikely event that the hon. Gentleman is chastised, he can always advise the Whip to sample the joys of riparian entertainments—it is something I often did myself in years past.

12.4 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), and I am grateful to be able to contribute to this collective greeting. I just wish to relate three experiences from my period as the Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty’s Household between 2003 and 2005. I see that another former Vice-Chamberlain, the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), is in the Chamber. As colleagues will know, the Vice-Chamberlain, who traditionally is a senior Government Whip, has a variety of duties to fulfil, three of which are: to design a daily message to send to Her Majesty outlining what is happening here; to act as hostage during state openings of Parliament; and to take to Her Majesty treaties to be signed and presented to the House of Commons.

I was first presented to Her Majesty in 2003. When I asked her what she would like to see in the message—the same question, I am sure, that all my predecessors and successors have asked—she answered, “That which generally does not make the papers will be of interest.” In other words: “Just give us the gossip—that which is not fit to
print.” Given how we are reported in today’s media, that was a pretty high bar, but I managed to achieve it at least once.

The second duty is to act as hostage. Since our predecessors executed Charles I in 1649, every time the monarch comes to visit us, we have to find a senior MP to act as a hostage, which I did on two occasions. I felt like Patrick McGoohan in “The Prisoner” and that I was not allowed to leave, although I never actually tried. The Buckingham Palace officials were very generous and hospitable. They said that I could watch television, read the paper, have a coffee or a gin and tonic, or walk about, but I was not leaving. When I expressed my anxiety at this experience a short time later to the then head of our armed forces, Sir Mike Jackson, he said, “Jim, you shouldn’t have worried.” I said, “Shouldn’t I, Mike?” and he said, “No, if anything had happened to Her Majesty, we would just have shot you.” He was not kidding, as I am sure that Members know.

One Easter, when we needed a document to be signed and then presented to the House, the civil servants in the Whips Office contacted Buckingham Palace, which responded that Her Majesty was not at Buckingham Palace, but at Windsor. Our officials said, “Well, Fitzpatrick will go to Windsor to get the document signed.” The message came back from Her Majesty, and the officials looked at me and said, “Her Majesty said, ‘If Mr Fitzpatrick is coming all the way to Windsor, ask him if he would like to stay to lunch’.” My civil servants said, “Do you want to stay?” I said, “Bite her royal hand off”—except I do not think that I used the word “royal”.

When I was being driven down in the Government car to Windsor castle, on a beautiful, sunny Easter Monday, I wondered, “How many people does Her Majesty entreat to lunch on an Easter Monday?” There were six of us: her private secretary, three equerries, me and Her Majesty. I was totally unprepared. It was a measure of the dear lady’s humanness that for an hour and a half she commanded the conversation around the table and included everybody. Not having known her before, I saw her charm, generosity and regality.

I am grateful for the experience of being Vice-Chamberlain for two years and am pleased to add my and my constituents’ greetings to Her Majesty on this auspicious day.

12.7 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Her Majesty the Queen came to the throne in the year I was born, so she is the only monarch I have ever known, and because of the way she has fulfilled her duties, I am a staunch royalist. In my time in this place, we had one Prime Minister who increasingly behaved as if he was a president, and that certainly confirmed me in my view of how blessed we are to have a monarch rather than a president.

I have seen at first hand the joy that the Queen brings to people’s lives. I will never forget her visits in 1999 to the two constituencies I have represented. Residents were spontaneously thrilled with her visits, which is something that we politicians struggle to achieve. I represent the highest number of centenarians in the country, and I am constantly attending centenarian birthday parties. My own mother, who is 14 years older than the Queen, was thrilled to receive her telegram, and I have told her that the good Lord needs to spare her for another year if she is to receive her second birthday cake. When I had the good fortune of being invested at Windsor castle last year, I was in awe of how a woman of nearly 90 could stand for over an hour and, with her conversation and manner, make the occasion so special and memorable for each of the recipients.

I should say that Her Majesty has made only one mistake in her life, and that was when she observed that I had been a Member of Parliament for a long time and asked me whether I had seen many changes. Her eyes glazed over as I went on and on about all the changes I had seen. You and I know only too well, Mr Speaker, what a challenge it can be to be nice to people morning, noon and night. Well, Her Majesty certainly succeeds in that regard, unlike myself.

This wonderful and gracious lady has served our country with integrity, charm and dignity all her life, through the upheavals and tribulations our nation has faced. Her personal life, with all its tragedies and sorrows, has never been allowed to come between her and her subjects. She has been a constant example to us all, rising above party politics, and the ebb and flow of public opinion. She has been faultlessly impartial and loyal to her people. The natural warmth and empathy that she has shown throughout her long reign have endeared her to even the most hardened republican, and she is now more loved than she has ever been. So yes, long may she reign over us. God save the Queen. And, Mr Speaker, can we please all have a piece of this birthday cake we keep hearing about?

12.11 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): As a hardened republican, I think I have been introduced by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for which I am grateful.

I believe that possibly the most momentous moment of the Queen’s reign, and certainly of her visit to Ireland, was when she stood dressed in green in Croke Park and bowed her head in penitence because of the terrible massacre that took place there. It was an act of humility and majesty that had, and will continue to have, an enormous symbolic effect on relations between the nations of these islands.

I want to say a special word of thanks to Her Majesty on behalf of those—a quarter of the country—who regard themselves as proud republicans. My affection for her goes back a very long time, although I did know another monarch in this country, and until today she was a fellow octogenarian. She teaches us a great lesson—an example that this House should take. We have done well on diversity as far as ethnic minorities and women are concerned—we have done nothing like enough, but we are improving—but we are still dreadfully under-represented by octogenarians in this House. She has led with a splendid example of continuing service. The speech made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition reminded me of Mildred Gordon who, when she became an MP, followed Ian Mikardo. He stood down because he felt he was too old, but then the wise people of the Poplar Labour party chose Mildred Gordon, who was older than Ian Mikardo. She served with distinction in this institution.

There is a distinction between respect for Her Majesty and criticism of the institution of monarchy. She has continued the institution, giving it new life and meaning,
because of her personality and her decision not to be embroiled in any way in affairs that are political. The late Member for Cambridge, Robert Rhodes James, wrote an article describing what might have been a crisis in his party when Mrs Thatcher was about to leave office. She was more popular in the country than she was in the House or her party at the time. The fear that Robert Rhodes James expressed was that if she had decided to call a general election, the Conservative party could not have stopped her, and neither could Parliament, the Cabinet or anyone else; but the Queen could. I believe that was an example of where, because of her personality, the Queen would have acted in the interests of the country, rather than in the interests of a Prime Minister, and that is the supreme job of any monarch in this country.

As a republican, I am happy to speak for a city where the last attempted revolution to set up a republic took place, in 1839. It was interesting that last week Mr Mark Reckless, who is known to us in this place, came to Newport to launch his campaign and paid tribute to the attractions of Chartism as a forerunner of UKIP-ism. People have suggested that that was opportunist, but I do not think it was, because I believe that if he had stood in Coventry, he probably would have arrived in the constituency naked on a horse.

It is a great privilege to have been called in this debate. I share 81 years of life with Her Majesty and I have watched her with great interest all that time. Those of us who wish to have a new system for our Head of State can say with deep sincerity, “Happy birthday, ma’am.”

12.15 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Having caught your eye, Mr Speaker, I was about to pay tribute to Her Majesty as one of her five Members of Parliament, representing Sandringham, alongside those who represent Buckingham Palace, Windsor, Holyrood and Balmoral. However, first I want to endorse what the Prime Minister said. From the moment Her Majesty stepped off that flight back from Kenya on 7 February 1952 to return to a nation in mourning, her life has been one of relentless, selfless and dedicated duty to our nation and also Britain’s dependencies, our overseas territories and our realms.

I am very glad that the Prime Minister and, indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) mentioned the Commonwealth, because that ceaseless service also applies to the Commonwealth. As has been pointed out, it started off as a loose association of a small number of countries, but has grown into an incredibly important organisation that includes 2 billion-plus people—30% of the world’s population. The Commonwealth is a truly global organisation that I believe has led to countries within it co-operating and collaborating as never before. Her Majesty can be proud of the way the organisation has moved forward.

This extraordinary length of ongoing service to our nation stands in stark contrast to the cult of youth that seems to have taken over so many democracies, including our own—although obviously the Leader of the Opposition is an honourable exception to that, and has given my generation a lot of hope in the process.

I want to say something about Sandringham. Her Majesty could easily be excused from coming to her beloved Sandringham to get away from London and the pressures of work and to relax with her family, her horses on the two studs and her dogs, but every year without fail she carries out numerous local visits. Many are to the same organisations, but every year she will go and visit new organisations—for example, opening new village halls or a new ward at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King’s Lynn, or some of our local museums or local businesses. What I have noticed on those visits is that once she has met the dignitaries—the mayor, the lord lieutenant and the MP—she always makes it clear that she wants to go and meet real people. She shows to those people unfailing courtesy, good humour and a deep knowledge of west Norfolk. Time and again, she has brought untold joy and happiness to my constituents on so many different occasions.

Her Majesty personifies the dignity and civic spirit that are the very best of Norfolk and also the very best of British. As has been pointed out, very often beside her is her consort the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, who has been an indefatigable rock of support. We celebrate the birthday of a remarkable person, but we also celebrate something else. We celebrate the covenant between the monarch and the people, which under her stewardship has made the monarchy stronger than ever. Long may she reign over us.

12.19 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak, especially as I managed to make it into the Chamber only when the Prime Minister was concluding his remarks—my apologies to him. On this occasion I am convinced that, not having heard one of his remarks, I would have agreed with them all.

It is a massive honour to give praise and to acknowledge the service of Her Majesty on her 90th birthday. Unlike many people in this place, I have spoken to Her Majesty on only a limited number of occasions. It was on one occasion really, as a very new Member of Parliament. She was asking me how I was getting on as a new MP and how I was coping with the correspondence. I did confide that, on occasions, people would come up to me in the street and say thank you, or acknowledge a letter that I had written to them, and I would sometimes just go blank. I am sure that colleagues share that sensation and think, “Right, what are they talking about? I can’t quite remember the detail.” Her Majesty said, “Yes, that happens to me all the time. I always say that it is the least I could do”. Perhaps we should all cling on to that as a good get-out-of-jail card.

Her Majesty has had occasion to visit formally my part of the world—Westmorland—on two occasions in her reign. The first was in 1956, which was 14 years before I was born. It was the year of the Suez crisis; the year of the Clean Air Act; and the year that the United Kingdom turned on its first nuclear power station. The second occasion was three years ago, when I was privileged to meet her in Kendal as the Member of Parliament for Westmorland and Lonsdale. In the 57 years between those two visits, and indeed since she assumed the throne, so much has changed for all of us. Much, much more has changed for Britain and the world in which we live. The Elizabethan age will be reviewed by history as
a vast, transformational and tumultuous era, during which our Queen has provided immeasurable constancy, which will be looked back on as the thread that runs through all of it, and that has made change possible without the uncertainty and instability that could have come about otherwise.

In Her Majesty’s time, Governments have indeed come and gone. She has seen them lead Britain into the European Common Market, and then seen her people vote to remain—that was when I was five years of age. She has seen Britain lead the world by becoming the first G7 country to commit 0.7% of GDP to international development aid. She has seen Britain become a world leader in renewable energy and make great strides in tackling climate change. She has seen technological advances race ahead from when a telegram or a radio programme was a thing of great excitement to the prevalence of satellite television, the iPhone, letters being supplanted by email and playground conversations by tweets and Facebook status updates.

Through all those years of change and upheaval, Her Majesty’s selfless service to Britain has remained a constant. She is admired at home and around the world for her constant and consistent advocacy of Britain at its best. I am bound to say—others have reflected on this—that she embodies the value of a constitutional monarchy. She is a neutral person who is above politics and who is the foundation of our constitution. She is someone to whom all of us, whatever our political views, can look, and with whom we can share an allegiance. That is an immeasurably valuable thing.

Even as we contemplate the monumental things that have occurred during Her Majesty’s reign, it is worth remembering that birthdays are very personal occasions. They are opportunities to celebrate the lives we lead and give thanks with friends and families. Hers has been an extraordinary life and she is an extraordinary example to all of us in public life of the meaning of public service. As we and others pay tribute to her example, I give thanks with friends and families. Hers has been an extraordinary life and she is an extraordinary example.

By tweets and Facebook status updates, the royal Twitter account went live in 2009 and the royal Facebook page in 2010.

Today, the British monarchy has 2.2 million followers on Twitter—and growing—and 2.7 million likes on Facebook. That is a number of which many of us in this place will be rather jealous. A Google search for “Queen Elizabeth II” returns more than 21 million results, and “the Queen” returns 214 million results—and while many others, both past and present, can claim that rather generic title, the Queen, one has to go to page 6 of the search results before one comes to any topic other than Her Majesty—incidentally, and not surprisingly, that is indeed a public house.

The Queen is probably the most recognisable figure in the world and yet, as we have heard, one of her former protection officers, Richard Griffin, has shared a most endearing story this week. I recognise that the Member who represents Balmoral is here today, so I will not share the punchline or the details of that story, but it shows how gracious Her Majesty is. So many people have personal stories of their own interactions with Her Majesty. She has met hundreds of thousands of her subjects; and millions have seen her face to face at one of the many great festivals and events that she attends each year. In 2012, during jubilee year, many residents of Worcestershire met Her Majesty when she opened the Hive library and history centre in Worcester and when she attended a reception at the Guildhall.

Such personal interactions are one of the main reasons why the Queen is so incredibly and enduringly popular. Opinion polls show that, despite considerable competition, Britons consider Queen Elizabeth II to be our greatest ever monarch. She has reigned over a new Elizabethan age, and we are fortunate to have shared that age with her. On behalf of my constituents, the loyal people of the faithful city of Worcester and all the people of Worcestershire, I wish Her Majesty a very happy 90th birthday.

12.24 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am honoured and humbled to be able to follow right hon. and hon. Members and the Prime Minister in congratulating Her Majesty the Queen on her 90th birthday, and indeed on 90 years of tremendous service to her country and the Commonwealth.

How fortunate we are in this complex modern age to be British, and to have a Head of State who is admired and respected throughout the world. The contribution Her Majesty has made to the standing of the United Kingdom in the world is hard to overestimate. From my own view, the Queen’s greatest contribution has been as a steady influence in British life through good times and bad. She is the one guaranteed constant in all our lives. In many ways, she has become the nation’s grandmother.

At the age of 45, I am precisely half the age of the Queen. Yet when I was born she had already been Queen for 18 years and she had been a public figure for many years before that. Indeed, like so many members of the royal family, the Queen has led her entire life in the public gaze. She sat for pictures almost from birth, and she made her first solo public appearance when she was a mere 16. Indeed, she has been a lady of so many firsts. She was the first British monarch to visit China, Australia and New Zealand, the first to address the US Congress and the first Head of State to have opened not one but two Olympic games. She made the first televised Christmas broadcast in 1957, and was the first monarch—and one of the first people in the world—to send an email in 1976.

It is to Her Majesty’s credit that, while being a figure of great stability, she has also moved with the times. As we entered the digital age, the royal email address was launched in 2007, as was the royal channel on YouTube. The royal Facebook page in 2010.

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12.27 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to join in the celebration today. I am looking forward to returning home this evening to my husband and four children for our own celebration,
because today is the birthday of not only Her Majesty, but my daughter, Shansée. I remember 21 April very well. It was a particularly long day a number of years ago. My daughter has prepared her own birthday wish list. I do not know whether Her Majesty has done the same, but perhaps they may share some of the same aspirations for the future. I am delighted to wish them both a very happy birthday.

For the benefit of the House, I should add that I have just returned from the Council of Europe where I was a member of the UK delegation. I can assure Members that they will be celebrating Her Majesty’s birthday in the normal manner just about now.

For the past 64 years, Scotland has enjoyed Her Majesty’s leadership. Indeed, in 1999, she said that our country has “a special place in my own and my family’s affections.” I know that Scotland feels the same in return. We very much look forward to her opening the new Scottish Parliament after the elections next month.

The people of Strathern in my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire are very proud of their royal connections, especially our association with the Queen’s grandson, the Earl of Strathern and his wife, the Countess.

Few 26-year-olds would have been equipped to cope with the daunting role Her Majesty inherited in 1952, but it has been clear to all that she has provided exemplary leadership over the past 64 years and, hopefully, for many to come. Over and above that, to have been seen to conduct herself in such a decorous and dignified manner in an era of unprecedented public scrutiny has been an example to all of us in public life.

I am proud to have been honoured for my work in business and in Scotland’s Asian community by receiving an OBE. One of my deepest regrets is that my dad passed away just two weeks before I received that award in Holyrood palace. He believed that the honour was not just a personal one but, in part, a commitment to the whole of the Asian community, reinforcing our valuable place in its fabric. How lovely it is that the lady preparing the birthday cake for Her Majesty is also a member of the Asian community; I have no doubt that Nadiya Hussain’s cake will be a masterpiece.

The recognition I received from Her Majesty symbolised for me and my father the fact that those of us with Pakistani heritage had all been accepted into the heart of this country. That is a gift that could only have been bestowed by someone who conducts themselves in an arena above politics and who acts overall in the national interest. I was fortunate enough to be presented with the OBE by Her Majesty herself, and what I remember most about the conversation I had with her was that she spoke so knowledgeably about the work in which I had been involved and the achievements of the organisations that I had supported. I remember thinking at the time that carrying out those duties for every single recipient she met that day with such skill and insight must have taken considerable personal commitment and preparation on her part.

By committing herself so diligently to her public duties at home and abroad and by carrying them out with such dedication, Her Majesty has shown herself to be a model and modern constitutional monarch. She has not only acted as our Head of State but has been a great servant to our democracy. I am glad to have had this opportunity to thank her once again for her public service and to wish her a very happy 90th birthday today.

12.31 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am delighted to support this Humble Address on this splendid day, celebrating the landmark 90th birthday of our beloved Queen Elizabeth. It is also an historic day on which we celebrate the life, achievements, service and dedication of our Queen, who is both Britain’s oldest and longest reigning monarch, two records that she continues to extend with each passing day, which I, for one, hope that she continues to do for many days and years to come.

On the subject of ages, Mr Speaker, I observe that when I entered Parliament last year I was a similar age to Her Majesty when she ascended to the throne. It was a great honour to swear an oath to the Constitution and to have the opportunity to sit on these Green Benches and in so doing I hope that I reflected the highest regard in which Her Majesty is held across the generations of our country, both old and young.

As we remember the Queen’s popularity here at home, we should also remember her role throughout the world and as the head of the Commonwealth, an organisation of 53 countries, while remaining the sovereign Head of State of 15 realms in addition to the United Kingdom. Her Majesty’s sense of duty is never stronger than when it comes to her dealings with the Commonwealth and now, as ever, is a fitting time to remember just how much Britain owes to the Commonwealth and how much its members and citizens have supported us in times of difficulty.

Apart from such far-flung travels around the Commonwealth, some of Her Majesty’s duties have involved visits to my constituency of Hazel Grove. The Queen last visited the constituency in 1977, as part of the national celebrations for her silver jubilee. She opened Hazel Grove railway station, a fine example of Britain’s 1970s urban design, which is still there today. It was also my great pleasure as a councillor on Stockport Council to propose that the road currently under construction between Hazel Grove and Manchester airport be named the Queen Elizabeth II Way in her honour. If Her Majesty were keen to come and open the road on its completion, I am sure that she would be warmly welcomed by me and my constituents.

I regret to remind the House, however, that my constituency has not always enjoyed such a happy relationship with the monarchy. The town of Marple was the home of John Bradshaw, the lead judge at the trial of Charles I, who later became an MP for Cheshire. Charles I was the great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great— that is eight greats, for the benefit of the Hansard stenographer—grand-uncle of the current Queen.

The assessment of my predecessor was that the then monarch was a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy, but let me reassure the House that no such republican tendencies arise in me. Nor have I detected them among my constituents.
Indeed, the country has truly taken our current monarch to our collective hearts and she is much loved. I was interested to read some polling figures in the Evening Standard last week that found that 67% of respondents held the Queen in high favour. The Queen, of course, is above all this, and I understand that she is a much bigger fan of the Racing Post than the Standard. We can be sure that there are hon. and right hon. Members, including even some of my right hon. Friends, who would yearn for such popularity. In addition, her grandchildren the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry were reported to receive similar high favourability ratings, suggesting that the monarchy is in good shape for generations to come. That is great news and having a monarchy in the form we do, we are also spared the prospect of a presidential Head of State. The Queen is above politics. She is steadfast in her beliefs and resolute and she executes her duties faithfully, as she promised that she would, and she will continue to do so. In my opinion, the secret of the Queen’s success over the past 60 years and more is that she believes in what she is doing and is dedicated to the service of Britain and our place in the world. Long may she reign, God save the Queen and happy birthday, Ma’am.

12.36 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): All over loyal Ulster today, Her Majesty will be receiving the best birthday wishes. It is a huge and humbling treat to join my constituents in expressing those wishes. At prayers this morning, Mr Speaker, your chaplain prayed for Her Majesty the Queen with the words, “May she have long life and everlasting felicity.” That prayer asking for a long and joyous life is answered daily for Her Majesty the Queen and we thank God for his mercy to her as she enters her 91st year and for her faithfulness to not just this nation, but her religion.

It is with great joy that we extend to our gracious sovereign many happy returns and wish her many more in the future. Indeed, I would like to see the constitutional dilemma arise of how the Queen gets over the hurdle of sending herself a birthday card when she reaches her century, God willing. I look forward to the many celebrations in churches and civic locations across County Antrim this year. Just this week, the Lord-Lieutenant of the county invited me to a service of thanksgiving for the Queen, which I will, of course, most certainly attend.

The people of Northern Ireland are always abuzz when they learn of a royal visit. During her time as Princess Elizabeth she visited Northern Ireland on three occasions, and has made a further 20 official visits as Queen. These many visits throughout her reign have always been successful in their outreach and engagement, despite the at times very real personal threat to herself and to the royal family. On one occasion, the IRA made the very sinister threat that they would give her a visit to the marketplace, the King pressed a button which opened the school gates a good half a mile away and well out of sight. The story goes that an explosive charge relayed by the school in his car on his way out of town passed by the school in his car on his way out of town before it. Indeed, tonight the Queen will light the first beacon to mark her birthday in Windsor Great Park. I am delighted that 17-year-old Army Cadet Emma-Lee Wray from Carnlough in County Antrim will be at her side representing Northern Ireland. That will be an inspiring moment for Emma-Lee that she will cherish for the rest of her life.

The release today of the stamps of Her Majesty the Queen, her son, her grandson and her great-grandson is a real inspiration to us all and emphasises the sure line of succession and the ever-increasing popularity in which the monarch is held. Long may she reign over us. Many happy returns, Ma’am, on behalf of the people of North Antrim.

12.40 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As other hon. Members have said, it is a great honour to be able to pay tribute to Her Majesty the Queen today on the occasion of her 90th birthday and, as others have said, what an amazing and inspirational 90 years those have been. Her Majesty’s commitment and dedication to our nation and to public duty throughout her life, through the good times and the bad, are the envy of the world.

There are two businesses in my constituency that have been inspired as a result of receiving awards from Her Majesty. Ilkeston-based technical textiles company Baltex received the Queen’s Award for International Trade in 2009, and Long Eaton-based Douglas Gill International, renowned for its sailing clothes, received the Queen’s Award for Enterprise as a result of increasing export sales to 75% of its total revenue in 2011. Those awards are treasured and displayed with immense pride in those businesses.

Sadly, my constituents have never had the honour of a visit from the great lady. The last time a monarch visited Erewash was more than 100 years ago in June 1914, when Her Majesty’s grandfather, King George V, opened Ilkeston County Secondary School. Standing in the marketplace, the King pressed a button which opened the school gates a good half a mile away and well out of sight. The story goes that an explosive charge relayed the success of the operation back to the assembled crowds in the town centre. It is reported that the King passed by the school in his car on his way out of town and had a few words with the headmaster.

I would like to add to the list of invites that my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) has given and take the opportunity to invite Her Majesty to Erewash during this celebratory year to officially open the new Ilkeston train station. She will be able to alight at the station and not be half a mile away when she opens it. Despite her great years, hon. Members will...
know that Her Majesty is a very modern lady. As she probably will not have time today to listen to the tributes being paid in this House, I am sure she will catch up on YouTube later, so I hope that in that way she will get the invitation to open Ilkeston station.

On behalf of Erewash constituents, may I wish Her Majesty a very happy birthday and may she enjoy birthday celebrations for many years to come.

12.42 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to participate in the debate today. I was on these Benches 10 years ago, when I participated on behalf of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru in the Humble Address on the Queen’s 80th birthday, as did only five other speakers, one of whom has spoken already today, having advanced, as is often the case, from being Leader of the Opposition then to being Prime Minister today. I, meanwhile, am on the same Bench as I was on 10 years ago. The Humble Address then had, as I said, six speakers and took about 15 minutes in total. Given the advance in time today, I look forward to the length of the Humble Address in 10 years’ time, if we are all spared.

The Queen is six years older than the SNP. That is not her only SNP connection. Her private secretary’s first cousin is an SNP councillor in Stornoway, and a very good councillor indeed is Rae MacKenzie.

Mentioning Stornoway gives me the opportunity seamlessly to mention one of the Queen’s great passions— islands, particularly the Outer Hebrides. Looking back on my speech 10 years ago in this place, I praised her good sense in her choice of holiday that year—sailing round the Hebrides—to mark her 80th birthday. As was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), she visited Lewis, Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, Barra and Vatersay, where she has come many times, mostly informally. Since then I have met the Queen and asked her about the trip, and I can report happily to the House that she found it to be a very splendid occasion indeed.

In the intervening period many others have followed her example and visited the islands and have had a right royal time in other ways, I am sure. I encourage many others to follow the Queen’s example and I welcome those who come back for a revisit. I certainly hope Her Majesty has the chance to return to the islands that she has visited so often. I clearly remember seeing the royal yacht Britannia with its three masts from behind Vatersay as a youngster from my grandmother’s house in Castlebay. Clearly, the Queen’s enjoyment of the Hebrides is more than formal—it is very personal.

People in the Gaelic-speaking Hebrides were very pleased when the Queen, in Ireland, spoke in Irish Gaelic, which was a great gesture on so many levels. Therefore, as I did in the debate 10 years ago, I will end in Scottish Gaelic, the language of Eden, and say, “Co larna breith dhan Bhanrighinn Ealasaid”.

12.45 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I should like to associate myself with the congratulations offered by the Prime Minister and others to Her Majesty. Following on from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) when he said that, perhaps, Her Majesty the Queen is the nation’s grandmother, I might add that with her commitment not only to serving our nation, but to serving God, she is the nation’s godmother too. I am delighted to add the heartfelt good wishes of the people of North East Hampshire.

We have heard from all corners of the United Kingdom, so there is not much for me to add in respect of our country. I shall therefore focus my contribution on Her Majesty’s lifelong commitment to the Commonwealth. Many countries around the world share a common history, and a shared history leads to a shared language, shared values and, I hope, a shared future. To harness this shared history, Her Majesty has overseen the creation of the Commonwealth in its current form as a force for good—a force for good for the future, given that the Commonwealth is home to 2.2 billion people, of which more than 60% are under the age of 30.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka, I would like to observe that, as Head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty’s reign has overlapped with the tenures of all 14 Prime Ministers of Ceylon and, now, Sri Lanka, since the country’s independence. Her Majesty and I have at least—perhaps only—one thing in common: we have both visited Sri Lanka only twice. A former British High Commissioner said following Her Majesty’s second visit:

“Her Majesty has fond memories of her first visit to Sri Lanka in 1954…As part of official engagements during the visit, Her Majesty also addressed the nation from the historic studios of Radio Ceylon, now known as the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.”

He continued:

“Her Majesty came back to Sri Lanka in 1981 as Head of the Commonwealth and people I have met travelling around the country fondly recall memories of her second visit.”

Not only do those excerpts highlight the mutual delight in each other’s involvement in the Commonwealth, but they demonstrate the strength afforded by the changes that have occurred. Her Majesty has helped make sure that Britain and Sri Lanka have continued to enjoy a long association, which has remained cordial throughout the various constitutional changes of recent decades.

That is true of the wider world. The United Kingdom’s relationship with Australia, Canada, India and other Commonwealth countries has changed, and is stronger for it. Thousands of Commonwealth students study in the United Kingdom each year at our world-class universities. The prestigious Foreign and Commonwealth Office-supported Chevening scholarship provides postgraduate study at Britain’s top universities to outstanding individuals who demonstrate leadership qualities. This provides real hope for the future. Tomorrow’s leaders across the world are being provided with the tools to create and sustain a Commonwealth that is mutually respectful, resilient, peaceful and prosperous; a Commonwealth that cherishes quality, diversity and our shared values; a Commonwealth that Her Majesty has created, is committed to and, if I may be so bold, is rightly proud of. God save the Queen.

12.49 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called to wish Her Majesty a happy 90th birthday. As the hon. Member
for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, I have the privilege to represent the royal residence of Balmoral. That royal connection, begun under Queen Victoria, gives an area I grew up in the name Royal Deeside. It also gives the local whisky the name Royal Lochnagar, and it means that Ballater, near Balmoral, has one of the highest concentrations of royal warrant holders anywhere in the UK. Ballater has had a tough year, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the royal family for their support and to remind everyone that Ballater is open for business.

It is fair to say that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) mentioned, the royal family and Her Majesty are most at home in Royal Deeside—something I am proud to say I have in common with her. Residents of Royal Deeside, and indeed many visitors, often recount stories of encountering a kindly lady who is often wearing a headscarf and often driving a Land Rover, and they talk of engaging in light-hearted conversation or of being offered a lift. Who is to say who that kindly lady is? However, it is nice to think that it is Her Majesty.

Perhaps I could finish my brief remarks with a story, and I thank the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for not recounting it. While walking near Balmoral castle, Her Majesty encountered a group of American tourists. They asked whether she was local, to which she replied that she had a house nearby. They then asked whether she had met the Queen. “No,” she replied, and gesturing to her protection officer, she remarked that it was always important to ensure that a drawing had been seen by the then Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister and everyone who needed to see it. However, it was noticed just in time—not by me, I hasten to add, but by one of the experts in heraldry—that the chain on the unicorn was the wrong way round, so the design was changed.

Later, when Her Majesty came to Parliament and saw the window in situ, I mentioned to her that the unicorn’s chain had nearly been the wrong way round. She said, “But he has.” I wish Her Majesty a very happy 90th birthday and many happy returns.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, all right. I call Mr Michael Ellis.

12.51 pm

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Thank you for that enthusiastic endorsement, Mr Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson). It is a great honour to be in the House of Commons and it is a particular honour to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. Her Majesty is someone we can all look up to as an exemplar of duty and public service. I wish her a happy 90th birthday and many happy returns. I hope, and confidently expect, that she will reach her 100th birthday and more birthdays after that. It is widely acknowledged around the world that Her Majesty has shown the most extraordinary and selfless devotion to duty and public service—for 64 years now.

The Houses of Parliament marked Her Majesty’s silver jubilee in 1977 by placing a rather special window in New Palace Yard, in the shadow of Big Ben. It is still working today and it gives great pleasure to many visitors and those of us here. The Houses also recognised Her Majesty’s golden jubilee in 2002, when they placed a sundial in the ground in Old Palace Yard, outside the House of Lords. More recently, in 2012, Members of both Houses of Parliament—on both sides of the political divide and both sides of the aisle, I am pleased to say—recognised Her Majesty’s diamond jubilee by placing a very special stained glass window in the north end of Westminster Hall, and it is hoped that that window will be there for many hundreds of years to come. That window shows Her Majesty’s coat of arms, and it is almost directly opposite the world war two window, which was put in in around 1950—the original Victorian window was blown out by enemy action during the war. That means that the coat of arms of Her Majesty’s late father, King George, is directly opposite her coat of arms across Westminster Hall—that ancient edifice, which is nearly 1,000 years old. It is a suitable honour for this House and the country that they have been served so well by Her Majesty and Her Majesty’s late father.

We are only five and half years from the platinum jubilee, and we need to keep that in mind. I have no doubt that both Houses of Parliament will mark it in an equally special way—and, I might add, without recourse to public funds, as also happened with the diamond jubilee, when the work was funded entirely from private donations from these Houses.

It is interesting to note that during the preparations for the window, sketches were made of the design to be used. There was some to-ing and fro-ing, and some precision work was needed, as Members can no doubt imagine. The heralds wanted to look at the exact intricacies to make sure that everything was in order. We got to the very last drawing, which was going to be signed off and sent to the glaziers for manufacture in the ancient way—the way stained glass has been made for 800 years. The drawing had been seen by the then Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister and everyone who needed to see it. However, it was noticed just in time—not by me, I hasten to add, but by one of the experts in heraldry—that the chain on the unicorn was the wrong way round, so the design was changed.

Later, when Her Majesty came to Parliament and saw the window in situ, I mentioned to her that the unicorn’s chain had nearly been the wrong way round, and Her Majesty smiled broadly. I will not indicate the conversation that we had, but perhaps I can say that somebody later remarked that it was always important to ensure that a unicorn’s chain is the right way round. I dread to think what might have happened if it had been the wrong way round—the story would no doubt have been told for a long time to come.

Mr Speaker: Particularly by the hon. Gentleman.

Michael Ellis: In fact, even though things did not go wrong, I still tell the story.

One other point I would like to make before closing is that His Royal Highness Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who has been Her Majesty’s consort for nearly 70 years, has been a steadfast support to Her Majesty, as is clear to everyone. By being such a steadfast support to our sovereign—his wife—he has been a steadfast support to this country, for which I thank him. I wish Her Majesty a very happy birthday and many happy returns. God save the Queen!

12.58 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak briefly in this really special debate.

On behalf of my constituents, I congratulate the Queen on reaching her 90th birthday. I remember the last time the Queen and Prince Philip were in North Tyneside, when she officially opened Tyne tunnel 2—it
was 45 years after she opened the first Tyne tunnel—and she was welcomed on that beautiful day by many schoolchildren and our air cadets from Longbenton, who played music for her. It was a wonderful occasion.

That took me back to the day in 1967 when the Queen came to Tyneside to open the first tunnel. It was a school day for me—I was at St Cuthbert’s Primary School in North Shields. We knew the Queen was coming, and we were all excited because one boy in our class, David Bell, who happened to live near the Tyne tunnel, was going to join the crowds and see the Queen. We were all in awe because we were stuck in school. I never dreamed on that day that, in 2012, I would be at the Tyne tunnel to meet the Queen as the local MP.

I was brought up in a royalist household. My parents were very proud of the Queen, as were many of their generation who were contemporaries of that part of the royal family. Over many years, our family enjoyed watching all the royal events on TV, including the royal weddings and the annual trooping the colour. We always got into the spirit of the occasion and felt very patriotic, alongside many others who are so proud of everything our Queen has achieved. I know that, were my late mother alive today, she would be both thrilled and particularly humbled to see me standing here, on behalf of North Tyneside, what can it be? and to see me and her family out and about around the constituency.

The great affection shown to the Queen is not undeserved. She has been a consistent force for social cohesion in our history. As the Head of State, her role is more than symbolic. She is more than a figurehead. She has been a beacon for civilised happiness, joy and celebration over such a long period. The magnificent Windsor castle is at the heart of local activities and can be seen by people nationwide. In many ways, Her Majesty runs an open home and an open life. Very few people have not paid a visit to Windsor castle, and it would be unusual not to see her and her family out and about around the constituency.

The great affection shown to the Queen is not undeserved. She has been a consistent force for social cohesion in her entire 90 years. She has been a beacon for civilised people both at home and abroad. Few features of our national life have brought such consistency, stability, happiness, joy and celebration over such a long period of our history. As the Head of State, her role is more than symbolic. She is more than a figurehead. She has been a warm and consistent presence in an often harsh and changing world.

On behalf of myself, the country, my constituents, the Commonwealth and the world, I send my heartfelt congratulations on her 90th birthday. Long may she reign, and long may she rein in the forces that seek to divide us.

1 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): In the Windsor constituency, the history of the monarchy runs deep and wide—from Royal Ascot to the Great Park, the barracks, the charities, good causes, hospitals, schools and way beyond. The magnificent Windsor castle is at the heart of local activities and can be seen by people nationwide. In many ways, Her Majesty runs an open home and an open life. Very few people have not paid a visit to Windsor castle, and it would be unusual not to see her and her family out and about around the constituency.

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1.1 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to wish Queen Elizabeth a very happy birthday, and to do so on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). I also add the good wishes of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who regrets that she cannot be here today for this very happy occasion.

As has been said, the Queen has a remarkable record of service, throughout which she has shown model devotion to her duty and to dignity in public life. That is particularly instructive these days, when so many feel a compulsion to reveal all. It also, of course, acts as a caution in respect of our activities here, as she has outlasted and probably outgunned so many “here today and gone tomorrow” Prime Ministers—and Leaders of the Opposition, for that matter.

Professor Dewi Seaborne Davies was once my parents’ MP. He was a Liberal MP for the very short period between Lloyd George moving to the other place as the Earl of Dwyfor, and the post-war Dissolution and the landslide that swept him and the Liberals away. Many years later, he and some other gentlemen of a similar vintage were standing on the square of my hometown in Pwllheli. They were approached by a younger man, who said, “You three, standing there: Duw, you’re looking good. You’re looking good.” Seaborne Davies replied, “There are four ages to man: when you’re young, when you’re middle aged, when you’re older, and when, Duw, you’re looking good!” The Queen is looking good. That is not only a statement of fact, but symbolic of the personal respect and affection that she enjoys so widely. Today is a public celebration but, more importantly, it is also a joyous family occasion. I will close by saying, “Penblwydd hapus iawn i chi ac, ar eich penblwyddyn ddeug, a phethedwar again, dymuniadau gorau at y dyfodol.” I wish her a very happy birthday and, on her 90th birthday, best wishes for the future.

1.4 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence. As promised, I rise momentarily to wish Her Majesty the Queen many happy returns on behalf of my constituents in St Helens North, one of whom, Norah Collins, also celebrates her 90th birthday today. She is originally from County Galway and I thought it was appropriate that I spoke to her this morning, because Her Majesty the Queen has done so much to further good relations between Britain and Ireland. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Irish in Britain, I know that the community here felt special pride at her state visit to Ireland and the reciprocal visit here by the President of Ireland. On behalf of the all-party group and the community here I say, “Breithlá sona duit a Banríon.” Happy birthday to Her Majesty the Queen.

1.5 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Of course, as you know, Mr Speaker, it will be you who properly summarises this debate, because it is for you to choose the appropriate words from it when you go to the Palace with 12 of us. This is not really a summing-up speech, but more a contribution of my own, and I am grateful for that opportunity, not least because I think I am the only Member of this House who has ever sworn the Oath of Allegiance to Her Majesty and her successors both as a Member of Parliament and as a clerk in holy orders. I would therefore like to thank her enormously for the faithfulness she has shown to the Church of England.
and, for that matter, the Church of Scotland. She manages to be ambidextrous in that, as in so many other things.

I am delighted to be here. It reminds me of the time when Norman St John-Stevas, who was simultaneously Leader of the House and Arts Minister, greeted Queen Elizabeth, the then Queen Mother, at the foot of the stairs of the Royal Opera House. As they climbed the stairs, the large crowd burst into a spontaneous round of applause, at which Her Majesty was distinctly heard to say, “Lucky things: two queens for the price of one.”

I cannot pretend to know Her Majesty well—or, indeed, at all—but I once canvassed the staff at Balmoral in the Kincardine and Deeside by-election. We did not get very many supporters—in fact, I think we came fourth in the by-election.

My father Rees, however, played an important part in the coronation in 1953. He was serving in the RAF in Lytham at the time, but when 31 Group, which was based in Hawarden in north Wales, decided to send 40 male and female RAF officers to march in the coronation, it was decided that somebody had to brush up their marching skills, so my 19-year-old father was sent for. He was flown up to Hawarden in a tiny aeroplane and spent a few days with the officers. Apparently my father was so good at shouting at people that he was not needed for the coronation itself.

I make that point simply to underline quite how many people’s lives Her Majesty has touched. She has visited the Rhondda many times. Indeed, a photo of her at Plas Horeb in Treherbert in 1989 was used for the 24p stamp to celebrate her 40th anniversary in 1992.

When Her Majesty came to the Rhondda in June 2002, I was asked to walk with her past the great number of people who had lined the streets of Treorchy, all of whom were singing. “She’ll be stopping in Treorchy when she comes”. I knew that my office manager, Kevin Morgan, was going to be there with his two young sons, Sam and Owen, so when I saw them waving their little Union flags, I gently steered Her Majesty towards them. The two boys were very young at the time and rather shy, so as we approached I said, “Go on, then—say hello.” Unfortunately, Her Majesty thought I was talking to her: “All right, young man!” she barked back at me, “Lucky things: two queens for the price of one.”

The truth is that Her Majesty has had to put up with an awful lot in her time. She has had to suffer a phenomenal stream of politicians—she will be getting another 13 in a few days’ time—and 160 Prime Ministers in all her dominions.

Living with change is one of the most difficult things in the world, especially when you are almost powerless yourself to affect it. Yet that is exactly what she has done, in admirable style. Technology has changed faster than in any other generation, including television, computers, mobile phones, Twitter and so on. Social attitudes have changed dramatically, too. It is strange to think that in 1952 there were just 17 women in Parliament—18, I suppose, if we include her—but today there are 191 women MPs and 201 women peers. That is still not enough, but it is better than it was.

It seems incredible today, but in 1952 parents of children with cerebral palsy found it impossible to find anyone to educate their children, which is why three parents set up the Spastics Society, which became Scope. Since then, we have made enormous strides: the first Minister for Disabled People, the Disability Discrimination Acts, the Disability Rights Commission and so on. Quite often, the royal family have played a dramatic role in changing those attitudes by the way in which they have reached out. Likewise, when the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” was first published in 1952, it classified homosexuality as a mental disorder, yet very few today would hold that view, and one can even get married in Parliament in a same-sex ceremony.

When we think about what the Queen has lived through—the second world war, the cold war, the Falklands, the end of empire, the troubles and then the peace in Northern Ireland—it is difficult not to feel, in Shakespeare’s words from the end of “King Lear”:

“The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

For all the pomp and circumstance, regalia and deference, the reason why our constituents— republicans and monarchists alike—adore and respect the Queen is because of her fundamental decency, her commitment to doing her duty and her ability to keep her counsel. At the end of Thomas Hardy’s novel “The Woodlanders”, the courageous peasant girl Marty South pays tribute to Giles Winterborne in very simple terms as “a good man” who “did good things”. I think we can all agree that we could surely say the same of Her Majesty: a good woman who does good things.

1.11 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is my privilege and honour to conclude this debate and commend the motion to the House. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister singled out the importance of faith to Her Majesty. Earlier, Mr Speaker, your Chaplain led us in extra special prayers, to which I will add one that used to be sung weekly in Catholic churches, “Domine, salvam fac reginam nostram Elisabeth, et exaudi nos in die, qua invocaverimus te.” Almighty God, we pray that Thy servant our Queen Elizabeth, who by Thy mercy has undertaken the government of this realm, may receive increase of all the virtues; so that she may be enabled to avoid all foul temptations, overcome her enemies, and with her Prince Consort and the royal family, may she at the last be welcomed by Thee, who art the way, the truth and the life.

We have heard from many hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the United Kingdom, speaking in all languages: Gaelic, Welsh, Irish—

Chris Bryant: Latin.

Dr Coffey: Yes, Latin—as well as the Queen’s language. Hon. and right hon Members paid tribute to Her Majesty, citing individual stories and stories from their constituencies, and reflected widely on her service to the nation and to the Commonwealth.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out, the influence of our Queen started long before she was crowned. We have heard of her special children’s
broadcast during the war, and her service in the ATS. I understand that as a young girl, she reminded her father of the poem “God Knows”, also known as “The Gate of the Year”, part of which he recited in the 1939 Christmas broadcast:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’
And he replied:
‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’"

This world is uncertain, but Her Majesty brings to it a constant, calming presence, full of good counsel for all the Prime Ministers and, indeed, for our Parliament, the nation and the Commonwealth. She has especially shown that in her leadership as Head of the Commonwealth, which has brought her and the country many challenges but also many joys.

As has been pointed out, the Queen has seen much change in her 90 years. I have always thought of her as timeless and as a steady hand, but also as keeping up with the times. Technology is being used to commend her today. The hashtag #HappyBirthdayYourMajesty is trending on Twitter, and the Google icon is “Happy 90th Birthday, Ma’am”.

As the Father of the House pointed out, many people are excited and overjoyed to meet the Queen. I recall a few years ago, when the Queen opened the new Broadcasting House at the BBC, she memorably and deliberately walked into shot during the live broadcasting of the news. Even the cool kids of the BBC newsroom were running and climbing on desks simply to catch a glimpse of their very special visitor. She really does touch all hearts.

Up and down the country tonight, people will join in a traditional form of celebration, the lighting of beacons, and I will make it back to celebrate one of those events in Suffolk Coastal. We have already heard about further celebrations that will continue later this year. I, for one, hope that the Queen will enjoy time with her family as well as with the wider nation. For now, I conclude with part of the national anthem:

“What choicest gifts in store,
On her be pleased to pour,
Long may she reign!
May she defend our laws,
And ever give us cause,
To sing with heart and voice,
God save the Queen!”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, nemine contradicente,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty to offer the heartfelt good wishes of the House on the occasion of Her Majesty’s ninetieth birthday, expressing its deep gratitude for Her Majesty’s lifelong commitment to the service of the country and the Commonwealth, and praying that Her Majesty may long continue in health and happiness.

That Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister, Chris Grayling, Jeremy Corbyn, Chris Bryant, Angus Robertson, Mr Nigel Dodds, Tim Farron, Hywel Williams, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Danny Kinahan, Caroline Lucas and Mr Douglas Carswell do wait upon Her Majesty with the said Message.
Common Fisheries Policy (Article 17)

Motion made and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Guto Bebb.]

1.15 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate, because it provides the opportunity to examine how the Government are getting on in implementing article 17 of the reformed common fisheries policy, which came into operation on 1 January 2014. Article 17 presents the opportunity to regenerate the fishing industry in ports such as Lowestoft in my constituency, and it has the potential to bring significant economic and social benefits to coastal communities all around the UK. It will help the Government to achieve their objective of rebalancing the economy away from London and the south-east and facilitating the much-needed regeneration of coastal areas, where communities feel that they have been neglected for far too long. There is a consensus that although the Government have introduced some initiatives in order to comply with article 17, they do not have a coherent, long-term strategy in place to ensure that its important objectives are met.

Put simply, the way the common fisheries policy works—perhaps I should say should work—is that an overarching policy framework is laid down centrally in Brussels, and it is up to individual states to pursue their own initiatives to ensure that the mutual objectives in the framework are met. Under the previous regime from 2002, member states were given very wide discretion, and the equivalent policy framework was loosely worded. Article 20(3) from 2002 stated:

“Each Member State shall decide, for vessels flying its flag, on the method of allocating the fishing opportunities assigned to that Member State in accordance with Community law. It shall inform the Commission of the allocation method.”

Member states were given wide discretion to do what they wanted, but they had to tell the Commission what they were doing. That article has been replaced by article 17, which is more far specific:

“When allocating the fishing opportunities available to them, as referred to in Article 16, Member States shall use transparent and objective criteria including those of an environmental, social and economic nature. The criteria to be used may include, inter alia, the impact of fishing on the environment, the history of compliance, the contribution to the local economy and historic catch levels. Within the fishing opportunities allocated to them, Member States shall endeavour to provide incentives to fishing vessels deploying selective fishing gear or using fishing techniques with reduced environmental impact, such as reduced energy consumption or habitat damage.”

I should highlight some of the important requirements of this more targeted policy strategy. First, there is the need for transparency, which is particularly welcome. For too long, domestic and, indeed, European fishing has been unnecessarily complicated and opaque. A good example of that was the difficulty of finding out who held fishing quota. That was shrouded in mystery until my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), the former Minister, introduced the register that had to be published. Before that register existed, all manner of urban myths developed about who held fishing quota. Was it car companies, or even football clubs?

Secondly, in allocating fishing opportunities, the Government are required to consider the three criteria—environmental, social and economic factors. That means maximising the economic and social benefits to UK coastal communities, but at the same time minimising the environmental impact of fishing, which is the activity that has the greatest ecological impact on the UK’s precious and vital marine ecosystem. It is crucial that the allocation of fishing opportunities is based on the targeting of these multiple and diverse objectives. If it is not, as history has shown time and again down the ages, fish stocks will decline, market forces will push inextricably towards industry concentration—fishermen will be muscled out as small businesses—and coastal communities will be weakened and undermined, with their economies often taking decades to recover.

Thirdly, article 17 encourages member states to pursue a variety of methods of allocating fishing opportunities. No longer should they be one-trick ponies relying just on catch history; they should consider a whole package of measures and issues, such as the impact of fishing on the environment, the history of compliance, the contribution to the local economy, the incentivising of fishing vessels to deploy selective fishing gear, the promotion of fishing techniques with reduced environment impacts and the reduction of energy consumption and of habitat damage.

The Government have signed up to a policy that can help to bring back prosperity to our coastal communities, and they have been provided with a number of tools in the box to do so. I have two questions: first, are they using all reasonable endeavours in pursuit of this policy; and secondly, are they using all the tools in the box? It is vital that the Government do so, as fishing communities all around our coast are in urgent need of support.

In the past, those communities—the fishermen and the people working in the industry—have delivered so much to this country not just by putting good, wholesome food on our plates, but by providing jobs in the supply chain, which stretches far and wide inland. What has happened in Lowestoft in my constituency in the past 40 years is a vivid illustration of how the policy makers have got it terribly wrong. Now, as a matter of urgency, we need to do things to right the mistakes of the past.

Lowestoft was built on fishing. It was the fishing capital of the southern North sea. In years gone by, one could cross the water from one side of the Hamilton dock in Lowestoft to the other by walking from boat to boat. Today, the dock is virtually empty of fishing boats. In the past four decades, Lowestoft has been hit hard by overfishing, wrong decisions by politicians and the vulnerability of the very make-up of the industry, whereby the large trawlers used to help to sustain the smaller boats.

The way the quota is allocated has been a major factor in Lowestoft’s decline, as it has taken away the trawlers that were the cornerstone of the industry. The six affiliated vessels in the Lowestoft producer organisation have a fixed quota allocation of 80,419 units this year. This is a significant amount of fish, but none of it is landed in Lowestoft: 68% of it goes to the Netherlands and 32% to Scotland. Those boats—Wilhelmina, Ansgar, Margriet, Hendrik Brands, Sola Fide and Soli Deo Gloria—bring very little, if any, economic and social benefit to Lowestoft.

Today, the Lowestoft fleet is made up of small boats, known as the under-10s—the under-10 metre fleet—which get a raw deal in terms of quota. Nationally, the under-10s comprise 77% of the UK fleet and employ 65% of the workforce; yet they receive only 4% of the total quota...
available. As from 1 April many of these boats in Lowestoft are able to catch only 100 kg of skate and 2 tonnes of cod per month. That is not enough for skippers to sustain a business, let alone to earn a living. This story is not unique to Lowestoft; it is the tale all around our coast. It is being repeated all around the UK, and it is the reason why we cannot delay in properly and fully implementing article 17.

It is fair to say that, from a legal perspective, the Government are complying with the requirements of article 17. That was the conclusion that Mrs Justice Andrews reached in determining Greenpeace’s judicial review this January. The Government have carried out some welcome initiatives, such as the permanent transfer of underused quota to the under-10s. That was worth an extra 678 tonnes in 2015. The inshore fleet will also benefit from an extra 1,000 tonnes this year.

However, one can argue that although these initiatives are very welcome, they are piecemeal allocations. A clearly articulated and overarching framework for the full implementation of article 17 is still lacking. We need—dare I say it—not just a long-term economic plan but a long-term economic, social and environmental plan. The Government can be criticised for adhering to a system that is too restricted, relying excessively on catch history and not making full use of the other initiatives that article 17 positively endorses and promotes. As I have already said, there is a need to use other tools in the box.

Other Governments are doing so and are pursuing a course that I suggest the UK Government should seriously consider following. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden are all moving away from systems for the allocation of fishing opportunities based exclusively on historical catch levels. In Belgium, there is a requirement to contribute to the local economy. In Denmark, there is an objective of aiming at best economic performance and investing in energy consumption reduction measures. In France, market orientation and socioeconomic equilibrium are considered alongside historical catch records. In Germany, historical catch levels likewise remain important, but measures have been introduced to reduce the impact of fishing on the marine and environmental plan and to reduce discards and bycatch. The contribution to society and local communities is also taken very seriously there. In Sweden, economic criteria are of importance in pelagic and industrial fisheries, while environmental criteria are pursued in demersal fisheries.

The policies being pursued in Ireland are particularly innovative. I urge the Minister to look at them very closely to see how they can be applied in the UK, as the fishing industries and fishing communities in our two countries have a great deal in common. In Ireland, quota is assigned to vessels, and if it is not used, it is returned to the state for reallocation. Inshore fisheries operate under a community quota system. There is a monthly catch allocation for stocks under pressure. A specific Irish measure that we should seriously consider adopting is that of consultation with those actively involved in local fishing communities—the people in Ireland, as in the UK, who ultimately know their industry and their waters best. There was a consultation in Ireland when the allocation policy framework was set up, and when amendments are made to the framework, they are always consulted on.

It is also appropriate to look outside the EU. In Canada, British Columbia now has one of the most comprehensive, integrated and successful catch share programmes in the world, which takes full account of economic, social and environmental consideration. The starting point for setting up the system there was likewise a public consultation, with an independent arbitrator submitting recommendations to the Government, who then adopted them.

In conclusion, we need a clear and well articulated framework in which the UK’s fishermen and allied industries can work, invest in their businesses and make a fair living. That will lead to a healthier industry and benefit coastal communities all around the UK. With the allocation of fishing opportunities coming up in 2017, there is now a real chance to put such a system in place. Will the Minister give us an assurance that he will look at doing so with his colleagues and officials?

Last May, Geoffrey Melton, skipper of the Serene Dawn from Lowestoft, lost his leg aboard his boat. He has been given a prosthetic limb and is about to return to sea. We owe it to people like Geoffrey to do all we can to ensure that he has every chance of earning a decent living and bringing some prosperity back to the community in which he lives.

1.30 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for the opportunity of speaking on this subject, and pay tribute to him not only for bringing this matter to the House but for his long commitment to the fishing industry in Lowestoft and beyond. I got to know him well before the election at which he joined us in this House. The fact is, if he was simply doing things for political purposes, there are probably more newsgagers in his constituency than there are active fishermen. His commitment to those fishermen is a credit to him and his love of his town and community.

I will take the opportunity to add a little to what my hon. Friend has said. Although it may not seem like it for some members of the fishing industry, there is at last some good news, with rising stocks in our seas. The iconic species that people use as a measure of the health of our seas is cod, and the biomass of cod in the North sea is rising quite substantially. There is still more to do, but it is a credit to the fishermen, scientists and those in organisations such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and others, who are not always the fishermen’s best friends. They have relentlessly tried to find new methods of conservation of stocks, and are starting to see those work.

The sea is a very complex ecosystem, and what might assist one stock could damage another; we do not have the time to go into that today. However, the element of my hon. Friend’s speech to which I really want to pay tribute is that he talked about people. When these matters are discussed in Government, among policymakers, in non-governmental organisations, and in the chancelleries of Europe, if that is all that happens, we fail, because we have to engage those whose livelihoods depend upon the health of fish stocks. That does not mean simply the—sadly few—fishermen left in my hon. Friend’s constituency. This is about the very heartbeat of coastal communities. It runs very deep in the psyche of the
British people, whether they live in coastal regions such as his, or about as far from the coast as is possible, in constituencies such as mine.

Combining the three legs of the stool of sustainability—economy, environment and social factors—is very important. I well remember the negotiations on article 17, some of which took place through the night. Indeed, I remember being prevented from getting in to make the case for sustainability by a blockade by Greenpeace, which was a rather strange irony.

Looking forward, the Minister needs to take this important point away with him. One of the great wins in reform of the common fisheries policy was not that on the headline issue that concerned most people, the absurd necessity for fishermen at that time to throw away perfectly edible fish, although we were all, quite rightly, affronted by that and its reform was welcome. The ending of discards is starting now, although we are not yet there. For me, however, the great win was a legally binding commitment to fish to maximum sustainable yield.

We have recently discovered that 50% of stocks in British waters are still not fished sustainably. If we want to see the glass as half full, we could say that half are, which is certainly a big improvement on the situation just a few years ago. However, there is still so much more to do. The political effort of the next few years is needed in the Council of Ministers. The resolve remains in the European Parliament, in this Parliament, in the devolved Administrations and Parliaments, and in the Commission, but to carry through the bold ambitions for reform of the common fisheries policy that were agreed unanimously will require continued great leadership by our excellent Fisheries Minister and others, to try to drive through reforms and make them effective.

I have been as rude about the common fisheries policy, and its folly and failures, as anyone—I bow to no one in that—and reforming it was something I enjoyed doing. I felt that we as a Parliament were united in achieving that. But we should not kid ourselves that the common fisheries policy is the only problem. In fact, if we look at Professor Callum Roberts’s very interesting graph of the decline of fish stocks since the late 19th century, there are two peaks in North sea cod stocks, one between 1914 and 1918, and one between 1939 and 1945; I will let hon. Members work out what was going on at those times. In the early 1970s, there is not even a blip.

As a society, we have gained ever more technological advantages in harvesting wild fish. Parliament and regulatory authorities have always been behind the curve. Now, perhaps, we have more regional control and the understanding that we have to involve catchers as well as scientists and others in achieving our aims. It is vital. I applaud the way in which my hon. Friend looked abroad for good practice. The catch share schemes in north America and elsewhere offer great opportunities for fishermen to buy into a rise in biomass and have some ownership of value. By helping to increase the harvestable surplus of a stock, fishermen increase the value of their right to fish it. That gives them something to hand on to their children or else to sell to another fisherman when they want to retire.

There is cause for optimism. It is not easy, and there is much more to do in complex sea environments such as those around our shores. It requires political will and resolve, and needs people such as my hon. Friend, who represent the places around our coastline, to continue to be great champions for the health of our seas and those whose livelihoods depend upon them.

1.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart):

The Minister of State responsible for fisheries unfortunately cannot be here, but it is a great privilege for me to be here to hear those speeches, which revealed just how much care, affection and thought my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Newbury (Richard Benyon) have put into the issues of complex fisheries. I will reply quite briefly, as this is the Minister of State’s subject rather than mine, but I will make a couple of observations on DEFRA’s behalf.

First, we absolutely accept the importance of the inshore fleet. Its economic value is not just the amount of fish it catches but its contribution to ports and to fleets in general. The selective fishing done by inshore fleets—the under-10 metre vessels—is often more environmentally friendly and sustainable. It is less likely to have by-catch or disrupt spawning stocks. It is also much less likely to have issues with carbon emissions. Generally, it ticks almost every box for a sustainable fishery.

As my hon. Friend pointed out very well, it is also true that this is not simply an issue of economics or the environment. Fishing is the lifeblood of the ports. We love to go to coastal communities and see fishing boats. Those boats simply will not be there if we do not protect the under-10 metre fleet. There is also a connection with our maritime heritage as a nation. It inspires us as a country to know that those vessels can continue to operate. It connects to tourism, the wider economy and the environment. For all those reasons, we need to pay attention to those fleets.

We must balance that, of course, with the interests of the offshore fleets. They catch far more of the fish we eat—about 666,000 tonnes are caught by the offshore fleets compared with about 42,000 tonnes caught by the inshore fleets. Of the 42,000 tonnes caught by inshore fleets, only about 5,000 are within the quota stock range.

About 5,500 people are supported by the offshore fleets. We know more and more about the benefit and fantastic nutrition that we get from fish, and about how good it is for our health and what a fantastically delicious and healthy food it is, and that depends on the offshore fleet as well as the inshore fleet. We need to consider how to get the balance right and swing the pendulum back.

The Government’s gut instinct is probably that the pendulum has swung too far in favour of offshore fleets, and we have now begun to push it back. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney acknowledged, we have recently allocated another 1,000 tonnes to inshore fleets. We have begun to use the opportunities provided by getting rid of discards to allocate more, and 10% of that quota goes to inshore fleets.

The challenge is to have a good strategic study to consider the 25 or 30-year future. Rather than my pontificating from the Dispatch Box on a subject about which I do not know a great deal, I would like my hon.
Friends the Members for Waveney and for Newbury to sit down with our officials and talk in great detail through the issues that have been raised, and particularly the fantastic work that the hon. Member for Waveney has done on comparative studies, such as Swedish fishing methods, and the French, German and Canadian approaches.

Our current process is fantastic, and it is not only processing people but retailers, the industry, fish salesman, and coastal communities who are discussing what more we can do for the inshore fleet. To do that, we need from my hon. Friends details of how much more of the quota it makes sense to give that fleet, how much more it feels that it can catch, and how that will deliver economic benefit.

I have two small pieces of reassurance. First, it is true that we are already incentivising more sustainable ways of catching fish, and European Union grants are available to upgrade the type of nets that are used to get more sustainable catches. Secondly, we are already emphasising the economic links with people who possess those quotas in terms of providing jobs for coastal communities.

In conclusion, let me pay tribute to what was a serious and impressive piece of research that contained stimulating ideas. We must take up the challenge of thinking forward over a 25-year environment plan, and we must consider how to integrate fish and coastal communities into that. In addition to protecting this precious piece of maritime heritage, we must think about the fish themselves, because they are a finite and precious resource.

Question put and agreed to.

1.42 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that the Secretary of State gets this right, as we have made a lot of mistakes in the past by comparing our system of education with those of countries that are very unlike ours, such as Finland and parts of China. The fact is that the results from the programme for international student assessment can be very misleading, so will she be very careful about which systems she compares ours with as the best?
September 2017. Of course, the opportunities offered by the longer school day are also important in ensuring that our young people get the extracurricular activities that help them to achieve the highest possible standards.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Much of the quality assurance in schools is driven and carried out by local authorities. That means that self-evaluation and improvement is a continuous cycle, with only the occasional visit from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of education in Scotland, or Ofsted in England, to rubber-stamp the work already done. With the move to academies, how does the Secretary of State envisage quality assurance being monitored locally, and what budget has she set aside for the increased number of inspectors required to drive improvement?

Nicky Morgan: Quality assurance will be measured in exactly the same way as it is now, by Ofsted, and, most importantly, by parents, who make the best possible choice for their children by choosing the strongest schools. It is worth noting that, in Scotland, 29% of schools in the most deprived areas are rated weak or unsatisfactory. The SNP has had nine years to raise educational standards in Scotland. What has it done about them?

Education White Paper

2. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What progress she has made on implementing the proposals in the education White Paper, and if she will make a statement. [R]

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): Our education policy, including the White Paper, is about making sure that every child gets the best possible start in life to enable them to fulfil their potential. The White Paper is called “Educational Excellence Everywhere” because for us the “Everywhere” is absolutely non-negotiable. We are making progress on commitments in the White Paper. The first stage of our consultation on the national funding formula closed last week, moving us closer to a fairer system where every school’s funding is matched to the needs of the pupil.

Diana Johnson: Kelvin Hall School is outstanding without being an academy. That is due to its excellent headteacher and staff and its inspirational campus, which was built under Building Schools for the Future. Would Ministers not be better off focusing their time, energy and money on raising standards in poor-performing schools—the original purpose of Labour’s pragmatic and targeted academy programme—not pursuing the wasteful and disruptive dogma of imposing rigid structures from Whitehall?

Nicky Morgan: I am delighted to hear about the excellent school the hon. Lady mentions. I want that excellent school not to hide its light under a bushel, but to go on to make the rest of the schools in the area as strong as possible and to work in collaboration. I am not going to leave the job half done; we are going to finish this job.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): My constituency is a rapidly growing new town, and that puts pressure on primary school places. Does the Secretary of State agree that academisation can put a good or outstanding primary in a better financial position so that it can build more classrooms and increase intake to meet parent demand?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the opportunities offered by schools becoming academies and by fairer funding, which will mean that more money gets to the frontline, that schools are in charge of their own destinies and that they can expand to take on more pupils. We also want local authorities to work with academies to secure more places, and also to secure more free schools—for example, to deal with parental demand.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): The case for academisation so far rests either on the desire of an individual school to academise or on arguments around school improvement. However, that will not be the case in future, when schools will be required to academise even if they are good or excellent, which will see them risk losing the very features that made them good or excellent. As the Secretary of State considers legislation, will she consider an academisation model that allows such schools that wish to remain in the public sector to have a form of academisation whereby they may do so?

Nicky Morgan: I was following the right hon. Gentleman’s question up until the last sentence, when he seemed to imply that, somehow, academies were not part of the public sector. He could not be more mistaken: they get their funding directly from the Department for Education, their teachers are trained in accordance with our guidance and they can follow the national curriculum. What does the right hon. Gentleman say to the headteacher who wrote to me after the Academies Show last week, saying that her colleagues were forgetting that children are the priority, change is the reality and collaboration is the strategy. How can it not be our moral responsibility to serve as many children as possible by working together? That is what we want to see.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a good argument for academisation is to get schools out of the control of loony left councils, such as Brighton and Hove, which is seeking information in relation to the gender assignment of four-year-olds?

Nicky Morgan: The point about academies and academisation is that they are the vehicle for schools to innovate, make best use of the freedom to drive up standards and do the right thing for their children, which often does not happen under local authority control. That is what we want to see, and that is why we want schools to become academies.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State has intimated that good local authorities can form multi-academy trusts. Ironically, this would give local authorities more responsibility for running schools than they have now, although the Prime Minister has suggested that local authorities having such responsibility is holding
Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman perhaps knows that I am a caffeine addict, but he is missing the point, which is that good schools have much to offer the whole of the rest of the education system. What we see now in schools across the country is collaboration and partnership in clusters of schools, and that is what we want to continue right across the system. We know that actually the best people to run schools are those on the frontline—the heads, the teachers and the professionals—and that is what we want. The issue for the Labour party is that we never hear talk of the pupils, the children or the raising of standards; it is always about vested interests.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Over the past 11 months, one of the issues that has come to me time and again in the constituency has been the cost of the recruitment of teachers, so I was very pleased to see the proposal in the White Paper in relation to the national website that will be set up. Will the Secretary of State tell us how this will help to improve teacher recruitment across the country?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. and learned Friend very much, first, for raising this important issue, but also for spotting that only one of the eight chapters in the White Paper deals with school structures, while the rest tackle the issues that schools have been talking to us about, one of which is the high recruitment cost of teachers. We think that if we can work with the sector to provide a low-cost or no-cost website to enable schools to advertise vacancies, it will mean that more money gets to the frontline, which I think we all want to see.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

4. Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of teacher recruitment and retention.

16. Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of teacher recruitment and retention.

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): We have record numbers of teachers in our classrooms, and retention rates have remained broadly stable for the past 20 years. I recognise that recruitment has become more challenging for some schools, which is why our White Paper sets out clear plans to boost teacher recruitment, build on the success of measures we have already put in place, such as the £67 million package to improve recruitment of STEM teachers, and generous training bursaries and scholarships.

Angela Rayner: Excessive workload is the top reason for teachers leaving the profession. Figures released by the National Union of Teachers show that three quarters of teachers say their workload has increased since the Secretary of State launched the 2014 workload challenge, which was supposed to address the concerns about increasing and excessive work. Why has her workload challenge failed to reduce the workload crisis, and will she agree to meet me and my Labour colleagues in Oldham and Tameside about our local challenges?

Mr Gibb: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady in her constituency or in Parliament. On the workload challenge, there were 44,000 responses to that survey. The top three issues raised were marking, data management and lesson planning burdens. We set up three working parties, which have now reported with very concrete proposals about how we can reduce the burdens. These are very real proposals that will actually, once implemented, reduce the burdens and workload of teachers.

Julie Cooper: The National Audit Office reports that the number of teachers leaving the profession has increased by over 11% in the past three years, and for the past four consecutive years the Government have failed to hit their own recruitment targets. Does the Minister agree that the plan to force all schools to become academies will do nothing to help this situation and may, in many cases, cause teachers to become more demoralised and more likely to leave the teaching profession?

Mr Gibb: The professional autonomy that comes with academy status does the opposite—it encourages the profession in a way that has not happened in the past. We have the highest number of teachers of all time in our schools—445,000, which is 13,000 more than in 2010. The National Audit Office acknowledged that despite the very large increase in numbers of pupils—9% in the past few years—the number of teachers has kept pace. In terms of retention, 90% of teachers are still teaching one year after qualifying, 70% are still there after five years, and over half of all teachers are still in teaching 18 years after qualification. These figures are broadly in line with those in other professions.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): One of the very best ideas that the previous Government had was the Troops to Teachers scheme. Given that personnel in Her Majesty’s armed forces are among the very best that Britain has to offer, what success is the Minister achieving in getting personnel from the Royal Air Force, Navy and Army into our schools to teach our pupils?

Mr Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. This is a two-year scheme that started only in 2014, and the current cohort is the first to qualify. Applications by eligible candidates are up, and over 140 former troops are now working in schools across England as part of the scheme.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Is it clear that teachers are not being listened to with regard to the fiasco over the forthcoming SATs—standard assessment tests—as two excellent teachers communicated to me. They also said that the Department for Education is putting children off learning English and maths properly. When will the Minister listen to teachers, listen to children, and change this approach?

Mr Gibb: We do listen to teachers, and we consulted very widely on the new primary school curriculum that was published in final form in 2013 and came into force in 2014. It is on a par with the best maths curriculums for primary schools from around the world. We have very high expectations and we do not apologise for that. We need to make sure that pupils leaving our schools are able to compete in a modern world—able to survive
and thrive in a modern economy such as Britain’s. That is our ambition, and I wish the Liberal party would share it too.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): At Education questions on 7 March I asked the Minister for Schools about the £35,000 income threshold for non-EU nationals and how it would impact on the recruitment and retention of STEM-qualified teachers. He told me that there was an ongoing consultation with the Home Office, but no new announcements appear to have been made on this issue. Will he answer my question today: what steps has he taken to ensure that qualified teachers will be exempt from the £35,000 threshold on earnings?

Mr Gibb: The consultation is ongoing and we will report to the hon. Lady and the House in due course.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): There is undeniably a crisis in teacher recruitment in schools. I warn the Minister that it is not confined to schools but is starting to affect early years provision too, and hitting it hard because there is no coherent early years career pathway and no set pay scale, with some providers paying wages for only 35 weeks a year. How can the Government possibly hope to improve quality in early years when they are doing their level best to put people off joining the profession?

Mr Gibb: We are not putting people off joining the profession, and we are expanding the early years sector. We acknowledge that when we have a strong economy it is a challenge to recruit highly qualified and highly able people. That is the case in this country, and it is the same in other successful economies around the world. We are doing a huge amount to encourage more professionals to come into the profession. We have a very effective advertising campaign. We have very generous bursaries right across the system; we are spending £1.2 billion on those bursaries. This is working, because we recruited 94% of our target to teacher training last year and we have record numbers of people in teaching. What we do not do, as the hon. Lady and Labour Members are doing, is talk down the profession, because, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, teachers tell us that talk about a recruitment crisis helps to deter people from coming into the profession; it does not encourage them to do so.

Parental Involvement: Academies

5. Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that parents have more influence in the running of their children’s schools when those schools become academies. [904621]

11. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that parents have more influence in the running of their children’s schools when those schools become academies. [904627]

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): Many parents are governors and make a significant contribution to our schools, and we want this to continue, but that is not the only way we want parents to engage in schools. That is why our White Paper outlined our intention to place a duty on academies to engage meaningfully with parents, introduce parental satisfaction surveys, and set up a new parent portal to help parents navigate the school system.

Stuart Andrew: I am extremely fortunate to have many parents in my constituency who are engaged in local schools. Many have approached me recently because they have been concerned by recent reports that their voice, position and influence may be diminished if all schools are turned into academies. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that that is not the case?

Nicky Morgan: I pay tribute to the many thousands of parents who already play a valuable role on school governing bodies. It is vital that schools and governing bodies listen to the views and the voices of parents, and we want academies to engage meaningfully with them. I know that that is happening, for example, in my hon. Friend’s constituency at Crawshaw Academy, where parents are invited to half-termly information evenings to comment on academy policies and to share their views with senior leaders. In a recent parent survey, 78% of respondents reported that they felt consulted and able to contribute to the academy’s development.

Wendy Morton: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the voice and the skills of parents are greatly valued in our schools? Will she further clarify how their voice and their skills will continue to play an important part in governing bodies when a school becomes an academy?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Involving parents in governance and really listening to the views of parents are not necessarily the same thing. That is why I want academy boards to appoint parents for their skills and experience, and to set up parent councils or other appropriate arrangements to engage parents meaningfully and to represent their views to governing bodies.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that she is rethinking her White Paper in relation to parents, and that she will reconsider whether they should be consulted over the academisation of our schools and their role as school governors?

Nicky Morgan: I do not need to rethink, because we are very clear about the important role that parents play as governors, through parental surveys and through parental engagement. The hon. Gentleman also appears, in the second part of his question, to be fighting a fight that we fought in the Education and Adoption Act 2016, which is now part of the law and which set out the clear role for parents to be involved when a school becomes an academy.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Perhaps the Secretary of State can explain a little more clearly and slowly, particularly to some of her colleagues on the Conservative Back Benches, who are gently asking her to think again about this point. Parental accountability is quite an important part of school life. In what circumstances does she envisage that removing that role of governance in a school from parents will be a good thing?
Nicky Morgan: First, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman should be insulting Conservative Members, who perfectly well understand the important role of parents as governors. For the avoidance of doubt, let me speak slowly and clearly to him. We are not suggesting, and never have suggested, that parents should not be on governing bodies.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I have had many parents contact me about the key stage 2 SATs that are going to be examined in the next two weeks, and I have also been contacted by the headteachers of schools. Even though this has been in place since 2014, there is some concern. After the exams, will my right hon. Friend meet me and talk over any concerns that may come up?

Nicky Morgan: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter. As the Schools Minister has said, we have raised the bar in relation to the key stage 2 tests that are happening, but the important reason for that is to make sure that our young people have the basics of the reading, writing and maths that will help them to progress in life. We know the difference in GCSE results between key stage 2 pupils at the end of primary who get to the expected level in reading, writing and maths, and those who do not. That can hold people back for life, and that is not fair.

Children's Social Work Sector

6. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy and quality of provision in the children's social work sector. [904622]

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): May I begin by apologising if I am moving unusually slowly and gingerly to and from the Dispatch Box this afternoon? I have the excuse of having run the London marathon yesterday, along with seven other Members of the House and close to 40,000 other hardy individuals. I ask the House to put on record our collective gratitude and admiration for them, in particular for the more than £25 million that they raised for hundreds of charities up and down the country.

It is the role of Ofsted to assess the adequacy and quality of provision in the children’s social work sector. All local authorities are currently being inspected under the single inspection framework, which assesses arrangements for child protection services for looked-after children and the leadership, management and governance of children’s social care. My Department intervenes to support improvement in services where they are judged to be inadequate.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wished to give the House and close to 40,000 other hardy individuals. I ask the House to put on record our collective gratitude and admiration for them, in particular for the more than £25 million that they raised for hundreds of charities up and down the country.

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Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wished to give the House and close to 40,000 other hardy individuals. I ask the House to put on record our collective gratitude and admiration for them, in particular for the more than £25 million that they raised for hundreds of charities up and down the country.

Edward Timpson: I am afraid that the hon. Lady has a distorted view of the work being done to improve social work practice across the board. Not only are the Government investing in fast-track graduate schemes such as Frontline and Step Up to Social Work, to which 151 local authorities have signed up, but we have the assisted and supported year of employment and the new knowledge and skills that every children’s social worker will now have to be accredited and assessed against. That is important because for the first time there is a relentless focus on high-quality social work practice rather than a simple theoretical understanding of social work. We need to get that balance right, and that will be at the heart of our social work reforms.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): St Monica’s Catholic Primary School in my constituency has had five consecutive outstanding Ofsted reports. It has a fantastic headteacher, teachers, pupils and parents. Can the Minister tell me what benefit there is to forcing that school to become an academy?

Edward Timpson: I would answer the question, but I am not sure that it has any relevance to the original question asked by his hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wished to give the Minister his views, which he has done, but now that he has I am afraid his question is not really suitable for a ministerial answer at this time.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Services

7. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve special educational needs and disability services. [904623]

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): The 2014 special educational needs and disabilities reforms represent the biggest change to the system in a generation, helping to transform support by joining up services across education, health, and social care, and focusing on positive outcomes for education, employment, housing, health and community participation. We have invested heavily in practical and financial support for implementation, including an extra £80 million in 2016-17, and from May 2016, all areas will be inspected by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission.

Debbie Abrahams: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I have been contacted by a constituent who has raised concerns about the potential effect that forcing schools to become academies will have on her autistic son in terms of his being marginalised. Will the Minister tell me what assessment has been undertaken of how forcing schools to become academies will affect disabled children?

Edward Timpson: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to give her a lot more detail about exactly how the system operates. I can reassure her that, under the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new special
educational needs system, academies have exactly the same duties to pupils with special educational needs as all other schools, and must co-operate with their local council, whether in developing their local offer or publishing details of their SEN provision. That will not change. We are confident that it is the right approach so that every child gets the right school with the right support for them, irrespective of what type of school that is.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the most egregious elements of today’s unfair and broken school funding system is that which affects children with special educational needs, and will he confirm that, like the schools block, the special needs block will be part of the review, so that we can have a transparent and fair system for all children?

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend, the former Chair of the Education Committee, is right to point out that the high needs funding element of the dedicated schools grant has, over time, become extremely skewed with regard to finding the formula to distribute that important money for the support of children with special educational needs and disabilities. In December 2015 we announced an additional £92.5 million for the high needs element, but we need a fairer system so that every child has their needs met, irrespective of where they are in the country. That will be part of the consultation.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The ring-fenced nature of the schools block under the London schools funding proposals needs no flexibility. This year, the Hounslow schools forum agreed to transfer £7 million to the high needs block to address the needs of vulnerable children. The Secretary of State’s proposals for London will result in a huge funding shortfall for special needs. What will the Secretary of State do to address the very great concern of parents and headteachers?

Edward Timpson: I reiterate that we want a funding system based fairly and squarely on meeting children’s individual needs. We have consulted widely right across the sector and engaged with the public consultation to ensure we achieve just that. I will certainly consider what the hon. Lady says about London—as well as the situation across the country—so that every child can benefit from the new system as we move forward.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If I may pick up on funding for special schools, Wyvern Academy in my constituency looks after children who are particularly physically and mentally disabled; so much so, in fact, that other schools that do the same work pass them on to this school. The funding, however, does not recognise the high level of care that is needed. Will the Minister agree that one of the most egregious elements of this unfair and broken school funding system is that which affects children with special educational needs, and will he confirm that, like the schools block, the special needs block will be part of the review, so that we can have a transparent and fair system for all children?

Edward Timpson: I am, of course, happy to talk further with my hon. Friend to establish how the system is working in his constituency and how we can make it work better in the future.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Ever since the Government announced the ham-fisted academisation of all schools, there has been growing opposition, as we have heard, from parents, teachers, SEN charities, Tory council leaders, such as the leader of the West Sussex Council, and even Mr Goddard from “Educating Essex”. The plans will adversely affect the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Will the Minister further explain what the Government are doing to alleviate those concerns? Will he go as far as to say that parents of a child with an education, health and care plan will be able to name their school, and ensure that children with SEND do not go on to be excluded or fall through the gaps in the increasingly fragmented school system the Government are creating?

Edward Timpson: The hon. Lady knows I have a real fondness for her. We enjoyed our time together on the Children and Families Bill in those halcyon days of 2013, but I have to say—I suspect she has been put up to it—that this does not sound like her question. I am confident, as she will be, that the law we both helped to take through this House reflects properly what I said in an earlier answer: that academies have to abide by the same rules as other schools when it comes to children with special educational needs. The law is clear. This is why we are bringing in, for the first time, an inspection regime for special education needs, so we can see a really clear picture of how they are performing.

Maintained Schools

9. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): If she will make it her policy that maintained schools be given the choice of whether to become academies.

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): Academies reject the old one-size-fits-all approach, and are more dynamic and responsive to performance and the needs of local areas. In the next six years, schools will have time to make choices and to set in place arrangements that will work for them, either as standalone academies or in multi-academy trusts, including diocesan trusts and operating in local clusters.

Stephen Timms: It will by now be clear to the Secretary of State that Conservative Members, not just Opposition Members, believe schools should have some choice in whether they become academies. Headteachers of excellent primary schools say they have more autonomy with their local authority than they would as members of a multi-academy trust. Surely enforced compulsion from Whitehall of this change cannot be the right way forward.

Nicky Morgan: Ofsted data for the latest inspection results of all schools show that 350,000 children not studying in sponsored academies are rated good or outstanding. Let us look at the example of an academy in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Langdon Academy, a special measures school in East Ham, opened as a
fast-track sponsored academy on 1 January 2014. Over a year later, it has gone from 45% of pupils getting A* to C to 57%. Those are achievements that I want all young people to have access to.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Conversion to academies is improving the education of children throughout the country, and it is right that we make this opportunity available to all children. However, concerns have been expressed about the impact that this policy will have on small schools, particularly in a place such as Cornwall, where we have many small schools. Has my right hon. Friend considered that one of the ways of addressing those concerns would be to allow local authorities to be involved in the running of multi-academy trusts?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend will know that we published a White Paper in order to make sure that we talk to Members in all parts of the House, as well as to local authorities. Like my hon. Friend, I want all young people to have the best possible start in life. We know that academies make a difference. We also know that small schools can benefit from working together in clusters, including the 15 schools in Cornwall that converted to academies together as one group last week to provide mutual support. I look forward to continuing my conversations with my hon. Friend. 

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Luton has the highest-performing schools in the eastern region of England and most of the town’s schools remain in local authority control. When will the Government undertake an objective analysis of why some schools do better than others, and accept that this has nothing to do with academy status?

Nicky Morgan: We know from the international evidence that the more autonomy those on the frontline have—heads, teachers and governors—the more they take responsibility for the results that are achieved. I want the good schools in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency to share their expertise with other schools that are not yet so good. That way we have a strong education system, which is what I as Secretary of State for Education and this Government want to be available for everyone.

Suella Fernandez (Fareham) (Con): In Fareham, primary schools such as Hook with Warsash Church of England and St Anthony’s converted from maintained schools to academies and saw their results improve, surpassing the local authority average. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this policy represents an opportunity for Hampshire, which performs well as a local authority, to get involved and create a mass to enable more autonomy and improvement overall?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is right to say that we can see that the results in primary sponsored academies, for example, which have been open for two years have improved by an average of 10 percentage points, which is double the rate of improvement in local authority schools. She is right to say that there are many talented individuals working in Hampshire local authority and I hope they will take advantage of the new system as well.

Post-16 Education and Training

10. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions she has had with education providers on area-based reviews of post-16 education and training provision.

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): I wish I could claim to have run the London marathon, like my hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families. I went on only a two-mile run this morning and it nearly finished me off. To answer the hon. Lady’s question, I have regular meetings with post-16 education providers about area reviews and all the issues that those throw up. I am also holding meetings with hon. Members once area reviews produce recommendations for any changes in provision in their area.

Liz McInnes: A particular concern of my constituents is mergers between colleges and the potential for young people in rural and suburban areas such as mine to be forced to travel long distances to get to college. What funding would be available from the Department for students forced to travel further as a result of closure or amalgamation of their courses? Would the Department consider reinstating the education maintenance allowance?

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady will be aware, first, that any of the recommendations that come out of an area review that might include proposals for a merger have to be accepted by the colleges themselves. They are independent corporations. In my constituency I also have a very sparsely populated area with towns 25 miles apart so I understand full well the issues surrounding travel to course provision. Colleges can use funding, including the bursary funding, to contribute towards transport costs, but it is ultimately up to the college to decide whether it thinks that move is going to be good for it and its students.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on the position of area-based reviews of colleges which are in special measures? At the same time as colleges are being encouraged to merge, inspectors and the people involved are not allowing such mergers to take place.

Nick Boles: I am not aware of the particular case that my hon. Friend refers to. If he wants to write to me, I would be happy to meet him to discuss it. In general, we do not want mergers to be rushed into before an area review has had a chance to look at the provision in a whole area, but we do not want to stop institutions making arrangements that help them address problems, so I am happy to look into the situation with him.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Government want to promote apprenticeships in post-16 training and colleges, yet the proportion of apprentices with learning difficulties or disabilities decreased from 11% to 8% between 2010 and 2013. With the area reviews ongoing, an Ofsted report has just said that “monitoring and evaluation of FE and skills provision for high needs learners…were ineffective.” How effectively will the interests of young people in those positions, and those of children on the autism spectrum, be addressed, especially if area reviews force
them to travel further to study in new environments? Will the Minister specifically guarantee decent outcomes for young people with disabilities?

Nick Boles: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important question. I recently had an excellent meeting, facilitated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), with groups representing deaf people, and I will shortly be holding a round table with groups representing people with other kinds of disability. It is essential to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunity of apprenticeships and other forms of technical education, and we are determined to do that.

Academies

12. Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What plans she has to require all primary and secondary schools to become academies. [904628]

17. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): How she plans to implement the proposed requirement for all primary and secondary schools to become academies. [904633]

15. Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support academies through the creation of multi-academy trusts. [904631]

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): We expect all schools to be academies, or have plans in place to convert, by 2020 and all schools to be academies by 2022. By setting out our clear expectation for full academisation now, we can give schools, local authorities and dioceses the opportunity to plan effectively for a sustainable future and ensure that no school is left behind. We have set aside funding to support a high-quality, fully academised school system, including over £500 million available this Parliament to build capacity.

Jonathan Reynolds: I support academies where people want them, but there is nothing worse than a top-down reorganisation of a public service for political, rather than sound policy, reasons. In response to a written question from me earlier this month, the Department confirmed that deficits for schools that convert will remain with the local authority. In my borough, over half of our schools will have deficits by 2017. How can the Government justify transferring this burden on to local councils, when it is their own funding of schools that is to blame?

Mr Gibb: I read the hon. Gentleman’s recent letter to the Ofsted lead for the north-west, Chris Russell, and I share his ambition to improve standards of education in Greater Manchester, but it is not a top-down reform; it is devolution in its purest form that gives control of schools to the professionals on the frontline. That is what this is about. He should be supporting the measures because they will raise academic standards right across our schools system.

Mike Kane: This morning, I visited Springfield Primary School, in my constituency, which is run by the most dedicated professionals I have ever known—I had the privilege to teach there myself for the best part of a decade. They tell me that it is more than adequately supported by the Conservative local education authority in Trafford, and in Mike Freeman it has a brilliant LEA Labour councillor and school governor. Will the Minister join me in praising the school for all it does in my constituency and explain to it why its model, which is really good, needs to be changed?

Mr Gibb: We do not want the model under which that school operates to change; we want the school to take the model it uses to raise standards and teach children well, despite the loss of the hon. Gentleman as a teacher, and to spread that excellence to other schools in the area. That is the essence of the academies programme. It is about ensuring that every local school in every part of the country, beyond Trafford, has a good local school. That is the ambition. I hope he shares it.

Andrea Jenkyns: I recently visited Jerry Clay academy, in my constituency, which has seen huge improvements under the leadership of the head, Tracy Swinburne. We should ensure that academies that have benefited from strong leadership are recognised and that they can support other schools through the creation of multi-academy trusts. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating her and the academy on their success and inform me what steps the Government are taking to ensure that those in leadership positions in trusts are strong and effective?

Mr Gibb: I am pleased that the headteacher of Jerry Clay academy is exploring the possibility of joining a multi-academy trust. The regional schools commissioner has discussed the matter with the school and continues to support it as it considers the opportunity. We are supporting leaders of trusts to succeed in their vital role through programmes such as the successful multi-academy trust chief executive programme and the academy ambassadors programme, which have resulted in over 190 experienced business leaders joining trust boards.

Mr Speaker: We have now exceeded the time available for the Minister’s exam, and we come now to topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): Last week, I had the pleasure of marking the 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare, watching a live stream of “The Merchant of Venice” at Lings primary school in Northampton—a school serving a disadvantaged area with 55% of its pupils getting free school meals. The inspirational headteacher there has shown how all pupils, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, can develop an appreciation of and a love for great literary works. We want to encourage more pupils to experience Shakespeare, as countless previous generations have before. That is why the national curriculum requires all pupils to study at least three complete Shakespeare plays while they are at school.

Victoria Atkins: We Conservative Members all welcome the Government’s decision to introduce a fairer funding formula for schools. Will my right hon. Friend assure my constituents that the particular needs of our rural
deliver her objectives is to force any good or outstanding to convert, so the only remaining power she needs to that good and outstanding schools can already choose remember the right hon. Lady that she already has powers Secretary of State than we have heard so far. Let me and those heads need and deserve more clarity from the new GCSEs and her real-terms cuts to school budgets, her botched new SATs tests, her massively behind-schedule panic she has caused by her announcement. Headteachers huge amount of upheaval, uncertainty and, frankly, huge amount of upheaval, uncertainty and, frankly, panic she has caused by her announcement. Headteachers are already facing huge challenges trying to work around her botched new SATs tests, her massively behind-schedule new GCSEs and her real-terms cuts to school budgets, and those heads need and deserve more clarity from the Secretary of State than we have heard so far. Let me remind the right hon. Lady that she already has powers to turn underperforming schools into academies and that good and outstanding schools can already choose to convert, so the only remaining power she needs to deliver her objectives is to force any good or outstanding school that does not want to become an academy to do so. Is it still her intention to ask Parliament for these new powers—yes or no?

Nicky Morgan: I have been very clear that I will not be the Secretary of State who leaves undone the job of making our school system as strong as possible for the benefit of all pupils. I hope that as she visits schools up and down the country, the hon. Lady includes visiting those that are already taking advantage of the new academy freedoms. Amanda Bennett from the Greentland primary academy in Halifax said, for example: “As an academy we have had the freedoms to explore the specific needs of the children in our care—so our curriculum progression, pitch and expectations are able to adapt when we want them to, to respond to our changing needs. This has allowed us to be consistently in the top performing schools nationally.”

Conservative Members are all for improving opportunities and life chances for all children. Is it not interesting that we never hear the hon. Lady talk about pupils or standards, because she is so obsessed with one chapter in the White Paper?

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): Digital literacy is, of course, a core part of the national curriculum, and computing is a statutory subject in all four key stages in maintained schools. We are training a cadre of specialists who can cascade the knowledge that teachers require in order to be able to teach that very important subject.

T8. [904649] Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): Digital skills are fundamental to the success of our knowledge economy, but evidence given to the Science and Technology Committee during its inquiry showed that only 35% of ICT teachers have a specialist qualification, and more than half lack confidence when it comes to delivering the new computing curriculum. What steps are the Government taking to train ICT teachers, and to ensure that we are equipping young people with the skills that they need not just for today’s workplace, but for a jobs market that may be unrecognisable in a decade?

T8. [904649] Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Charles Dickens Primary School is an outstanding foundation primary school in my constituency, which, along with the London borough of Southwark, rightly has great expectations for all Southwark students. The chair of its governors has been in touch with me to express his concern about the enforced academisation of schools. Why is the Secretary of State ignoring the concerns of staff, governors, parents and pupils? Why is she insisting on dictating a structure that offers no choice, but only the academy approach, which could damage the standard of the education that is currently provided?

Nicky Morgan: I had the pleasure of visiting Charles Dickens Primary School during the last academic year. It is an absolutely brilliant school, with an inspirational head teacher. I want that head teacher not only to help, support and inspire the young people in her school, but to spread the excellence of her school to other schools in the area that are struggling. That is what we want to see in the education system. I am surprised that Labour Members are not interested in raising standards for all children in all parts of the country.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): My hon. Friend has a special interest in this area, and I would welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss how we can promote the excellent work that those nurseries do.

Edward Timpson: I had the opportunity to appear in front of the Education Committee during its inquiry into exactly this issue, which I welcome. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the fact that this area needs a better response. That is why we have set up a joint working group with the Department of Health to create new care pathways specifically for looked-after children to improve their mental health prospects. We also have the strengths and difficulties questionnaire for children who are looked after, which is collected every 12 months, but we need to look at what more we can do to follow their progress and ensure that they really achieve what they are capable of.

T4. [904645] Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): According to Ofsted, the best educational settings in the country are maintained nursery schools, of which 58% are “outstanding” and 39% are “good”. Remarkably, they perform just as well in poor areas as settings in the country are maintained nursery schools, of which 58% are “outstanding” and 39% are “good”. Remarkably, they perform just as well in poor areas as they do in less affluent areas. What consideration has the Minister given to allowing them to become academies if they wish to do so, in order to ensure that these great institutions continue their work?

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Last year I spoke to the Minister about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teachers in my constituency, which is partly due to its remoteness. He has talked a great deal about the recruitment of teachers, but what specifically is being done to encourage them to come to remote areas such as west Cumbria?

Mr Gibb: The National Teaching Service was established to second high-performing teachers to parts of the country with a history of recruitment problems. When a remote rural school is part of a multi-academy trust, that helps to recruit teachers, because they know that they can move, within the trust, from a rural to an urban school and back again. That makes recruitment and retention far easier.

Edward Timpson: I utterly refute what the right hon. Lady has just said. We have a more rigorous system for the governance of individual academies when they become academies. The issue with the Department’s consolidated accounts is a technical and accounting problem caused by academies producing accounts covering the academic year to the end of August, rather than to the end of March. We have now agreed with Parliament a new methodology for the current financial year that will better reflect the situation.

T5. [904646] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the excellent headteacher, staff, students and governors at Barnsole Primary School in my constituency, which has gone from “requires improvement” to “overall: outstanding”?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his question, and I should like to thank the head, Sean McKeown, his staff and the pupils of Barnsole Primary School for an outstanding Ofsted judgment. It is an amazing achievement to move from “requires improvement” to “outstanding”, and I was pleased to read a report describing the high-quality teaching that leads its pupils to make accelerated progress in reading, writing and maths. I hope that the school will now consider sharing its experience and expertise by forming a multi-academy trust.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The vast majority of children entering the care system have experienced abuse and neglect and are particularly vulnerable in regard to their mental health needs. Will the Minister accept the concerns expressed by the NSPCC, which I share, that if the Department does not commit to counting and tracking abused and neglected children, those children will continue to be at risk of falling through the cracks and not receiving the mental health support that they need to rebuild their lives?

T3. [904644] Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Dig-i-T, the dyslexia group in Tamworth, tells me that while provision can be good, it is all too often uneven across local schools. What can the Government do to maintain not just the quality of dyslexia and dyspraxia provision, but its consistency in schools in Tamworth, Staffordshire and England?

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I commend the work of the dyslexia group in my hon. Friend’s constituency. I can reassure him that we are investing heavily in practical and financial support for SEND—special educational needs and disability—including funds for a project run by the British Dyslexia Association to address issues such as early identification and effective provision, and funds to enable the Dyslexia SpLD Trust to provide expert advice, information and training for schools and parents. I can also tell my hon. Friend that we are procuring a new contract in 2016-17 so that we can continue to support children and young people with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties—including dyspraxia—in schools and post-16 institutions.

T10. [904651] Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Last year I spoke to the Minister about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teachers in my constituency, which is partly due to its remoteness. He has talked a great deal about the recruitment of teachers, but what specifically is being done to encourage them to come to remote areas such as west Cumbria?

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T7. [904648] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): At the end of last week, Tresham College, which has its headquarters in Kettering, announced draft proposals
to end its A-level provision. I join local parents and students in opposing those plans but, should the worst outcome be realised, will the Minister make it clear to the college that it must do everything it can to ensure that those students who have already completed one year of their A-level course will be able to complete the second year at Tresham College?

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that the college would have a clear responsibility to ensure that those students were able to complete their A-levels at another high-quality institution, and I would be happy to work with him to ensure that it lives up to that responsibility.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that all the evidence shows that being an academy is intrinsically neither good nor bad for a school’s performance? With expert opinion now lined up from the County Councils Network to the Bow Group, it is surely time to revisit this flawed plan to force schools to become academies against their will.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Lady ought to take note of Andreas Schleicher, the deputy director for education and skills at the OECD, who says:

“What our data do show is that school systems which offer a greater deal of school autonomy tend to have higher performance, but they do not say anything about trends…I view the trend towards academies as a very promising development in the UK, which used to have quite a prescriptive education system, if you look at this through international comparison”.

I think we should take note of the international evidence.

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Shipbuilding on the Clyde

3.36 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government’s plans for shipbuilding on the Clyde.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): Before I answer the hon. Lady’s question, I am sure that the whole House will join me in offering our sincere condolences to the family and friends of Captain David Seath, who tragically died after collapsing during the London marathon on Sunday. This was of course not an operational casualty, but given the interest that many hon. Members take in raising funds for charity through the marathon, as do many members of our armed forces, I thought that it was appropriate to start my response in that way. Our thoughts are with his family and friends at this difficult time.

I welcome the opportunity to outline our plans for building complex warships. The Type 26 global combat ship programme is central to those plans. The strategic defence and security review restated this Government’s commitment to the Type 26 global combat ship programme. The ships are critical for the Royal Navy, and we are going ahead with eight anti-submarine warfare Type 26 global combat ships. The SDSR also made it clear that build work on Type 26 would be preceded by the construction of two additional offshore patrol vessels and that we would launch a concept study and then design and build a new class of lighter, flexible, general purpose frigates. The construction of the additional offshore patrol vessels will provide valuable capability for the Royal Navy and, crucially, will provide continuity of shipbuilding workload at the shipyards on the Clyde before construction of the Type 26 begins.

Nothing has changed since the publication of the SDSR, and over the next decade, we will spend around £8 billion on Royal Navy surface warships. We continue to progress the Type 26 global combat ship programme, and we announced last month the award of a contract with BAE Systems valued at £472 million to extend the Type 26 demonstration phase to June 2017. That will enable us to continue to work with industry to develop an optimised schedule for the Type 26 and OPV programme to reflect the outcome of the SDSR, to mature further the detailed ship design ahead of the start of manufacture, to invest in shore testing facilities and to extend our investment in the wider supply chain in parallel with the continuing re-baselining work.

Overall, the SDSR achieved a positive and balanced outcome, growing the defence budget in real terms for the first time in six years, delivering on our commitment to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence and, in the maritime sector, setting the trajectory for expansion of the Royal Navy’s frigate fleet. That growth in numbers will be achieved through the introduction of a more affordable light general purpose frigate—GPFF. The GPFF reflects a shift in the Navy’s focus and posture to delivering the strategic defence outputs of continuous at-sea deterrence and continuous carrier capability with our unique high-end warships: six Type 45 destroyers and eight Type 26 frigates. A large range of other naval tasks will be undertaken by the GPFF.

To deliver the SDSR, we must improve and develop our national shipbuilding capability to become more efficient, sustainable and competitive internationally. To that end, we announced the intent to have a national shipbuilding strategy, and I am delighted that Sir John Parker, a pre-eminent engineer and foremost authority in naval shipbuilding, has started work as the independent chair of that project. I look forward to receiving his recommendations, which will address, among other things, the best approach to the GPFF build.

I understand the strong interest in the timing of the award of the contract to build the T26 global combat ship, and I also understand that reports of delays create anxiety, but let me assure the shipyard workers on the Clyde that this Government remain absolutely committed to the Type 26 programme and to assembling the ships on the Clyde, and that we are working closely with BAE Systems to take the Type 26 programme forward, ensuring that it is progressed on a sustainable and stable footing.

More broadly for Scotland, our commitment to the successor programme will sustain 6,800 military and civilian jobs there, rising to 8,200 by 2022. As the programme progresses, an additional 270 personnel will be based at Her Majesty’s naval base Clyde. Extending the Typhoon until at least 2040, and upgrading it with the active electronically scanned array radar, will benefit RAF Lossiemouth and continue to benefit Selex ES in Edinburgh. Our new maritime patrol aircraft will be based at RAF Lossiemouth, which is ideally placed for the most common maritime patrol areas and is currently used as a maritime patrol aircraft operating base by our NATO allies. This will also lead to significant investment, and our current estimate is for some 200 extra jobs in Scotland.1

Mr Speaker: Order. I am most grateful to the Minister for his words, but I gently point out that he took more than twice his allotted time. I felt that he had germane information to impart, so I let it go on this occasion, but I cannot do so on a subsequent occasion; there are rules in this place and they must be observed. In recognition of how long it took the Minister, the hon. Lady now has slightly longer, if she wishes to take it.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I, on behalf of the Opposition, also extend our condolences to the family of Captain David Seath?

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter in an urgent question, although I am deeply disappointed that the Minister had to be dragged to the House this afternoon to explain what on earth has been going on with the Government so far. The Secretary of State cannot be seen for dust. After three days of considerable uncertainty over the future of British shipbuilding, during which the Government have remained completely silent, the Secretary of State has, unfortunately, failed to clear the air. This is about a commitment to our Royal Navy and the national defence of the UK.

As a maritime nation, it is bad enough that our Navy has had its surface fleet cut by a sixth since this Government came into office. We have been promised that at least 13 new frigates will be built, but if the timetable for delivering the new frigates has slipped, the Government’s promise to maintain the Navy’s fleet at its current size is put at risk. Can the Minister answer a simple question: will construction begin this year, in line with previous

commitments? He claims that the orders for the new frigates will proceed as set out in the SDSR, but it says nothing about the timetable—and the timetable is vital. The unions are now being told that this could be delayed by up to a year. Is he saying that that is not the case? Does he also deny the claims made by unions that the start of Type 26 construction has already been delayed?

The issue is not just about the Type 26 frigates. Over the past two years, the Government have repeatedly promised that all 13 of the Navy's new frigates would be built on the Clyde—not only the eight Type 26s, but “at least” five lighter frigates announced in the SDSR as well. Can we have confirmation that that is still true today? What about the budget? There are rumours that the next two offshore patrol vessels will now come out of the same budget as the frigates, meaning that the overall budget is almost certain to fall—is that right? Has nothing changed, as the Minister says? If that is right, why has BAE Systems not denied press reports that there will be redundancies at the shipyards? If that is not the case, why are the unions being told that there will be redundancies? This is a matter of national importance for the United Kingdom. The future of hundreds of people in Glasgow hang on the Minister's words this afternoon. Will he please answer my questions about delay, as this is a very important matter?

The Government say that they are publishing a shipbuilding strategy later this year. We have been waiting 16 months, and we are now told that a chair has been appointed. That is good, but will we get the shipbuilding strategy this year, because, frankly, at the moment, it looks like a shambles? This is not the time for weasel words such as “optimised schedules”. We need clear-cut assurances from the Government that they will honour the commitments that they have made both to local communities and to our national defences. If they do not honour those commitments, this will be yet another Tory betrayal of Scotland, which the SNP will not be able to fix. Only a British Labour Government will be in a position to safeguard the future of Glasgow's shipbuilding industry.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for your advice at the end of my opening remarks. I will keep my response brief.

The hon. Lady is seeking to make party political capital out of a routine meeting between BAE Systems and the trade unions that took place last week and that happened to come nearly two weeks ahead of the election for the Scottish Parliament. As I said in my opening remarks, the commitment of this Government to the Royal Navy is crystal clear. We have a 10-year forward equipment plan, in which we will be investing more than £8 billion in surface ships. Where is her party's commitment to the Royal Navy? What percentage of GDP will her party commit to spend on defence in this country? We hear nothing about that.

Let me turn to the hon. Lady's specific questions. She asked whether construction will begin this year. As I said earlier, we placed a contract last month for a further £472 million, which takes our contract on this programme up to some £1.6 billion. That is paying for equipment sets for the first three vessels; long lead items; and shore-testing facilities. The programme therefore remains on track. We have confirmed before, and I have done so again today, that there will be eight Type 26 frigates built on the Clyde. As I have said, this is a multi-year programme that extends beyond the equipment plan. The Type 23s will be replaced by a combination of the Type 26s and the new GPFF.

The hon. Lady asked when the national shipbuilding strategy will be published. We have invited the independent chairman to ensure that his work is completed before the end of the year, and I fully expect that it will be. She asked when the timeframe for the general purpose frigates will be determined. As that is a principal part of the national shipbuilding strategy, the answer will be apparent once that strategy is published.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Since 1997, the total number of frigates and destroyers has declined from 35 to only 19. Does the Minister recognise that the lighter general purpose frigates could offer a great opportunity to reverse that decline in numbers and to create not only more platforms for the Royal Navy, but more work for the shipyards and possibly even export opportunities if the frigate is designed in the right way, which should be modular, adaptable and capable of being upgraded in service, rather than having all the accoutrements put on it from day one?

Mr Dunne: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is very knowledgeable about matters naval. He is right to draw attention to the fact that the introduction of a new and lighter class of frigate raises the prospect not only of more surface platforms for the Royal Navy, but of more exports. As far as I am aware, there has not been a complex warship exported from Clyde yards to other navies around the world for some decades. This provides us with the opportunity, through the general purpose frigate and the additional offshore patrol vessels, to give the Royal Navy, in due course, a larger physical presence and therefore to reverse the decades of decline.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I am sure that those watching will be disappointed that this urgent question descended so quickly into a Tory-Labour bun fight. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), whose question exposed the revised timetable. The reply he received confirmed what we have suspected ever since the strategic defence and security review was published last year: that this Government are creating the conditions in which to betray workers on the Clyde once again. Earlier today, Scotland's First Minister met the unions at BAE Systems, and they expressed their grave concern that the UK Government are set to renge on the promise they made, along with the Labour party, before the independence referendum, that there would be a steady stream of work coming to the yards on the Clyde, guaranteeing employment. Just three years ago, the Prime Minister said: “Scottish defence jobs are more secure as part of the United Kingdom.”

Given that, can the Minister confirm today that there will be no redundancies at BAE Systems in Glasgow, and will he confirm that the Ministry of Defence will stick to the timeline that has been agreed and set out?

Mr Dunne: What I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman is that, had the independence vote gone the way that he and his colleagues would have liked, no warships would
have been built on the Clyde, because the United Kingdom Government would not have chosen to build them there; we made that very clear. As it is, as I have just confirmed to the House, we will be proceeding with the construction of eight complex Type 26 warships on the Clyde as and when the programme is ready.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the shadow Defence Secretary’s refusal to commit her party to the NATO target of spending a minimum of 2% of GDP on defence is a threat not only to our national security, but to key equipment programmes and investment for the Type 26?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that obfuscation on the part of the official Opposition. I draw to his attention the backlog of work ahead of shipbuilders in this country as a result of our equipment plan and our commitment to build the eight Type 26 vessels. No warship yard in Europe has the prospect of eight warships to look forward to. From that perspective, those working in those yards in Scotland can take considerable heart from the fact that they are working in our yards, rather than those elsewhere in Europe.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Defence has stated in the past that UK warships are only built in UK yards, but what percentage of the total contract value will flow to British companies, and what specific work will be given to the British steel industry from those contracts, with regard to not only the value of the orders in the supply chain, but the swift timetabling for the awarding of contracts, to help the beleaguered British steel industry from those contracts, with regard to not only the value of the orders in the supply chain, but the swift timetabling for the awarding of contracts, to help the beleaguered British steel industry now?

Mr Dunne: That is a good question, and I wish that I were in a position to give the hon. Gentleman a full answer. What I will say is that the vast majority of the contracts that have been placed thus far have gone to UK contractors. In relation to the systems and long-lead items that have been placed thus far, the contracts have gone primarily to BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce; in relation to the gearboxes, they have gone to David Brown. As far as the steel content is concerned—I know this is a matter of great interest to the hon. Gentleman—I have made it very clear previously in the House that UK steel mills will have the opportunity to bid for steel tenders that are put out by the prime contractor over the course of this programme. It will be up to the British steel industry to see whether it is in a position to match those orders for the specification and the timelines required.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend have any information on when the designation of the GP frigates will be confirmed? Will it be a Type 31, as has been rumoured in the press, and will it, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, be directed to exports? Will we be building it, or will we get ideas from outside on what the exports should be?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend pushes me to pre-empt the Royal Navy’s normal routine on the making of designations and, indeed, the naming of vessels—she did not ask about that, but I am regularly asked about it by colleagues in the House, who rightly like to express an interest on behalf of their constituents. I am afraid I cannot currently give her any comfort on the designation of the vessels. She is right to ask whether they will be designed with export prospects in mind. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, that is something we intend to look at, but the priority will be to meet the requirements of the Royal Navy, rather than of other navies, so the vessels will be designed to Royal Navy specifications, but with an eye on the possibility of exports to other navies.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister have an estimate of the percentage of work on the frigates that will be carried out in Scotland? Has that changed over the last 18 months, and do the Government have an estimate of how many fewer shipbuilding-related jobs there would be in Scotland if the Scottish National party got its wish to carry out its obsession with taking Scotland out of the United Kingdom?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion of English shipbuilding capability in his constituency, which is across the border from Scotland. I do not have a figure for him—he asked what would happen with the Type 26 programme in Scotland—but our intent is to build the ships on the Clyde, in Scotland, so I do not foresee any direct change from the position we were in last year. As far as his comment on independence is concerned, he is absolutely right that there would have been an enormous reduction in the jobs in Scotland had the Scottish people decided to follow Scottish National party advice and vote for an independent Scotland.

Order. Some people need to calm down. Mr Blackford, you are an extraordinary individual; you do become very excitable. I prefer your cerebral side. If you feel you can find it before the afternoon is out, the House would be greatly obliged to you. I call Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright)—

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. We can come to points of order later. I say to Carol Monaghan that I do not know what has exercised her, but we cannot deal with the matter now. We will have points of order afterwards, when I will happily hear her. There is a certain amount of gestulation going on. Members on the Labour Benches and the SNP Benches should calm down. I will come to the point of order at the appropriate time if it is still germane. Now, we must all unite in hearing Mr Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Hartlepool, has any specific assessment been made of the impact of any delays in the programme, particularly on the British steel industry?
Mr Dunne: We have made it very clear that British Government procurement policies are being adopted by the Ministry of Defence. In all our contracts where steel is involved, we are looking to provide for contractors to ensure that British steel manufacturers have an opportunity to bid. In that respect, the only change is that there are perhaps greater opportunities since we implemented that new policy than there were before.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The workforce on the Clyde are highly skilled and motivated men and women, and I really do wish that the focus of the House this afternoon could be on preserving their futures and livelihoods, instead of on other considerations. With that in mind, will the Minister assure me that, between the end of the construction of the offshore patrol vessels and the start of work on the Type 26 frigates, everything will be done to ensure continuity, because it is in our national strategic interest to ensure that the workforce is maintained?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for focusing his question on that important subject, and I agree that the workforce on the Clyde are highly skilled; indeed, I make a point of meeting the trade union representatives of shipbuilders on the Clyde, and I did so last month. The short answer to his question is yes. The five offshore patrol vessels—three of which are in build, and two of which we added as part of the SDSR—do provide continuity between the Type 45s and the aircraft carrier blocks, as they finish being produced on the Clyde, and the beginning of work on the Type 26s.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome the news of the new-build ships. We still do not have enough, but we are going in the right direction. May I ask that no HM ships currently serving be withdrawn before and until any new ship is built and commissioned?

Mr Dunne: I think my hon. Friend is referring to the Type 23 class of frigates. The Royal Navy’s intention is that the new vessels replace Type 23s on a like-for-like basis as they come out of service.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): When the Prime Minister visited BAE in February last year, he stated that the contract for the Type 26 frigates would secure jobs on the Clyde for the next 30 years. The delays in this contract now threaten the very jobs that the contract should secure. Will he tell the workforce when they should expect to cut steel on the first Type 26?

Mr Dunne: I can tell the workforce that, as I have told their trade union representatives—I also said this to the hon. Lady when she visited me last month—we have a programme for the Type 26, the offshore patrol vessels and the subsequent general purpose frigate that will secure jobs for the shipbuilding workforce in this country, especially on the Clyde, for decades to come. This is the biggest shipbuilding forward programme we have had in this country for a number of years, and that should reassure the highly skilled workforce that they will have jobs for decades to come.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With quality jobs and apprenticeships being secured at David Brown engineering in Huddersfield, which is producing the gears for the Type 26 frigates, will the Minister assure me that as we move forward with the general purpose frigate programme the northern powerhouse will be a major part of that programme?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the gear box work for David Brown, which, as I said earlier, has secured long-lead contracts last month. The benefit of the Royal Navy shipbuilding programme is not confined to Scotland; it affects constituencies right across this country, which is just as it should be. When contracts are placed, we will seek to highlight to hon. Members the work we will be providing in their constituencies for their constituents.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Amid the politics, perhaps the House could remember the estimated 800 families for whom, with their livelihoods at risk, this is a very worrying time. Will the Minister confirm that the promised investment in upgrading the shipyards will still go ahead?

Mr Dunne: I hope that some of the remarks I made earlier will provide some reassurance to the families of those who work on the Clyde. Part of the contracts we have already signed with BAE Systems will help to provide shore test facilities both on the Clyde and through the supply chain, so some investment is going into facilities. The overall level of facilities investment will be part of the overall contract, so I cannot update the hon. Lady further at this point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Our Type 45 destroyers have world-class capability, but they cost £1 billion each. One of the reasons they cost more and took longer to build than we thought they would is that they kept being redesigned after construction had started, and we now learn that there have been major problems with the power plant. Will the Minister assure the House that these mistakes will be avoided with the Type 26 frigates?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend makes a really valuable point. There is no doubt that before starting the construction of a complex warship, it makes an enormous difference if the design is more complete than otherwise. He is right to point out that the Type 45 programme began with a less advanced design than the Type 26 will have, and we hope we are learning lessons from that. We have certainly learned lessons in relation to the power and propulsion, and we will have a different system.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As someone with the privilege of representing the Govan shipyard, may I first tell the Minister that a meeting between an employer and trade unions, with 800 jobs at risk, is not “a routine meeting” by any standard? I hope he will reflect on his earlier remarks. Will the Minister confirm that the original date for cutting steel for the Type 26 was May 2016, and will he explain the reasons for the delay? Finally, what message does the Minister have for the trade unions and the workforce on the Clyde, who view the national shipbuilding strategy with suspicion and as an attempt to reduce the role of shipbuilding on the Clyde? Are the fears of the workforce unfounded, or is that another betrayal that is still to come?
Mr Dunne: It is very unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman, who represents his constituents well—I have been pleased to meet him at the yard in the past—uses words such as “betrayal”, because that does not characterise what is happening. We are making commitments to build the Type 26 for several years ahead. I cannot, I am afraid, give him an update on the date for cut steel, as that will emerge from the programme work that is yet to be finalised. It is wrong to suggest that people should be fearful of the outcome of the national shipbuilding project, which seeks to put the rollercoaster ride of shipbuilding in this country in recent years on to a firm and stable footing so that there is clarity for the next decades. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman says, “That is what they think”, so perhaps I can help him by saying that the objective of the national shipbuilding strategy is to align the Royal Navy’s requirements, which stretch out for many years ahead, with the capability to maintain in this country the high-quality engineering skills that, at present, reside primarily on the Clyde in his constituency.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I very much second the comments made about the importance of using UK steel in these products, unlike in many recent Ministry of Defence projects. I want to ask the Minister two very specific questions: will there still be five general purpose frigates, and where will they be built—on the Clyde or elsewhere?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see what emerges from the national shipbuilding strategy. The intent is that by having a more affordable design we are able to do some of the less high-tempo tasks that the Type 26 will undertake. That should allow the Royal Navy to have more than five frigates. I can confirm that the intent is to replace the Type 23s on a like-for-like basis as between the Type 26 and the general purpose frigate, with the potential for there to be more. He will have to wait to see what emerges from the national shipbuilding strategy with regard to the timetable and the location.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As ever at this time of year, there is much reminiscing over the UK’s defeat of Argentina. Given that that took a taskforce of 42 Royal Navy ships, does the Minister really expect us to believe that a fleet of 19 frigates and destroyers is sufficient for a Navy with the strategic ambitions outlined in the 2015 SDSR?

Mr Dunne: I remind the hon. Gentleman that part of the strategic ambition is fulfilled by the two primary battlegroup capabilities: continuous at-sea deterrence and the continuous carrier capability. I can absolutely reassure him that the military assets in place on and around the Falklands are of an order of magnitude greater than they have been in previous times, particularly compared with 1982, so the notion of having to send a flotilla of the type that was sent at that time would not be required in the event of a threat to the Falklands today.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Shipbuilders on the Clyde are very skilled, as are those on Merseyside, and they share having experienced the threat of redundancy over many years. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s now-delayed shipbuilding strategy, once we have it, will cover the supply chain in all parts of this country, wherever marine engineering skills reside?

Mr Dunne: The objective of the national shipbuilding strategy is to look at the manufacture of complex warships. As part of that, there are, as the hon. Lady says, significant capabilities across the country through the supply chain. We are not expecting a detailed review of all elements of the supply chain, but I take her point and will reflect on it in my conversations with Sir John Parker.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I asked in July about the building of Type 26 frigates, when it had been reported that the order process could be fragmented to bring to it what the Government called “realism”. With this uncertainty, exactly what kind of realism are the Government looking to bring? Does the Minister not think that the workforce on the Clyde deserve to hear, specifically and clearly, exactly what work will be available and when?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady will have to have a little more patience. The way in which major procurements of this nature take place means that it is not appropriate to set hares running or, frankly, to be alarmist about the prospects for individual companies or locations. Until such time as a contract has been signed, there is not the clarity that the hon. Lady seeks to achieve.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The 2015 SDSR gave an explicit commitment to the eight Type 26 frigates being built on the Clyde. Given that the workers at Govan and Scotstoun also heard that there would be 12 Type 45 destroyers, and then that there would be eight, before finally being given work for six, does the Minister wonder why the Clyde workforce are unsure about MOD promises? On that basis, can he categorically confirm that eight Type 26s will be built there?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady needs to speak to those who were in post when the decisions were taken to reduce the Type 45 class. That was certainly not done under this Government. We made it crystal clear in the SDSR that eight Type 26 global combat ships would be built on the Clyde. In response to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), may I say that that is the reassurance that the workforce on the Clyde need? This is a forward programme, the like of which, during the past six years under the previous coalition Government, we had not been able to implement: now we can.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Minister has spoken about the role of steel in the frigates and other key pieces of procurement that the MOD will be undertaking, but I was not particularly comforted by his comments on the role that procurement will play in this case. Can he confirm that local content and local value will play a key role when decisions are made about procuring steel?

Mr Dunne: As the hon. Gentleman knows—he may well have been an expert on the subject for a long time, but he is certainly something of an expert now—steel of the specification and standards required for naval warships is not available in many of the routine runs of, for example, plate steel provided by UK suppliers. That is why there have been different proportions of UK steel content in different types of military platforms. The offshore patrol vessels, for example, have a thinner plate
than that which is currently available from any of the mills in the UK, which is why no UK mills chose to bid for the steel content that has been contracted thus far. I cannot tell him whether there is capability at this stage for the Type 26 steel requirements, but I have made a commitment that we will invite steel manufacturers to understand what those capabilities are and give them an opportunity to bid.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Minister said earlier that he is still confident that the Department’s orders will provide job security for decades to come, but that will be of little benefit to anyone who is made redundant between now and when the Department makes up its mind what it is going to do. May I ask him again the question that he has not so far answered: will he give a commitment that there will be no compulsory redundancies on the Clyde as a result of these delays?

**Mr Dunne:** All I can say to the hon. Gentleman and to the workforce on the Clyde is that we have, through the SDSR and again today, made a commitment to build eight Type 26s on the Clyde. That will provide work for the highly skilled workforce on the Clyde for many years.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): There is a growing sense of anger and frustration on the Clyde, and many of those hard-working and highly skilled workers are starting to feel as though they have been used as constitutional pawns. What does the Minister say in response to the secretary of GMB Scotland, who said that the UK Government’s recent actions in the Clyde are “a total betrayal of the upper Clyde workforce”?

**Mr Dunne:** I find it hard to characterise a commitment to build eight complex warships on the Clyde as a betrayal. That is what we did in the SDSR and it has not changed.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister, has today written to the Prime Minister saying: “The BAE yards on the Clyde require a cast iron commitment from your government that you will deliver the contract as promised, with the full scale up of the workforce without any risk to employment at the yards.”

Will the Minister recommend that the Government reply positively to that request?

**Mr Dunne:** I am sorry to have to say to the hon. Gentleman that the risk to employment on the Clyde would have arisen if the people of Scotland had followed his advice and chosen to vote for an independent Scotland. Thankfully, they did not, and as a result hundreds of people are still working in shipbuilding on the Clyde.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In a debate such as this, language is extremely important. In his response, the Minister has stated that ships would be “assembled”; and, at one point, “constructed”. To clarify and put it beyond doubt, will he tell the House, and those in my constituency who work in the shipyards and those represented by my hon. Friends, that that will include fabrication, and that the process will be in the yards from beginning to end, not somewhere else?

**Mr Dunne:** I encourage the hon. Gentleman to spend a little more time in the yards on the Clyde to understand how components and systems are an integral part of the capability of building a complex warship. Fabrication is an important part, but much of the value and content comes from introducing weapons command and control systems, which are not built on the Clyde. Fabrication is done there, as is integration, and that will continue to be undertaken there.

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): On 4 April 2013, the Prime Minister said that Scottish defence jobs were “more secure as part of the United Kingdom.” Does the Minister realise how ridiculous that now sounds?

**Mr Dunne:** I have to repeat to the hon. Gentleman that we have committed to build eight Type 26 complex warships on the Clyde. Had the people of Scotland voted for an independent future, we would not have made that commitment.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. After a little time to simmer down, I hope that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has now acquired the poise, gravitas and serenity to which he should aspire.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, but perhaps, like the workers on the Clyde, we on the Scottish National party Benches are beginning gently to simmer. I reflect on the Minister’s words: he said that the demonstration phase is now going to continue to June 2017. Is the cat not now out of the bag—he is putting back the construction process? Why does he not give a guarantee to the workforce that their jobs are safe? We can all now reflect on what Better Together meant—duping the people of Scotland down, I hope that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has now acquired the poise, gravitas and serenity to which he should aspire.

**Mr Dunne:** I am not sure that the simmering has really calmed the hon. Gentleman down. As I have said, we have made a clear commitment to build eight Type 26s on the Clyde, providing high-quality jobs. That would not have been the case had the people of Scotland voted for independence.

**Carol Monaghan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Points of order come after statements, and there are a number of statements. That is the way in which we deal with these matters, and that is how it will be handled today.
Junior Doctors Contracts

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We have many choices in life, but one thing over which we have no control is the day of the week that we get ill. That is why the first line on the first page of this Government’s manifesto said that if elected we would deliver a seven-day NHS, so we can promise NHS patients the same high-quality care every day of the week. We know from countless studies that there is a weekend effect showing higher mortality rates for people admitted to hospital at weekends. The British public know that, too. Today, we reaffirm that no trade union has the right to veto a manifesto promise voted for by the British people. We are proud of the NHS as one of our greatest institutions, but we must turn that pride into actions. A seven-day service will help us to turn the NHS into one of the safest, highest-quality healthcare systems in the world.

This week, the British Medical Association has called on junior doctors to withdraw emergency care for the first time ever. I will update the House on the extensive measures being taken up and down the country to try to keep patients safe. But before I do so I wish to appeal directly to all junior doctors not to withdraw emergency cover, which creates particular risks for A&Es, maternity units and intensive care units.

I understand the frustration that many junior doctors feel that, because of pressures on the NHS frontline, they are not always able to give patients the highest quality of care that they would like to. I understand that some doctors may disagree with the Government about our seven-day NHS plans and, in particular, the introduction of a new contract. I also understand that doctors work incredibly hard, including at weekends, and that strong feelings exist on the single remaining disagreement of substance: Saturday premium pay. However, the new contract offers junior doctors who work frequently at weekends more Saturday premium pay than nurses, paramedics and the assistants who work in their own operating theatres, and more than police officers, firefighters and nearly every other worker in the public and private sectors.

Regrettably, over the course of this pay dispute 150,000 sick and vulnerable people have seen their care disrupted. The public will rightly question whether this is appropriate or proportionate action by professionals whose patients depend on them. Taking strike action is a choice. If they will not listen to the Health Secretary, I urge them to listen to some of the country’s most experienced doctors — Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, Professor Dame Sally Davies and former Labour Health Minister Lord Darzi—who have all urged doctors to consider the damage it will cause to both patients and the reputation of the medical profession.

Let me today address some of the concerns raised by junior doctors: first, that a seven-day NHS might spread resources too thinly. The Government’s financial commitment to the NHS has already seen a like-for-like increase of 10,700 more hospital nurses and 10,100 more doctors. Despite the pressure on national finances, last year’s spending review committed the Government to a £10 billion real-terms increase in the annual NHS budget by 2020. I can today tell the House that by the end of the Parliament the supply of doctors trained to work in the NHS will have increased by a further 11,420. While it is true that pressures on the NHS will continue to increase on the back of an ageing population, we are not saying that the current workforce will have to bear all the strain of delivering a seven-day service, even though, of course, they must play their part.

Secondly, there is a concern that the Government may want to see all NHS services operating seven days a week. Let me be clear: our plans are not about elective care, but about improving the consistency of urgent and emergency care at evenings and weekends. To do this, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has prioritised four key clinical standards that need to be met. These are: making sure patients are seen by a senior decision maker no more than 14 hours after arrival at hospital; seven-day availability of diagnostic tests with a one-hour turnaround for the most critically ill patients; 24-hour access to consultant-directed interventions, such as interventional radiology or endoscopy; and twice daily reviews of patients in high dependency areas such as intensive care units. About one quarter of the country will be covered by trusts meeting these standards from next April, rising to the whole country by 2020.

Thirdly, there is the concern that proper seven-day services need support services for doctors in the weekends and evenings, as much as doctors themselves. Less than half of hospitals are currently meeting the standard on weekend diagnostic services, meaning patients needing urgent or emergency tests on a Saturday or Sunday, such as urgent ultrasounds for gallstones or diagnostics for acute heart failure, face extra hours in hospital at weekends or even days of anxiety waiting for weekday tests. Our new standards will change this, with senior clinician-directed diagnostic tests available seven days a week for all hospitals by 2020.

Finally, there is a legitimate concern that a seven-day NHS needs to apply to services offered outside hospitals if we are properly to reduce the pressure on struggling A&E departments. So, as announced last week, the Government’s seven-day NHS will also see transformed services through our GPs. We are committing an extra £2.4 billion a year for GP services by 2020-21, meaning that spending will rise from £9.6 billion last year to over £12 billion by 2021—a 14% real-terms increase. Thanks to this significant investment, patients will see a genuine transformation in how general practice services operate in England. By 2020, everyone should have easier and more convenient access to GP services, including at evenings and weekends. We will not be asking all GP practices to open at weekends to deliver this commitment, but instead using networks of practices to make sure that people can get an evening or weekend appointment, even if not at their regular practice. We have committed to recruiting an additional 5,000 doctors to work in general practice to help meet this commitment, and we will support GPs in this transformation by harnessing technology to reduce bureaucratic burdens.

Returning to the strikes, the impact of the next two days will be unprecedented, with more than 110,000 outpatient appointments and more than 12,500 operations cancelled. However, the NHS has made exhaustive preparations to try to make sure that patients remain safe, and I want to thank those many people in NHS
England, NHS Improvement and every trust in the country who have been working incredibly hard over this weekend to that effect.

I have chaired a series of contingency planning meetings, bringing together the operational response across the entirety of the NHS and social care systems. From this, NHS England has worked with every trust to ensure that they have plans in place to provide safe care, with particular focus on their emergency departments, maternity units, cardiac arrest teams and mental health crisis teams. As part of their duties for civil contingency preparedness, trusts also have major incident plans in place which are ready to be enacted if required. NHS England has also asked GP practices and other primary care providers in some areas to extend their opening hours so that patients can continue to get the important but non-emergency care that they need, such as follow-ups and assessments.

Finally, we have set up a dedicated strike page on the NHS website to provide as much information as possible to the public on local alternatives to hospital care, where these alternatives are, and when they are open. This website is now live and can be reached at www.nhs.uk/strike. The NHS 111 system will also work as normal during the strike, and has been provided with additional staff to cope with expected increased demand. We would encourage people who are concerned that they may need urgent care to visit this website, and call 111 in advance of showing up at an A&E department.

The NHS is busting a gut to keep the public safe. However, we should not lose sight of the underlying reason for this dispute, namely this Government’s determination to be the first country in the world to offer a proper patient-focused seven-day health service. To help deliver this, the NHS will this year receive the sixth biggest funding increase in its history. But it is not just about money, as we know from the mistakes of previous Governments. It is also about taking the tough and difficult decisions necessary to make sure that we really do turn our NHS into the safest, highest-quality healthcare system in the world. This Government will not duck that challenge. I commend this statement to the House.

4.28 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Health Secretary for the advance copy of his statement.

Tomorrow’s strike is one of the saddest days in the history of the NHS, and the saddest thing is that the person sitting opposite me could have prevented it. Yesterday the Health Secretary was presented with a genuine and constructive cross-party proposal to pilot the contract. That would have enabled him to make progress towards his manifesto commitment on seven-day care, and crucially, that the very person he appointed to lead his negotiations, the BMA had indicated it was prepared to meet the Government to discuss calling off Tuesday and Wednesday’s action.

The Health Secretary claimed yesterday that a phased imposition was the same as a pilot. Will he explain how imposition on a predetermined timescale, with no opportunity to right the wrongs of his proposed contract, and no independent assessment of its impact on patient care, is the same as a pilot? Why is he so afraid of an independent evaluation? Why does he not want to know how changing the contract contributes in practice to meeting his aspirations for more consistent emergency care across the seven days of the week? And why is he so determined to railroad this contract through, with all its associated implications, instead of road-testing it and working with junior doctors and hospital bosses to bring about the changes in patient care and outcomes he wants to see?

The Health Secretary claims that any further delay means it will take longer to eliminate the so-called weekend effect, but he has failed to produce a shred of evidence to show how changing the junior doctors contract alone will deliver that aim. He will know that the very person he appointed to lead his negotiations, Sir David Dalton, has said that the staff group that needs to change its working patterns the least to deliver seven-day care is junior doctors—because they already work weekends, nights and bank holidays.

The Health Secretary rightly talked about safety. NHS England’s update today said the NHS was pulling out all the stops to minimise the risks to the quality and safety of care this week. We know that in many cases senior staff will be stepping in to provide cover and ensure the provision of essential services, but there is no escaping the fact that this is a time of unprecedented risk, and he should have thought about that yesterday, before dismissing a plan that could well have averted the strike.

The Health Secretary wants to be remembered as the person who championed patient safety, but safety is not just an issue this week; it will be an issue in the months and years ahead. Long after his tenure in Richmond House is up, it will be the people who work in the NHS who will be picking up the pieces of this dispute, and they are rightly worried about the long-term safety implications of the proposed contract. How can it be safe to impose a contract when no one knows what the impact will be on recruitment and retention but everyone fears the worst, and when he is running the risk of losing hundreds of female doctors, given the contract’s disproportionate impact on women? Even if just 1% of junior doctors decide enough is enough and leave the NHS, they will be people we can ill afford to do without.

How can it be safe to impose a contract that risks destroying the morale of junior doctors, given that the NHS does not just depend on the good will of staff going the extra mile but survives on it? The Health Secretary is breaking that good will. How can it be safe to introduce a contract when there is no guarantee that effective and robust safeguards will be in place to control
hours worked and shift patterns? A pilot could have addressed these issues, which is precisely why it had the backing of so many people.

I suspect that when the Health Secretary gets back to his feet, he will launch another attack on me and the Labour party to detract attention from his culpability for tomorrow’s action. I know this because last week, instead of working to resolve this dispute, the Health Secretary was busy writing me a two-page letter that he briefed to The Sun, asking whether I would be on a picket line.

Let me deal with this matter now in the hope that we can get some constructive answers from the Health Secretary. No, I will not be on a picket line tomorrow or on Wednesday, but that is not because I do not support the junior doctors’ cause, and it is certainly not because I feel even an ounce of sympathy for the Health Secretary. It is because I think patients affected by this dispute want to see politicians working together to find a constructive solution—and that is exactly what I was doing last week, while the Health Secretary was penning his pathetic political attacks.

I am flattered that the Health Secretary attaches such significance to my actions, but the truth is that it is his actions, and his actions alone, that can stop this strike: not me, not the Labour party, but him. If he ploughs on, I warn him now that history will not be kind to him. It will show that when faced with a compromise, the Health Secretary chose a fight; that when presented with a way out, this Health Secretary chose to dig in; and that when asked to put patients first, this Health Secretary chose strikes.

The way in which the Government have handled this dispute is the political equivalent of pouring oil on to a blazing fire. Even if we put to one side the legal question of the contract provisions, the simple truth is this: there is no trust left between the people who work in the NHS and this Health Secretary. He can barely show his face in a hospital because he ends up being chased down the road. This is a deeply, deeply sad day for the NHS, and even at this eleventh hour, I urge him to find a way out.

Mr Hunt: The shadow Health Secretary can do better than that. She talked about the judgments that I have made as Health Secretary, so I will tell her what is a judgment issue—it is whether or not you back a union that is withdrawing life-saving care from your own constituents. Health Secretaries should stand up for their constituents and their patients, and if she will not, I will.

The hon. Lady also talked about the trust of the profession. The Health Secretary who loses the trust of the profession is the Health Secretary who does not take tough and difficult decisions to make care better for patients—something we have seen precious little evidence of from the hon. Lady. Or, if I may say so, her predecessors.

The hon. Lady also talked about putting oil on a blazing fire. What, then, does she make of the shadow Chancellor’s comments recently when he said: “We have got to work to bring this Government down at the first opportunity... Whether in parliament, picket line, or the streets, this Labour leadership is with you”?

Yes, it is with the strikers, but also against the patients. Labour should be ashamed of such comments from the shadow Chancellor.

Let us deal with the substance of what the hon. Lady said. She talked about her proposal for pilots. If this was a genuine attempt to broker a deal between all the parties, why was it that the first the Government knew about it was when we read The Sunday Times yesterday morning? The truth is that this was about politics, not peace making. If she is saying that we should stage the implementation of this contract to make sure we get it absolutely right, I agree. That is why only 11% of junior doctors are going on to the new contract in August. She says she wants more independent studies into mortality rates at weekends, but we have already had eight in the last six years, pointing to the weekend effect. How many more studies does the hon. Lady want? Now is the time to act, to save lives, and to give our patients a safer NHS.

The hon. Lady talked about legal powers, which we discussed in the House last week. The Health Act 2006 makes very clear where my powers are to introduce a new contract, either directly or indirectly, when foundation trusts choose to follow the national contract.

I have given very straightforward answers today. Will the hon. Lady now tell us yes or no? Will Labour Members now tell us yes or no? Do they or do they not support the withdrawal of life-saving care from NHS patients? Last week, the hon. Lady’s answer was “no comment”. Well, “no comment” is no leadership. Labour used to stand up for vulnerable patients, but now it cares more about powerful unions. It is the Conservatives who are putting the money into the NHS, delivering a seven-day service for patients, and fighting to make NHS care the best in the world.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): There are only losers in this bitter dispute, but those who have the most to lose are patients and their families. Tomorrow people will visit hospitals to see those whom they care about more than anything in the world, and will ask themselves why the doctors on the picket line are not inside looking after the people they love. May I ask the British Medical Association directly whether it will show dignity, put patients first, and draw back from this dangerous escalation? May I ask all sides, whatever provocation they may feel, to put patients first in this dispute?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend has spoken very wisely. She recently wrote, in The Guardian, something with which I profoundly agree: she wrote that there could have been a solution to this problem back in February, when a very fair compromise was put on the table in relation to the one outstanding issue of substance, Saturday pay.

I understand that this is a very emotive issue. The Government initially wanted there to be no premium pay on Saturdays, but in the end we agreed to premium pay for anyone who works one Saturday a month or more. That will cover more than half the number of junior doctors working on Saturdays. It was a fair compromise, and there was an opportunity to settle the dispute, but unfortunately the BMA negotiators were not willing to take that opportunity. I, too, urge them, whatever their differences with me and whatever their differences with the Government, to think about patients
tomorrow. It would be an absolute tragedy for the NHS if something went wrong in the next couple of days, and they have a duty to make sure that it does not.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the absolute commitment that the Secretary of State has given today that this is only about seven-day emergency care, because in the past he has often seemed to move between elective and emergency care. However, Sir Bruce Keogh has criticised the imposition of the contract, and has said that what has lost consensus across the profession has been the conflation of the need for a robust emergency service over seven days with the junior doctors’ contract, when junior doctors already work seven days.

I think that people have also been upset by the use of statistics without analysis. It is not a case of extra deaths at the weekend, which suggests poor care, but a case of extra deaths among people who were admitted at weekends within 30 days. That is quite an odd formula, but we can think of factors that might contribute.

I support the four standards that the Secretary of State mentioned, but none of them relates to junior doctors. Number one is probably access to diagnosis: people lie in hospital over the weekend with no access to scans, and their whole pathway is delayed. When we conducted an in-depth audit of surgical mortality in Scotland, it identified issues such as the insufficient seniority of an operating surgeon and, later, the insufficient seniority of an operating anaesthetist. However, part of the problem is that we have not worked out what the problem is. The Secretary of State may go on about the four standards—about a senior review, 24/7 access to interventional care, and access to diagnostics—but that will not be changed by the junior doctors’ contract.

The Secretary of State calls on the BMA to listen to leaders. What about the 11 royal colleges that have written to him? In his letter to the leader of the BMA over the weekend, he highlighted the things that still need to be sorted out, and that means that there is a need to talk. There has been no talking for five weeks. Surely we should stop the imposition, get rid of the strike, go back to the table, and complete the talking.

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Lady on one point: it is a total tragedy when the Health Secretary ends up with no other choice but to impose. Had we had sensible negotiations, that would have not have been necessary. She talked about the royal colleges. They say that the withdrawal of emergency care should not happen. Clare Marx, the president of the Royal College of Surgeons, has said that she personally would not and could not support the withdrawal of emergency care, because in the past he has often seemed to move between elective and emergency care. However, Sir Bruce Keogh has criticised the imposition of the contract, and has said that what has lost consensus across the profession has been the conflation of the need for a robust emergency service over seven days with the junior doctors’ contract, when junior doctors already work seven days.

The hon. Lady also asked about the link with the junior doctor contract. The single outstanding issue is Saturday pay rates, as the BMA has confirmed in private emails that it has sent out. We need to make it possible for doctors to roster more people at weekends, and Saturday pay rates are obviously connected to that. What I have tried to do today is to show that the supply of trained doctors into the NHS will be going up during this Parliament, so we will not be depending on the current workforce to supply the additional Saturday cover in its entirety. There will be more doctors going into the NHS, which will spread the burden, and that is the way that we will get the safe NHS that we want.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I support the vision of a seven-day NHS and a safer NHS that my right hon. Friend is so energetic about. However, for the benefit of all those uncommitted people listening to our debate who just want the NHS to work, will he tell us how big the gap is over that remaining issue, and how he sees it being resolved as quickly as possible?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the difficult paradox that we face. Earlier this year, we came close to an agreement and, had there been a willingness to negotiate rather than what I fear was the BMA’s desire to settle for nothing less than a full Government climb-down, we could have had a deal. The outstanding issues were about pay for antisocial hours and particularly about Saturday hours pay. That is where the main difference lay. We proposed a sensible compromise on that but, as Sir David Dalton, the chief executive at Salford Royal, said, we had to decide quickly what we were going to do because the contracts are coming in this August and there is a process we have to go through. So that will be in the new contracts from this August, but we are very willing to talk to all parties, including the BMA, about the implementation of these contracts, about the contents of future contracts and about anything to ensure that this contract works, because we would much rather have a negotiated agreed solution and it is a great tragedy that we were not able to do that this time.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): When the Secretary of State came into the Chamber today, I do not know whether he realised that there was a smirk and an arrogance about him that almost betrayed the fact that he is delighted to be taking part in this activity. He could start negotiations today, wipe that smirk off his face and get down to some serious negotiations. It has had to be done in the past, but instead he comes here to try and blame the Opposition for what is taking place. This strike can only be caused by two sides: the junior hospital doctors and the Government. He is almost giving the impression that he is revelling in standing up to the junior hospital doctors. Start negotiating now and sort the matter out!

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman has made many memorable contributions in the House, but that was unworthy of his track record. Let me tell him exactly what the Government have been trying to do to resolve the issue. We have been talking to the BMA for over three years. We have had three independent processes. We have had 75 meetings to try to resolve the issues. He may be interested to know that we made 74 concessions
in those meetings. There has been a huge effort. It is about not just talking, but both sides compromising to reach a solution. The BMA's junior doctors committee was not willing to have constructive discussions, which is why we face the tragic situation that we face now. When the hon. Gentleman says that it takes “two sides”, I hope he recognises that we need a counterparty with which we can have sensible negotiations. We have not had that this time.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I met some junior doctors on Saturday morning, and they said that they wanted to go back to talking, which perhaps means that the union is not representing doctors as well as it could—I do not know. They also said that they had genuine concerns about a couple of issues apart from pay. Will the Secretary of State look at concerns relating to rostering and timing and whether a daytime shift should finish at 1.30 am or 2 am with the next day continuing as normal? Some issues are open to discussion, and my doctors want those discussions to happen, so perhaps the union is not being as helpful as it could be.

Mr Hunt: I am afraid that junior doctors, who work incredibly hard and are the backbone of the NHS, have not been well represented by their union. The BMA is currently telling junior doctors not to co-operate with trusts in any discussions about the implementation of the new contract. The kinds of issues mentioned by my hon. Friend are exactly those that we want to sit down and talk to the BMA about. I wrote to Mark Porter, the chair of the BMA's council—in fact, I talked to him earlier this afternoon—about the possibility of talks to go through all those extra-contractual issues and the contract itself to ensure that we implement it in the best possible way. That is the kind of dialogue that the Government are willing to have and that we would welcome, but we need another party to come to the table if we are to succeed in doing so.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Health Secretary knows well that seven-day working has absolutely nothing to do with his proposed new contract. The Health Committee recently visited Salford Royal hospital, to which he referred earlier and which is already running a seven-day service on the existing contract. His petulant rejection of the all-party proposals to pilot the contract shows that tomorrow will be his responsibility and his alone.

Mr Hunt: Let us be absolutely clear. The people who are responsible for the strike tomorrow are those who choose to do the BMA's urging and withdraw emergency care for patients. That is where the responsibility lies.

Let me deal with the right hon. Gentleman's point directly. There are a couple of trusts in the country that have been good at introducing seven-day standards in urgent and emergency care, but my judgment, and that of the Government, is that it would not be possible under the current contractual structures to roll that out across the whole NHS. Those trusts happen to have some of the NHS's most outstanding leaders, and we need to learn from what they have done, but we also need to make it possible for those same things to happen at all hospitals, including the right hon. Gentleman's own.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Those of us who have served our time as junior doctors understand the hard work and very long hours that they do in a system that has had too few doctors since its inception. Many of us believe that there is no dispute about pay and conditions that justifies putting patients' lives at risk.

There has been some confusion about what the Government have meant by a seven-day NHS. There has always been a seven-day emergency service, but it is too patchy across the country, which needs to be addressed. That is different, however, from a seven-day elective service, which simply cannot be achieved by doctors alone and requires bacteriologists, haematologists, and radiographers. Might my right hon. Friend get the Government's case to be more clearly defined in future so that we know what we are trying to achieve? There is little difference between what the Government and doctors want, notwithstanding the fact that the BMA has behaved rather badly.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right; the tragedy here is what the Government want, which is to eliminate the weekend effect, whereby there are higher mortality rates for those admitted at weekends, is exactly what every doctor wants. We should be sitting around the table discussing how we can achieve a proper, consistent, seven-day service for urgent and emergency care. When it comes to elective provision, that is not part of our plans, although some trusts are operating elective care on a seven-day basis—that is their choice. We are trying to reduce the higher mortality rates for weekend admissions, and that will be at the heart of our vision for a true seven-day NHS.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Can the Health Secretary name a single medical college that backs his decision to impose this contract?

Mr Hunt: All I would say is that every medical college agrees with me that doctors should not withdraw emergency care in tomorrow's strike, because, as one of my right hon. Friends said, this is a line the medical profession has not crossed before. I do not think it should cross it tomorrow either.

Mr Speaker: May I say, on behalf of Members on both sides of the House, how good it is to see the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) back in her seat and, I hope, now in very good health?

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Many Members are as concerned as the Secretary of State is about the prospect of emergency care not being provided. Does he agree that junior doctors seem to have concerns about the rota and shift patterns, particularly where they are married to another doctor? Is he able to give any assurance that this issue will be looked at carefully as things are rolled out and that the NHS will help couples in that situation by making sure the rotas are more reasonable?
Mr Hunt: My hon. and learned Friend is right about that, which is why when we announced our decision to proceed with the current contracts we also said that we would set up a process to look at all the quality of life issues that could make a difference to the current junior doctor workforce and to their morale. One of those issues is that it is currently too difficult for doctors who are partners to work in the same city, because of the processes we have—we want to reform that. There are many other things we could do in terms of improving the predictability and reliability of shift patterns, but to do that we need the BMA to co-operate with the Bailey review, which we have set up and which is led by the president of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. We could then sort out these problems, but at the moment we do not have that co-operation, which is why we are not making the progress we want.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I say to the Secretary of State that it is because I have very real anxieties about the impact on patients of a strike involving emergency services, not because of political opportunism, that I signed that letter? I urge him, even at this eleventh hour, to meet all of us to discuss this in a reasonable and rational way. Ultimately, we all have a responsibility to try to avert this strike.

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with that, but I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that if that was the case, he has my mobile phone number and he could have contacted me, and he did not need The Sunday Times to be the first place I saw his proposal. If the people involved were genuinely serious about brokering a deal, that was not the way to go about it. We all have a duty to do everything we can to avert tomorrow’s strike, but his proposal to change the Government’s plans into pilots would mean, as he knows perfectly well, that seven-day care would get kicked into the long grass and would probably not happen. That would be wrong. As he well knows, we have a responsibility to patients to deliver our manifesto promises, and that is what we are going to do.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend can refresh my memory. Is it not the case that under the new contract those who are going to strike tomorrow—it is by no means all junior doctors—putting patients’ lives at risk, will be earning more, rather than less, and for fewer hours, rather than more? Would he also remind me of any other public sector employee who gets time and a half, rather than more? Would he also remind me of any other public sector employee who gets time and a half, rather than more?

Mr Hunt: If by “ideology”, the hon. Lady means a commitment to make the NHS the safest, highest quality health care system in the world, I plead guilty to ideology. That is the NHS that I want, and that means a seven-day NHS in which we do not have higher mortality rates for people admitted at weekends. There was a time when the Labour party would have been prepared to take tough and difficult decisions to make things better for patients, but that day has passed.

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Many professions and occupations require seven-day working in the public and private sectors. Given that all but one of the points of difference between the BMA and the Government have been resolved, does my right hon. Friend agree that this drastic strike action on the remaining issue of Saturday pay is wholly unjustified?
Mr Hunt: It is wholly unjustified because the offer on the table for Saturday pay is extremely generous, and in some ways more generous than that available to pretty much any other professional in the public or private sectors. This is a very extreme step as far as patients are concerned, and the BMA must recognise that this Government are as committed to the NHS as it is. When the Government want to learn the lessons of Mid Staffs, turn around our struggling hospitals, and ensure that our care is safe every day of the week, it is right to sit around the table, negotiate and talk, but that is not what we have had from the BMA. We must not be deflected from taking difficult decisions even if we have that opposition, because our ultimate responsibility is to patients.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I recently visited the Royal Albert Edward Infirmary in Wigan and met many junior doctors, all of whom told me that every day they work two or three hours longer than their contracted hours, without pay and out of concern for their patients. Is it not folly not to pilot this contract and to risk losing the good will and services of those dedicated people? Surely that will decrease, not increase, patient safety.

Mr Hunt: What is devastating to the morale of junior doctors is when they are represented by an organisation that constantly feeds them misinformation about the contents of the new contract. First, the BMA told them that it was going to mean that their pay was cut. Then it told them that they were going to be asked to work longer hours. In fact, the reverse is true on both those things. The way that we raise morale among the very important junior doctor workforce is by the BMA saying that it is prepared to take a constructive approach to sensible negotiations, not refuse to budge, as we saw in February.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is important to be both rational and reasonable. It is reasonable for registrars to be earning, on average, £53,000 a year and, when fully established, more than £100,000. It is rational for junior doctors’ leaders to accept that rostering should be a matter of discussion, as there is a right and a wrong level. The remaining issue is some of the premium pay for Saturdays. It seems that it would be a good idea if those behind the BMA negotiators came out into the open and explained in detail to my patients and the patients of the 649 other MPs, or the MPs in England anyway, what the issue is that is stopping it calling off the strikes, getting people back to talks and making agreements.

Mr Hunt: As ever, my hon. Friend speaks very wisely and also from experience on these issues. He is right. I have tried to make the point in my statement that a seven-day NHS is not just about junior doctors—it is about the whole range of services; it is about consultants, diagnostic services, general practice. As we seek to move towards a seven-day NHS, we will also be expanding the NHS workforce to ensure that the current workforce does not bear all the strain by itself. This is an opportunity. We have had lots of comments today about morale. I simply say this: the way to improve morale for doctors is to enable them to give the safest possible care to patients. At the moment, much of the frustration from doctors is that they do not feel able to give the safe care they would want to. We want to change that and to work with the BMA to make that possible.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): So far the Secretary of State has not grabbed the opportunity presented to him from across the House—I am talking about a cross-party solution—with both hands. If patients were at the centre of his thinking, he would have done so. He has told the House that he has not done so, because he read about it in The Times rather than getting a phone call. If the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) agrees to call his mobile and tell him anything that he wants to hear—whisper sweet nothings into his ear—will he agree to have the conversation and call off this strike?

Mr Hunt: I have to say that the right hon. Gentleman never whispered sweet nothings in my ear, and he certainly has not done so since being in opposition. With regard to doing what it takes, let me tell the hon. Gentleman directly that we have been trying to solve this problem for three years, with 75 meetings, 74 concessions and three independent processes. We have been doing everything we possibly can to solve this problem. What we have is a
very intransigent and difficult junior doctors committee of the BMA, which has refused to negotiate sensibly. In that situation, the Health Secretary has a simple choice: to move forward or to give up. When it comes to patient safety, we are moving forward.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Patient safety is a matter close to my heart. Tomorrow, doctors will shout that this strike is not about pay or Saturday working, but about patient safety. They will march under banners declaring the contract to be unsafe and unfair. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that there is absolutely no prospect of the Government giving into this naked attempt by the doctors’ union to hold vulnerable patients as hostage in a row over pay? Patients must always come first.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The truth is that being Health Secretary is never easy, whichever Government they are in, but where they have made mistakes in the past is where they have been too willing to compromise on vital issues of patient safety, and a seven-day NHS is one of those issues. When it comes to safety, Channel 4’s “FactCheck”, which is not a known supporter of the Government, has compared the new contract with the old one and said that, on the face of it, the new one is safer. That should reassure many doctors that this is the right thing for the NHS to do, and they should work with us, not against us.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that this is all about patient safety. Well, the junior doctors I have met in Warrington believe that it is all about patient safety, too, and they do not believe that overtired doctors provide the best service for patients. Has he done a risk assessment on the imposition of a contract and the consequences for patient safety of lowering doctors’ morale and losing doctors from the NHS?

Mr Hunt: Let me gently tell the hon. Lady the facts about what the contract involves. It involves the maximum number of hours that any junior doctor can be asked to work in any week coming down from 91 to 72. It involves reducing the number of nights and long days they can work, as we discussed earlier. It is a safer contract. The reason morale is low is that, rather than negotiating sensibly, the BMA has gone for an outright contract. The reason morale is low is that, rather than negotiating sensibly, the BMA has gone for an outright contract. The reason morale is low is that, rather than negotiating sensibly, the BMA has gone for an outright contract. The reason morale is low is that, rather than negotiating sensibly, the BMA has gone for an outright contract. The reason morale is low is that, rather than negotiating sensibly, the BMA has gone for an outright contract.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I have long found that the BMA is not universally admired by doctors, perhaps because of its long history of putting doctors’ interests ahead of patients’ interests. Will the Secretary of State ensure that he does not inadvertently drive doctors into the arms of the BMA, and will he look into adopting some of the old left ideas of mutuality, which would reconnect doctors to the interests of their patients?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend and I have discussed that recently, and I do think that the mutual structure is something we should be open-minded about. When junior doctors go on to the new contracts, which will happen in stages starting this August, they will find that it is safer and better and that they have more predictable shift patterns. It will enable them to have a better quality of life. Then they will realise just how badly represented they have been by the BMA.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I am worried about the potential consequences of the Secretary of State having people believe that if they are ill on the day of strike action there will be no A&E for them to go to. If they do not go and there are consequences, I believe that the consequences will be his responsibility, so could he now clear this matter up for the British public and confirm that there will be A&E cover on the days of these strikes, if they go ahead?

Mr Hunt: We do believe we will be able to keep all A&E departments open tomorrow and the next day, during the days of the strike, but that does not mean there will not be huge pressure on hospitals, which is why we are urging people to go to A&E only if they really need to. I would simply say to the hon. Gentleman that this disruption is the responsibility of the people who are choosing to withdraw emergency care for the first time in the history of the NHS.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can I ask my right hon. Friend to stick to his guns and not to give in to the unreasonable demands of the BMA? Doctors are among the most highly remunerated of our public servants—far better remunerated than members of the police or the armed services, who are essential workers and who are barred by law from taking strike action. Can I urge my right hon. Friend to review the situation with regard to A&E medics?

Mr Hunt: Interestingly, A&E departments will benefit from the new contract because there are special premiums to encourage more people to go into A&E as a specialty. However, on his broader point, I agree: when someone is paid a high salary, that comes with the responsibilities of a profession. That is why, however much people disagree with the new contract, and however much they may not agree with the Government’s plans for a seven-day NHS, it is totally inappropriate to withdraw emergency care in the way that will happen tomorrow and the next day. That is why doctors should be very careful about the impact this will have on their status in the country.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement: “Taking strike action is a choice”. However, when someone’s back is against the wall, and the person in charge will not listen, it never feels like a choice. A month ago, the Secretary of State could not answer my question about how big the NHS provider deficit would be in the last financial year—it was about £3 billion—so will he answer my question now, because money is at the heart of this? What will the NHS provider deficit be in the next financial year?

Mr Hunt: We are taking serious action to bring that deficit down. In particular, one thing we need to do is to reduce the use of agency staff. That will help with the provision of more full-time staff in the NHS, which will be good for the junior doctor workforce.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the way he is conducting himself in this matter. Will he remind the House of when the
BMA’s junior doctors negotiating committee first refused to meet him because it wanted to achieve a political outcome rather than a resolved settlement?

Mr Hunt: Regrettably, there has not been only one occasion. In the October before the election, the junior doctors committee walked out of talks after extensive efforts to negotiate a new contract. We then had the independent pay review body process. Then—this was the most shocking thing of all—we had the decision of the committee to ballot for strike action before it had even been prepared to sit down and talk to me about what the new contract involved. That has been at the heart of so many misunderstandings about this contract and has led to so much disappointment on all sides. If the committee had sat down and talked to us, it would have discovered that we all want the same thing: a safer, seven-day NHS.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The Secretary of State tells us he has spent over three years on this matter—three years, and he has brought us to this unprecedented state of affairs. May I gently suggest to him that it is not the junior doctors who are the problem, but him? My constituents—hundreds of whom have written to me—overwhelmingly feel that he has been irresponsible and intransigent. He needs to get back to the negotiating table, lift the imposition and put the people who need A&E—in the next few days and beyond—first.

Mr Hunt: If the right hon. Lady is asking whether I will compromise in my pursuit of a safer NHS for her constituents and my constituents, the answer is I will not. I am the Health Secretary who had to deal with Mid Staffs and with a huge number of hospitals up and down the country that the Labour party, when in power, did nothing to turn around. We dealt with that. We put 27 hospitals into special measures. We have dramatically increased the number of doctors and nurses in our hospital wards because we care about a safer NHS. When there are issues about weekend care, the right thing to do is to address those issues, not to duck them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I think the Secretary of State can be criticised in this dispute, and my criticism is that he has been far too generous to junior doctors. Despite their understandable embarrassment at admitting that, this is a good old-fashioned pay and terms strike by an old-fashioned trade union. As far as I am concerned, it is an absolute disgrace to withdraw emergency cover on the basis of what premiums are paid on a Saturday when most of my constituents, who are much more poorly paid, go out to work on a Saturday as a normal day without any premiums whatsoever. No Government should ever give in to this kind of industrial action. Will he give a firm commitment that, despite the bluster from the Labour party, he will stick to his guns on this issue?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely give my hon. Friend that commitment. He is absolutely right to say that professionals should not withdraw emergency care in pursuance of a pay dispute. It is totally and utterly inappropriate. It is not just me saying that; it is what very experienced doctors such as Professor Bruce Keogh are saying. This is the wrong way to go about this dispute. In the end, the public recognise a simple truth: you cannot choose which day of the week you get ill. If we are to have the best health service in the world, we need to reflect that in the medical cover we provide at the weekends as well as during the week.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have previously raised with the Secretary of State the problems with recruitment and retention in Hull and East Yorkshire. I would like an undertaking from him. If he moves forward with the imposition of the new contract and evidence comes to light that retention and recruitment are going to be difficult, will he stop the imposition and think again?

Mr Hunt: We are constantly monitoring what will happen with the new contract, and we want to make sure that we get it absolutely right. If the hon. Lady makes such a plea to me, she should also talk to the BMA and say that the way to make sure we implement this contract correctly is to sit down with the Government and talk about how to make it successful, rather than to refuse to talk to us, which is what is happening at Hull Royal infirmary and many other hospitals.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I briefly attended a medical conference over the weekend, where doctors said they were hugely concerned about the impact on the vast majority of junior doctors who neither wish to strike nor believe that the contract is satisfactory, for the reason given by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), when she was in the Chamber. They are being put in an impossible position. I really urge the BMA to withdraw the threat of strike action and the Secretary of State to make it quite clear that he will do whatever it takes in sitting down to resolve this issue for the sake of all our patients and their safety.

Mr Hunt: I am absolutely prepared to talk about anything that could be improved in the contract that will be introduced and, indeed, extra-contractual things such as the way in which rota gaps are filled and the training process. However, at the moment we do not have such a dialogue, and that has been the problem. The imposition of a new contract is the last thing in the world that we wanted as a Government. It followed 75 meetings—it was a totally exhaustive process—but in the end we found that our counterparty was not interested in sitting down to talk about this; it just wanted a political win. We had to make an absolutely invidious choice about doing the right thing to make patients safer. I wish we had not got to that point. We have got to it and we need to carry on, but the door is always open for further talks and discussions.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is the one person who can stop this strike. Why will he not now take a step back, engage the services of ACAS—specialists in negotiations—remove the conditionality and address the remaining issues? Proper dialogue will get a resolution.

Mr Hunt: Had Nye Bevan given way to the BMA there would be no NHS.
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for visiting my constituency earlier this month. In the last decade, the previous Labour Government removed medical services from Crawley hospital; now, we have a 24/7 urgent treatment service and a doctors out-of-hours service. Does my right hon. Friend share the dismay of my local patients that the BMA is essentially asking junior doctors to go against their Hippocratic oath?

Mr Hunt: I think many people inside and outside the medical profession are deeply upset that that is happening. I really enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend’s constituency, and we will continue to invest in his local health services. I think that his constituents will be upset by the fact that the pay and conditions many of them have for working weekends go nowhere near what is being offered to junior doctors under the new contract. In that sense, it is totally disproportionate to withdraw emergency care, which is such an extreme measure and has never happened before.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s recognition that junior doctors are the backbone of the NHS and his expression of willingness to talk about the implementation of the contract. Those words are great, but I urge him to take actions to match them and take the opportunity of the cross-party initiative to pilot this contract. If he does not do that and ploughs on regardless, he will jeopardise patient safety.

Mr Hunt: I welcome any genuine attempt to try to resolve this issue, but Health Education England has said that it does not believe that that cross-party approach is workable. As I have said to the hon. Gentleman before, having pilots of seven-day care and new junior doctor contracts would mean that we took too long to deliver a key manifesto promise.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Farmers in Taunton Deane, as well as retail workers, journalists and bus drivers, all work across the week, and we need the NHS to do so as well. We cannot choose which day our children fall sick, and it makes absolute sense for the NHS to operate seven days a week for the sake of patients. It is crucial for the BMA to join the Government and resolve these well-thought-out plans. I urge the Secretary of State to keep up the good work.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend, who eloquently makes the point that this is a moment of opportunity for the NHS. We have been through some terrible problems at Mid Staffs and a number of other hospitals where there were serious issues with the quality of care, and now we are going on a journey to make the NHS one of the safest healthcare systems in the world. That means facing up to these problems, not ducking them, and that is what is going to happen for the time that I am Health Secretary.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The junior doctors I have spoken to are concerned about unsafe staffing levels and unworkable rota as a result of the imposition of this contract. They ask me to make it clear to patients and to the public that the two strike days are nine hours in length and will last from 8 am until 5 pm, and that emergency care will be provided by consultants. The solution is in the Health Secretary’s hands: withdraw the imposition of this contract and get back round the negotiating table.

Mr Hunt: As I have said many times, were we to do that we would be giving the BMA a veto over a manifesto commitment, and no union should have a veto over what an elected Government do. I hope that what I said in my statement will give comfort to the hon. Lady and some of her constituents that we are increasing staffing levels in the NHS to deal with the extra pressures. With regard to unworkable rota, perhaps she will go and tell the BMA to sit round the table and talk to its local trust management so that we can get those rotas to work, because the way to sort out these problems is to sit down and discuss them.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the consultants and nurses at Leighton hospital and Countess of Chester hospital who will be working extra hours in order to give as much patient cover as they can? Does not the recent leak of emails from members of the junior doctors committee last week show that they utterly reject any compromise and that any offer at this stage is simply not a serious offer?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for what she says about consultants in her local trust and, indeed, up and down the country, as well as nurses, paramedics and many other people who will be working to keep the public safe. I salute all of them. She is absolutely right: those leaked emails show that those on the junior doctors committee know that had they been prepared to negotiate on Saturday pay we would not have had an imposed contract, so it was completely in their hands to avoid this outcome. They chose not to do that; they wanted war. That was a totally irresponsible thing to do. They need to recognise that the way we will build a safer NHS is by sitting round and talking to a Government who want to create it.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Farmers in my constituency and most others want to work seven days a week, and the NHS should be no different. It is crucial for the BMA to join the Government and resolve these well-thought-out plans. I urge the Secretary of State to keep up the good work.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend—indeed, the one Conservative who signed up to that proposal—when he was Health Minister proposed a contract that was much tougher on junior doctors than the contract we have ended up introducing. This has been a very interesting U-turn on his part.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): To take pressure off GPs, A&E units and junior doctors, may I urge my right hon. Friend to make full use of the pharmacy network and ensure that it can play its full part in a seven-day national health service?

Mr Hunt: No health statement would be complete without a mention by my hon. Friend of the important role that pharmacies can play in solving absolutely any problem that the NHS faces. Once again, I commend his excellent contribution.
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Whatever the Government’s aspiration, the fact is that we cannot run a health service on any day of the week without doctors who are willing to work in it. The reality is that the doctors I speak to in my constituency are exasperated. They are angry. They feel as though they have no choice. The Conservative party is kidding itself if it thinks that this is about the BMA making a political fight. There is a genuine strength of feeling about the way in which these people have been treated. That is shared by consultants and nurses, which is why they are willing to cover for their colleagues. The idea that the Government have no responsibility for the single biggest industrial dispute in the history of the NHS is, frankly, pathetic. People want to know why, if there is just one issue left to settle, imposition is necessary. Why can that not be taken off the table, so that negotiations can begin again and the strike avoided?

Mr Hunt: Because on that one issue—Saturday pay—the BMA said in writing last November that it would negotiate, but it tore up that agreement and said that it was not prepared to negotiate even one iota. That was why the agreement fell apart. The BMA could easily, had it stuck to its word, have negotiated an agreement and we would not have a strike today. The Government have been totally reasonable and fair throughout. The BMA has not. It is the BMA’s choice to call these strikes. It should think again, because this is the wrong call for the medical profession. It has very important values attached to it, the most famous of which are the Hippocratic oath and “do no harm”. It is a step too far to say that in pursuance of a pay dispute and more pay on a Saturday, you are prepared to withdraw emergency care from vulnerable patients. That is wrong for the medical profession, and that that will do more to damage the morale of the medical profession than any bluster from the Opposition or the BMA?

Mr Hunt: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Medicine is a profession. It has very important values attached to it, the most famous of which are the Hippocratic oath and “do no harm”. It is a step too far to say that in pursuance of a pay dispute and more pay on a Saturday, you are prepared to withdraw emergency care from vulnerable patients. That is the wrong call for the medical profession, and that that will do more to damage the morale of the medical profession than any bluster from the Opposition or the BMA?

Mr Hunt: I totally agree with that. That is why, since then, junior doctors’ hours have been reduced, and under the new contract we are reducing yet again the maximum hours that junior doctors can be asked to work. Every doctor should welcome the new agreement, but because, unfortunately, the BMA has not chosen to negotiate sensibly despite exhaustive efforts, we are left with the very difficult decision as to whether we proceed with our plans for a seven-day NHS or whether we give up. I think that elected Governments should never give up on manifesto promises.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Junior doctors went into medicine to save lives, not to place them at risk. Does my right hon. Friend agree that by striking, junior doctors are putting people at risk? Can he confirm what the position would be if he had allowed contracts to lapse, and what the effect would be on the national health service?

Mr Hunt: I agree that the strikes are putting patients at risk. I think that what my hon. Friend means by the second part of his question is: what would have happened if we had just allowed the current contracts to roll over? The answer is that we would not have made progress towards a safer seven-day NHS, which will be of enormous benefit to his constituents and mine.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Will the Secretary of State use the Dispatch Box this afternoon to appeal directly to junior doctors to ignore the militant BMA, to turn up to work tomorrow, to acknowledge that the Government have met the BMA over 70 times and made more than 70 concessions round the negotiating table, and to put patients first and make sure that my constituents get the level of health service, seven days a week, that they so deserve?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks extremely wisely. I say to every junior doctor in the country that what they want from our NHS—safe service and safe care for patients across every day of the week—is what we want as well. This Government are committed to the NHS. We are this year putting the sixth biggest increase in resources into the NHS in its history, so we are putting our money where our mouth is. We want to sit down with the medical profession and make this work for patients.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell me whether my understanding of the Saturday pay dispute is correct? On the one hand the BMA wants time and a half throughout a Saturday. On the other, Her Majesty’s Government are offering time and a half between midnight on Friday and 7 on a Saturday morning, time plus 30% between 7 o’clock in the morning and 5 o’clock in the afternoon for those who have worked more than one in four Saturdays, time plus 30% between 5 o’clock in the afternoon and 9 o’clock, and time and a half between 9 o’clock and midnight. My constituents in Kettering had sympathy for the junior doctors but are totally opposed to the withdrawal of lifesaving emergency care, especially when the difference between the doctors’ position and that of the Government is so narrow.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks wisely, as ever, on this. The fact is that we have moved a very long way to meet one of the BMA’s biggest concerns: that there should still be premium pay on Saturdays. For doctors who work regularly at weekends this is a very good deal—better than that for pretty much anyone else in
the public sector. That is why we think that the reasonable thing to do would have been to accept the deal and not to call these wholly unnecessary strikes.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend will agree that a dispute over pay cannot justify a threat to withdraw emergency cover. Will he confirm that after the new contract comes in no doctor will be treating patients while working their 91st hour in the same week, and that he will be looking at the availability not just of junior doctors but of other support services that are needed to deliver the seven-day services we have pledged to provide?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is quite right to point out that the seven-day NHS vision is not just about junior doctors but about support services for junior doctors that will make the provision of care to their patients at weekends not just better for those patients but much more rewarding for them. It is immensely frustrating for doctors not to be able to get diagnostic tests back quickly because it is the weekend. We want to sort out all those problems. That will be better for doctors and better for patients.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Whatever the objections to this contract, and however sincerely they are held, withdrawing emergency care for seriously ill patients cannot be on the list of options. On Saturday pay, will the Secretary of State bring absolute clarity to something that may have been misrepresented, or at least misunderstood: will doctors who work regular Saturdays—that is, more than one in four—continue to receive a pay uplift?

Mr Hunt: Yes, they will. That is the main outstanding issue of a very small handful of issues that were not resolved. We went a very long way towards what the BMA wanted. We are reducing premium rates for Saturday pay, but are making up for that with a 13.5% increase in basic pay. That will mean that hospitals can roster more doctors at weekends and that the doctors who work the most weekends will continue to get premium pay for that extra work. It is a good thing for doctors and for patients.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a short statement to update the House on the latest position following the announcement this morning that British Home Stores has filed for administration. This is obviously a very difficult time for all its employees. Somewhere between 8,500 and perhaps as many as 11,000 people work in its many stores across the United Kingdom. We must of course bear it in mind that it is also a difficult time for the many creditors concerned, especially those that are small businesses.

BHS is a name that has been synonymous with the British high street for more than 80 years. The company has been an important player in the history of British retail, and still has a significant high street presence, with 164 stores nationwide and, as I have said, somewhere between 8,500 and 11,000 employees. I recognise that consumer trends are changing, moving away from high street shopping and, increasingly, towards online retail channels. We continue to see the retail landscape change. The media speculation today and in the past few days has been particularly troubling for BHS workers and their families, but a clear message is going out to all staff today: BHS is still open for business as usual. There are no plans for immediate redundancies or store closures and the administrators are looking to sell BHS as a going concern. If that proves not to be possible, the Government stand ready to offer their assistance, including through the Jobcentre Plus rapid response service, to help people to move into new jobs as quickly as possible.

There has been a lot of comment and speculation about the BHS pension scheme. The pension regulator is investigating a number of concerns and allegations. I understand that the BHS scheme is in the early stage of a Pension Protection Fund assessment, during which time the PPF will determine the final funding position of the scheme and whether it should assume responsibility for it.

The retail sector is crucial for the United Kingdom economy. The total value of retail sales, excluding fuel, was £340 billion in 2015. The value of retail sales has increased every year for the past 12 years, although in 2015 the volume of sales grew faster than values, indicating a decline in prices overall. The sector accounts for 3 million jobs. Almost a third of those employees are under the age of 25. We intend to ensure that this success continues. In the Budget, the Government announced the biggest ever cut in business rates in England, worth £6.7 billion over the next five years. I commend the statement to the House.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and for giving me early sight of it. Eleven thousand BHS staff will be desperately worried about their jobs today. BHS is a venerable British company, which has been a feature of our high streets for almost a century. I am sure Members on all sides of the House will hope that administrators will be successful in their attempts to sell BHS as a going concern. At this difficult time for the workforce and their families, we all
want to be reassured that the Government are doing everything they can to support a successful outcome to the process. If the worst happens, BHS workers will want to know that the Government stand ready to offer help for them to get back to work as soon as possible.

The crisis facing BHS highlights a wider challenge for our high street retailers, with increased competition from online retailers. It is vital that our high streets adapt and change to stay relevant and competitive. It is important to understand how we ended up here and to think about the implications for public policy.

There are some serious questions to answer, not least by the former owner, Sir Philip Green. He bought BHS in 2000 for £200 million. In just two years of his ownership, £422 million in dividends was paid out, with the vast majority going to him and his family. He seems to have taken out far more in value than he paid for the business in the first place. Last year, he disposed of BHS for just £1. When Sir Philip bought BHS, the pension fund had a surplus of more than £5 million and it remained in the black as late as 2008. Yet when he got rid of the business, he had turned this into a deficit of hundreds of millions of pounds. The pension fund now reportedly has a black hole of £571 million.

If the worst happens, the liability will be covered by the Pension Protection Fund, as the Minister indicated, and BHS staff will get only 90% of the pension they have worked so hard for and saved for. However, Philip Green seems to have got much more out of BHS for himself and his family than that. BHS staff and the public will understandably want to know whether the former owner, who took so many millions of pounds out of the business, will have to pay his fair share of the liabilities that accrued during his stewardship.

It is right that the pensions of working people are covered in the event of their employer going under, but in this situation it appears that the owner has extracted hundreds of millions of pounds from the business and walked away to his favourite tax haven, leaving the Pension Protection Fund to pick up the bill. We know that Sir Philip is such a vocal supporter of the Conservative party that in 2010 the Prime Minister asked him to conduct a review for the Cabinet Office of how to slash Government spending. What he appears to have done with BHS is to extract huge value from the business and walk away, leaving all the liabilities elsewhere?

Anna Soubry: My concern is for the workers of BHS and the creditors, notably the small businesses. I find it most peculiar, though perhaps not unexpected, that the hon. Lady should turn this into some party political game. This is way above all that. I have said that the Pensions Regulator is looking at the various matters, and the Insolvency Service, which will oversee the administration, will take very seriously any allegations of any misconduct by any of the directors of the business. Any impropriety is taken very seriously not only by this Government but by all the regulatory bodies that oversee these things.

I could say that it is, perhaps, unfortunate that Labour decided to vote against our very moderate but important proposals on Sunday trading, when there was clear evidence that that would have helped the retail sector. If the Opposition had not done that, they might have a little more credibility when they comment on the unfortunate situation of BHS. This is not a political football to be kicked around by the Opposition.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I agree with the Minister that the predicament of BHS should not be a party political football. The Pension Protection Fund is not designed to be used as some sort of convenient bargaining chip in financial negotiations over the sale of troubled businesses. Instead, it should be used in rare circumstances for Governments and others to intervene to protect the contributions to company pensions where there has been a sudden collapse in a company. Therefore I agree with some of the concerns expressed from the Opposition Front Bench and hope that the Department will undertake an urgent inquiry into the conduct of the erstwhile and current owners of BHS. It seems appalling that the Pension Protection Fund is being abused in this way, and I suspect that BHS is not the only company in this position.

Anna Soubry: I thank my right hon. Friend for his wise comments. As ever, he provides a good, sensible insight into the situation. I agree with him: we must be sure that any impropriety is taken very seriously not only by this Government but by all the regulatory bodies that oversee any misconduct by any of the directors of the business. Administration, will take very seriously any allegations of any misconduct by any of the directors of the business. Any impropriety is taken very seriously not only by this Government but by all the regulatory bodies that oversee any misconduct by any of the directors of the business.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Let me associate myself and the Scottish National party with the comments made in relation to the BHS workers and families, and express our concerns for them. One of Scotland’s largest stores is in my constituency, and the store and workforce are well known and widely respected in the local community. We stand in solidarity with them today, and we are thinking of all the BHS workers and their families across the UK at this very difficult time.

The SNP is deeply concerned about job losses now that BHS has gone into administration. We acknowledge the centrality of loyal customers to a store which has
been part of our high streets since 1928. Behind every closure and job loss will be a personal story. BHS workers have a diverse range of skills and many of them have given long service. In some respects, BHS’s predicament has more to do with the UK Government’s failure to stimulate economic recovery and the confidence of people across these isles than with Sunday trading, and I am shocked and surprised that the Minister, in one breath, tells Labour not to resort to political point scoring and, in the second, resorts to political point scoring herself.

Dig a little deeper into today’s media commentary and one finds some very worrying claims emerging. In a blog published this morning, the Financial Times asked:

“Would 11,000 BHS workers still have jobs if Tina Green hadn’t siphoned £1bn out of the business?”

The tax and business affairs of BHS and the gap in its pensions fund merit serious investigation, so I hope that the Minister and the Government will look carefully at this issue. Will she please tell the House, the nations of the UK and, most importantly, the workers of BHS what the UK Government will do to facilitate the sale? The Scottish Government will do all they can to support the workers in Scotland, but we want a commitment to leave no avenue unconsidered in a bid to secure the future of BHS and its workers.

Anna Soubry: As I said, our thoughts are with the workforce. It is important to point out, however, that the stores are still open and people still in work—they have not lost their jobs—so we must not talk down the business. We want somebody to come forward and buy the company and to make sure it has a good, sustainable future. That is where my thoughts are at the moment. We want to help in any way we can to make sure a buyer comes forward. I pay tribute to the excellent workers at BHS not just in the stores but—not forgetting—in the various distribution centres around the country. I also have to say, however, that we are the Government who delivered 2.5 million new jobs in just five years.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Tens of thousands of BHS pensioners are set to suffer from closure and job loss will be a personal story. BHS has been part of our high streets since 1928. Behind every closure and job loss will be a personal story. BHS workers have a diverse range of skills and many of them have given long service. In some respects, BHS’s predicament has more to do with the UK Government’s failure to stimulate economic recovery and the confidence of people across these isles than with Sunday trading, and I am shocked and surprised that the Minister, in one breath, tells Labour not to resort to political point scoring and, in the second, resorts to political point scoring herself.

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Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Minister say that any impropriety will be taken extremely seriously, because there is a serious concern, given what we have heard about the previous surplus of at least £5 million turning into a pension fund deficit of £571 million, over a period when the company paid hundreds of millions of pounds to Sir Philip Green and his family. I reiterate that because it should be said time and again until we get satisfactory answers. On the workers, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers has offered to work with management to help consult staff at this difficult time. Will the Minister join me in encouraging BHS to take it up on this offer?

Anna Soubry: Absolutely. I am a firm supporter of good, responsible trade unions. I am a former shop steward myself, so I know the invaluable role that trade unions can play in representing workers, as long as they act in a good, sensible and responsible way—as they are doing, if I may say, in our steel industry.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): This is a worrying time for staff at the BHS store on Union Street, Torquay. Will the Minister confirm that, as well as planning to support the company, we should offer support to councils faced with having to find new tenants for major anchor stores on their high streets?

Anna Soubry: In such circumstances, there is a role for everybody, and my hon. Friend makes a good point about councils, which are invariably concerned about the future of their high streets. Good councils are already doing considerable work to make sure that their high streets are good, healthy places—in a business sense—and this should be a continuation of that. I would urge councils immediately to contact the local management to see what help, if any, they can provide. Some landlords, however, have already been engaged in a period of rent reduction, or of no rent at all. Despite much effort, this business is still in dire straits, but we are positive about the fact that a new buyer might well come along, which is what we want.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I represent Glasgow city centre, which has a great retail sector and two BHS stores, one on Sauchiehall Street and one in the St Enoch shopping centre. My sympathies go out to the workers in those stores who face an uncertain future. I understand that around 1,500 subcontractors are employed by Compass, which does the cleaning and catering, within the stores, and there are also connected supply chain jobs. What is the Minister doing to ensure job security for those workers, in addition to those directly employed by BHS, and will she work closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that those workers have the best possible future?

Anna Soubry: When any business is in difficulty, it has a knock-on effect throughout the whole supply chain. It is not simply about the difficult circumstances in which the immediate employers find themselves. I have already mentioned the creditors, but there are the connected attendant businesses too. It is not just about the immediate impact; it goes all the way through the chain, which is why it is important to stay positive and make sure and hope that a buyer comes forward.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): It might be that, facing a large and growing pension deficit, the previous owner, when Retail Acquisitions came knocking on his door to purchase the business, laughed all the way to the bank. If the sale was done on the understanding that £1 he received was equivalent to 30 pieces of silver in his betrayal of the BHS employees and pensioners. There is a reputational question for Sir Philip Green to answer. Will the Minister write to him and ask him to respond to the questions raised in the House, and will she look acutely at the PPF to ensure that the original legislation is strong enough to avoid this unacceptable face of capitalism in the passing on of losses to the taxpayer?

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend knows me of old, and he knows that while I support capitalism, I do not believe it should have anything other than a caring heart. I do not believe in unfettered free trade and all the rest of it, as one would expect from a Conservative on my wing of the party.

I want to agree with my hon. Friend that this is a very serious matter, and this Government take these sorts of issues and allegations extremely seriously. At the moment, of course, the regulator is involved. Let us see what conclusion the regulator comes to. My hon. Friend and anyone else listening to or indeed reading this debate, as no doubt Sir Philip Green will, should be absolutely assured that if there are any suggestions of impropriety, we will come after people. We believe in everybody in our society doing the right thing, especially when they hold people's livelihoods pretty much in their hands.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Since the closure of Woolworths, Great Grimsby has said goodbye to Comet, Staples, Homebase, Phones 4u and, most recently, WHSmith, which has vacated a very large space within our Freshney Place mall. Many constituents regularly share their worries with me about the future for our town centre, and the loss of BHS would be a real blow to the local community. Does the Minister share my concern, echoed around this place today, about the report that while significant funds of up to £100 million of so-called “negative goodwill” were secured by Philip Green for the future of BHS, rather than being invested in the business, that money was apparently diverted using dividends offshore? If the Minister is concerned, will she investigate those claims, because up to 11,000 members of staff will be concerned about their redundancy payments and, of course, their pensions?

Anna Soubry: I am in danger of repeating everything I have already said about how seriously we take these sorts of allegations and about how we are looking forward to seeing the outcome of the work done by the pensions regulator. I am familiar with Grimsby, having had the great pleasure of visiting Grimsby Crown court and shopping in the hon. Lady’s town centre. ( Interruption. ) It is probably a good job that I did not hear what the hon. Lady said. In all seriousness, in common with many town centres, Grimsby faces many challenges. I would like to commend to the hon. Lady a report that was written for her party by a gentleman called Bill Grimsey. He produced one of the most radical and brilliant reports I have ever seen on the future of Britain’s high streets. It is pretty controversial and the hon. Lady may not agree with everything written in it—I am not sure I do—but for understanding the future of retail and how people will shop now and in the future, I think Bill Grimsey had a great insight and put forward many excellent solutions. I commend his report to everybody.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): When this business was sold a year ago, there were clear going concern issues: there was a massive pension deficit, and the business was sold to an organisation with no retail experience. Does the Minister know whether or not the pension trustees of the BHS pension fund signed off on the deal, prior to it going ahead, or whether the PPF scheme itself was involved? If not, does the Minister agree that there is a loophole that really needs to be fixed?

Anna Soubry: I always try to give a straight answer to a good, straight question, but I simply do not know the answer to my hon. Friend’s question. I undertake to make full inquiries to answer it. I will write to my hon. Friend, and if any other hon. Members would like
to see a copy of my letter, I am more than happy to share it with them, including the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle).

Anna Soubry: There will be a robust investigation, and I have full confidence in the regulator.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Will the Government’s reforms of business rates help the BHS property in Cornwall street in my Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport constituency and in the city centre?

Anna Soubry: I suspect I am going to disappoint my right hon. Friend—I mean my hon. Friend, I nearly gave him a bump up there, which I am sure he deserves—because the changes in business rates are more likely to affect small businesses. Multi-chain businesses, even those with just three or four shops in a particular area, will not get the great benefit that we have undoubtedly given to small businesses, whereby very few of them pay any rates at all and many will have had a big reduction in their bills. That would not have benefited BHS, however.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I commend Ministers for listening where there have been abuses of corporate power before, and I urge this Minister to listen to the Select Committee on this issue. Given the need to modernise in retail, will she reconsider the freeze on further education budgets, so that those in the retail sector can be upskilled to face the sort of challenges that arise in that sector?

Anna Soubry: I am not particularly convinced, but I will have a look at it and probably write to the hon. Gentleman. Frankly, I think the most important thing is that retail has suffered in many ways, although in some instances it has benefited from the internet. That is the real trick. It is about how we make sure that there is still a place for the shop on our high streets in the internet age. I believe that there absolutely is a place for shops. I advise reading Bill Grimsey’s report on the future of the high street, which is enlightening, as I said, and contains some excellent ideas.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Although this is clearly bad news from BHS, does the Minister agree that we should not lose sight of the fact that Britain is spending more on its shops than ever before, that we are the biggest recipient in Europe of foreign direct investment in retail, and that the Government’s plans to cut corporation tax from 28% in the last Parliament to 17% by 2020 will help successful retailers to do even better?

Anna Soubry: I am delighted to agree completely with everything my hon. Friend has said. I agree that we are doing the right thing in setting the right conditions for businesses to flourish in our country. That is why our economy has grown in the way it has, so that we have become the fifth largest economy in the world, with the subsequent creation of over 2 million jobs. That is our record of success, because we have been doing the right thing by business.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The 11,000 BHS workers no doubt awoke with anxiety when they saw today’s headlines—an anxiety probably shared with many other retail workers on our high streets. The Minister mentioned earlier that she supported trade unions working constructively with the Government to support our industries, so will she join me in meeting USDAW, the shopworkers’ union, to see what work the Government can do to support our high streets?

Anna Soubry: I can say that I would pretty much meet anybody, but I am very happy to meet USDAW. I might try to convince the union that its stance on Sunday trading was wrong, but that is another matter. There is a really good debate to be had about the future of the high street, and about the recognition that for a large number of people, and especially younger people, the days of going shopping have changed hugely. They will go out to meet their friends, have a coffee and perhaps do some shopping almost as an aside. My daughter’s generation does not carry out the same sort of shopping as I did. It is a fascinating topic and would make a great one for a Backbench Business debate, if I may say so.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The market economy on which our civilisation rests is dangerously undermined when the privatisation of vast loss is followed by the projection of similarly vast losses on to other people, whether they be taxpayers or pensioners. Since corporations are creatures of the state, will my right hon. Friend look at the incentives, particularly relating to excess debt? Will she look at how the institutions around corporations can be changed so that we do not end up in a position where this can happen again?

Anna Soubry: Usually, when something goes wrong, there are lessons to be learned. I have already commented on our combined concerns about many of the issues surrounding what happened to BHS. I really do not want us to have this very negative view of BHS, however. The stores are still open; people are still in work; now we want to secure a buyer so that there is a future for all those shops and the workforce. My thoughts today are with the workforce, as well as the small business creditors.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I welcome many of the Minister’s comments, but while Sir Philip Green awaits delivery of his third superyacht in Monaco, it is the BHS workers in my and other constituencies who are paying the price of his greed and corporate failure. Does the Minister understand why many employees will feel that the pensions regulator should seek the entire £571 million actuarial deficit from Sir Philip?
Anna Soubry: I am getting worried, because, increasingly, the hon. Gentleman and I agree about so many things. I am sure that he is as worried as I am.

The hon. Gentleman has made a serious point about the way in which developments like this affect everyone, especially people who have been in their jobs for a long time. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) has left the Chamber now, but I have visited the Hartlepool steelworks, and I know that people have been working there for up to 30 years and paying into a pension fund in the expectation that when the moment comes for them to retire, they will have a certain amount of money on which to live, perhaps a lump sum. I think that there is an increasingly good case to be made for the right thing to be done by people who have given long service, paid into a pension fund, and have themselves done the right thing. It seems particularly cruel for a large amount of money to be taken from them, especially given their age.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I trust the Minister recognises that it is the administrator who is in charge of this whole situation. Will she encourage the administrator to look forward, not back, and will she ensure that the administrator understands that the best way in which to protect people's pensions and jobs—and the creditors—is to find a credible buyer for the group?

Anna Soubry: I entirely agree. My hon. Friend has made an important point. The administrators have been appointed, and there is no doubt that they will make every effort to do the right thing by everyone—which, of course, means both the workforce and the creditors—and to ensure that there is a successful sale. The Insolvency Service also has an important role, and I am confident that it, too, will play its full part. However, we also need to be confident about stores remaining open and workers remaining in work, so let us make sure that the administrators secure a buyer.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): The retail sector is dominated by structural issues such as low pay, lack of progression and job insecurity. It is also dominated by women, whereas each of the 11 industrial strategies in the Minister's Department is dominated by professions that are run by men. Will she think about what more she can do to rebalance, in gender terms, her Department's efforts to ensure that this vital sector is not lost from the high street?

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman has made an interesting observation, and I think there is some merit in what he has said. We know that, until recent years, women suffered from inequality in pay and inequality in opportunity, and that one of the great successes of the last Government was the fact that we reduced the pay gap in the most astonishing way. It no longer exists at all among those under 40. When I have met some of the big retailers, their desire to ensure that people are trained and aspire to advance themselves and make progress has struck me as very good and very healthy, but I will always look for any opportunity for the advancement of women.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I think that the Minister is right not to want to talk down the business, but I understand that BHS has already looked for a buyer and failed to find one. The Minister said that the retail sector was growing, but I wonder whether this is not an indication of fundamental structural difficulties in the sector that will have to be addressed separately.

Anna Soubry: That is a valid point. The retail sector does face a number of serious challenges. However, I am reminded that on Friday, when I had the great pleasure of attending the Midlands Asian business awards, the head of John Lewis—an outstanding organisation which is almost a proper workers' co-operative—gave us an excellent insight into the way in which his business has been progressing. It has done incredibly well in managing to combine a high-street presence with an excellent online service. The two are not mutually exclusive; they can be brought together. Perhaps we should all take account of some of the big success stories in the retail sector, like that of John Lewis.

Mr Speaker: Chris Stephens.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I represent a city centre constituency, and I know that many of my constituents are worried about their jobs at BHS today. The Minister has mentioned the role that the Insolvency Service will play. Given that her Department is voluntarily offering to make cuts of 40% in the service, rather than the 17% demanded by the Chancellor, is she confident that it will be able to help the BHS workers?

Mr Speaker: Order. I was calling a Chris with a “ph” rather than a Jo with a “v”, but never mind. The hon. Lady was in full flow, and what she said has been heard.

Anna Soubry: The short answer is yes: I have complete confidence in the Insolvency Service.

Mr Speaker: Chris Stephens.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker! I welcome what the Minister has said about the positive role that can be played in the trade union, and I look forward to further discussion on Wednesday, but will her Department write to the administrators and BHS to ensure that the company is complying with the law and avoiding mistakes made by other companies in the past, when employees have been put at the back of the queue of creditors?

Anna Soubry: I have complete confidence in the administrators, and I am sure that they will comply fully with all the requirements that are made of them.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the Bill Grimsey report. I must admit that I had not heard of it until now, but I have just looked at it, and it does not fill me with confidence. The first section is entitled “Why...high streets cannot depend on retailing for future prosperity”. I think that it will be an interesting read. However, given that BHS seems to be the latest casualty on our high streets, may I ask the Minister whether the report supersedes the Portas report, which was produced for the Government in 2011? No action seems to have been taken on Mary Portas’s recommendations.
Anna Soubry: I must point out that it was the Labour party that commissioned Bill Grimsey’s report. I urge the hon. Lady to read all of it, rather than scanning it quickly in the Chamber. I should repeat, for what it is worth, that I do not agree with all of it, but I absolutely agree with a huge amount of it. It is interesting to note that a number of our great town centres and high streets are, in effect, putting it into operation. Bill Grimsey makes the good point that high streets cannot rely solely on retail; they have to rely on other things as well. I could go on, and try harder to persuade the hon. Lady that this is an excellent report. I urge her to read it. As I have said, she will not agree with everything in it, but it is a great foundation for understanding the problem and considering some of the solutions.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I think that what is going on with British Home Stores should ring alarm bells with the Minister. When Hull-based Comet went into administration in 2012, there were 7,000 redundancies, and the taxpayer ended up paying up to £100 million in redundancy costs. At that point, Comet had been owned for a year by a private equity firm which had bought it for £1, but loaded it with about £75 million worth of debt from which it received huge interest payments before walking off. The Government commissioned a report on what had happened, but they have never published it. I think it is about time that the report was published, so that we could observe the similarities between what happened then and what has happened to BHS, and ask ourselves whether there are lessons to be learnt.

Anna Soubry: I do not think that the hon. Lady asked me a question, but it does not really matter. I shall be happy to find out what happened to the report, and write to her about it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me first express the concern that I feel for my own constituents who face the possibility of redundancy, having been on the frontline of retailing for 36 years in the branch of British Home Stores in Clydebank. The Minister mentioned future technologies. Thirty-six years ago, BHS, as a retailer, was the future, and I should like us to have a debate about that in the House. The real scandal, however, is the fact that my constituents face not only the possibility of redundancy, but a 10% reduction in their pensions when they reach pensionable age. Can the Minister assure me, my constituents and the House that when the regulator carries out an investigation, it will be open and transparent, and that if there is guilt to be apportioned, it will be apportioned and will be subject to the full force of the law?

Anna Soubry: The short answer to that question is yes. As for the other matter that the hon. Gentleman raised, at one stage BHS really was the future. I will not, at this point, give my own views on the history of BHS and the lessons to be learned from it. As I have said, I want to be positive, to think about the work force and to look for a buyer. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a debate to be had about the changing nature of the way in which we shop, and the changing nature of retail.

Points of Order

6.19 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise to you for attempting to raise it earlier, at an inopportune moment, but I was so outraged by events that took place during our exchanges on the urgent question about shipbuilding on the Clyde that I became over-enthusiastic. In 20 years of teaching in a comprehensive school in Glasgow, I was never subjected to language such as that to which SNP Members were subjected by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). May I ask you, Mr Speaker, how we should go about making an official complaint?

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry that you are being troubled with this, Mr Speaker. To my knowledge, I was not given any prior warning of this point of order. I can only hope that this is a genuine mishearing by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and that it is not malicious. I have learned my lesson from my misplaced social media in the last couple of weeks, and I certainly did not use any language that she could complain about. I am slightly at a loss for what to say. Further to this point, although I might have raised this matter in a separate way, I have heard growing concerns about the tactics of those on the Scottish National party Benches, who seem, to an extent, to believe that it is acceptable to bring into the Chamber the kind of intimidation that was practised on the streets of Scotland to shut down free debate during the referendum campaign. In my view, that is acceptable neither on the street nor here.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I shall come to the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), who has a wholly different point of order, in a moment. Let me first respond to the initial point of order and to the hon. Gentleman’s response to it. I am at a disadvantage for the very simple reason that if anything offensive or unparliamentary was said by the hon. Gentleman—I emphasise the word “if”—I did not hear it. If I had heard what I have subsequently been told was said—which I have no intention of advertising to the Chamber because it was undoubtedly offensive and unparliamentary— I would have deprecated it. Suffice it to say that immoderate language is always to be deprecated, whether it is uttered from a sedentary position or when a Member is on his or her feet. I did not hear it, and I cannot therefore comment on it. [Interruption.] Order. I am not prepared to get involved—or to subject the House to getting involved—in an ongoing exchange. Suffice it to say that at the time there was some discontent between the two sets of Benches and I did urge people to calm down. I stand by that. I am genuinely sorry if there are Members who feel offended, but I cannot condemn that which I did not hear. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness has made his point, which I have heard, and no further exchange is required on that matter.
John Woodcock: But I have been named in the Chamber and I do not know what I am supposed to have done.

Mr Speaker: I will tell the hon. Gentleman: a complaint was made to me that he had used bad language and that he had deployed an expletive. I did not hear any such deployment and therefore the hon. Gentleman has been convicted of nothing. An allegation has been made. It was reported to me—[Interruption.] Order. There is no reason to accuse anybody of dishonesty. A Member whom I respect reported to me her understanding that bad language had been used, but I did not hear it. A complaint has been made and the hon. Gentleman denies any such impropriety. I think the most sensible thing is to say that we let it rest there. However, for the avoidance of doubt—I am referring not to the hon. Gentleman or to any other particular Member—bad language should of course not be used in this Chamber, whether out loud or sotto voce. We ought to conduct ourselves in a more seemly manner. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response and the hon. Lady for her courtesy. Please let us park it there for today.

Sue Hayman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister’s questions on Wednesday last week, in his response to my question about support for independent pharmacies, the Prime Minister stated: “We are supporting rural pharmacies—there is a specific scheme to help there”—[Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 916.]

Since then, I have seen a letter from the National Pharmacy Association to the Prime Minister, advising him that this is untrue and asking him to set the record straight. Can I ask your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I can best go about correcting the record as to the existence of this fund in order to ensure that rural pharmacies do not waste their time looking for a fund that does not currently exist?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me notice of it. The truth, as I think she knows, is that she has found her own salvation. She has put her view on this matter on the record, and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. No doubt it will be conveyed to the Prime Minister’s office. If the Prime Minister feels that what he said was inaccurate or misleading in any way, he will doubtless take steps to correct what was said. But it may be—I simply emphasise that it may be—that these are matters more of interpretation or opinion than of fact. I would stress that what Ministers say in this House is the responsibility of Ministers and not of the Chair. The hon. Lady has registered her point with force and alacrity.

IMMIGRATION BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Immigration Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 13 October 2015 (Immigration Bill (Programme)) and 1 December 2015 (Immigration Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at today’s Sitting.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: Nos. 87 to 101, 60, 84 to 86, 183 to 215, 1 to 59, 61 to 83, 102 to 182 and 216 to 254.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—[James Brokenshire.]

Question agreed to.
Immigration Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

6.26 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to move the first motion, I would like to make three general points about the designation of the Lords amendments engaging financial privilege that are about to come before us. First, the designation of Lords amendments as engaging financial privilege is not a matter on which I or others exercise choice. I and those who advise me act as servants of the House in giving effect to its procedures and in asserting its financial primacy. Secondly, the designation of an amendment does not have any bearing on the subsequent freedom of the House to debate and then decide whether to agree or disagree to the amendment. Thirdly, I confess that I have felt a growing sense of disquiet over recent years at the strong convention whereby Ministers have no choice as to the terms of the reason they propose when this House has disagreed to a Lords amendment which engages Commons financial privilege, being limited simply to stating that fact without offering the underlying policy reason. I have therefore today written to the Chair of the Procedure Committee inviting his Committee to consider the whole reasons regime, and I have asked the Clerk of the House to prepare a memorandum. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

I draw the attention of the House to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 1, 11 to 13, 15 to 18, 24, 25, 27 to 45, 87 to 89, 117, 121, 125, 126, 158, 166, 227, 229, 235, 237, 239 and 243. If the House agrees to them, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the Journal.

After Clause 37

UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE CHILDREN: RELOCATION AND SUPPORT

6.29 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 87.

Mr Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendments 88 to 101.
Lords amendment 60, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 84, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.
Lords amendment 85, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.
Lords amendment 86.
Lords amendments 183 to 215.

James Brokenshire: As you have set out, Mr Speaker, there is a range of Lords amendments in this first group. I will first speak to Lords amendment 60, relating to overseas domestic workers, and then to the Lords amendments relating to detention before moving on to Lords amendment 87, relating to refugee children.

I set out the Government’s response to James Ewins’ review in my written statement of 7 March. We have acknowledged the need to provide domestic workers who arrive in the United Kingdom in an abusive employment relationship with an immediate escape route from that situation, and we have acted on that. At the same time, the Government are concerned to ensure that such abuse is reported where it occurs. If that does not happen, we cannot take action against the perpetrators and abuse may be perpetuated. The Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner has endorsed that approach, making clear his concern that granting a longer extension of stay —as the Lords amendment would—irrespective of whether abuse has occurred, may create an environment in which criminals are ensured a continuous supply of domestic workers in which to trade.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is aware that the alternative proposal is that, if someone leaves the employ of an exploitative employer, they should notify the Home Office of that change. That creates an opportunity to investigate the reasons for the departure and therefore to have a successful prosecution for the exploitation of an overseas domestic worker, which has not happened over recent years.

James Brokenshire: I respect what the right hon. Lady says, and we have considered the matter carefully. As she will know, Kevin Hyland, the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, has set out a clear view on the time period that should apply to the duration of the visa. He said that allowing annual extensions to all overseas domestic workers will significantly increase the risk of exploitation and possibly create an environment in which criminals could operate. Such cases had been happening prior to the 2012 change in visa rules.

We have already amended the immigration rules so that overseas domestic workers are admitted on conditions of stay that permit them, during the six-month period for which they are admitted, to change employer. They do not need to apply to the Home Office to do so. We have also already amended the immigration rules so that overseas domestic workers who obtain a positive conclusive grounds decision can obtain a two-year extension of stay. We have considered the concern that overseas domestic workers may not readily be able to secure alternative employment as a domestic worker if, even when they are referred into the national referral mechanism, their permission to work ends when the six-month period of their admission expires.

We will make a further change to address that, using the powers in section 4(1) of the Immigration Act 1971 to ensure that when an overseas domestic worker has been referred into the national referral mechanism during their initial six-month stay, their permission to take employment will continue while their case is assessed, and without the worker having to make an application. With that additional change, the measures will ensure that, when a worker arrives in an abusive employment relationship, they can leave it with the certainty that they will be able to continue working, while also ensuring that they are encouraged to report the abuse early. The Lords amendment is therefore unnecessary.

It is essential that overseas domestic workers properly understand the protections available to them and are provided with a safe space in which concerns about
employment conditions can be raised at an early stage. It is not, however, clear that the Lords amendment’s provisions in respect of information meetings quite work. It does not appear sufficient to specify a requirement to attend such meetings in guidance issued to immigration staff if they are to be binding on the workers themselves, nor is it clear how we could require attendance to take place within the 42-day period, as the amendment provides, if the requirement to do so is triggered only at the end of that period.

We have already committed to implementing Mr Ewins’ recommendations concerning information meetings, so further legislative provision is not required. It would be sensible to preserve flexibility to decide whether the requirement to attend should be triggered at 42 days, as Mr Ewins’ originally proposed, or sooner, as the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner has suggested. We also intend to link the requirement to attend such meetings to a registration scheme for employers, as part of a wider refocusing of our checks on employers, and to ensure that we are better able to prevent employers from bringing more workers to the UK when they have not complied with our requirements. We will do so through further changes to the immigration rules later this year. We will keep the position under review and have sufficient legislative powers to make any additional changes to protect overseas domestic workers. The Lords amendment is unnecessary, will not be effective in practice, and risks increasing the possibility of exploitation and creating an environment in which criminals can operate with impunity.

I turn now to Lords amendments 84 and 85. It is a well-established principle that there must be a realistic prospect of removal within a reasonable time period for an individual to be detained pending removal. Our current published policy in respect of immigration detention is that there is a presumption of liberty. Depriving someone of their liberty must be subject to careful consideration and scrutiny, taking into account an individual’s circumstances.

On these broad issues, I have appreciated the input of many colleagues from across the House. I take particular note of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, led by Sarah Teather in the previous Parliament, which carefully considered the issues and made several important recommendations. I also value the opportunities that I have had to speak to a number of colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), on several such issues. The Government take the matter seriously and announced a wide package (Mrs Spelman), on several such issues. The Government’s proposed motion is another important safeguard that will complement the wider reform, providing additional judicial oversight.

The proposal is that individuals will be automatically referred to the tribunal for a bail hearing six months after the point of detention, or if they have already applied for a bail hearing in the first six months, six months after that hearing. They will then receive further referrals at six-monthly intervals from the point of the last hearing. The referral requirement will act as a safeguard, ensuring that individuals who do not make an application themselves, for whatever reason, will have independent judicial oversight of their ongoing detention. Individuals will still be able to make an application themselves at any point. The package of reforms should result in fewer people being detained and for the minimum time possible.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I welcome the diligence and care that the Minister has afforded colleagues from across the House in relation to the package that was announced last week. It was also indicated that Stephen Shaw, who provided a helpful report, will undertake a further short review. Will the Minister provide some details about the timing of that report and whether its remit will include an assessment of the reforms that the Minister outlines, such as the additional judicial oversight and the impact that that has on length of time in detention?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, his insights and his work on the issue over an extended period. We want Stephen Shaw to evaluate the effect and operation of the reforms that we implemented in response to his review. Along with the various measures that we have outlined, they form part of our overarching package of reform to immigration detention.

On the timing, it is right that the system can be implemented and can run for a certain period. I therefore anticipate Stephen Shaw carrying out this short review towards the end of next year. That is an appropriate timescale, allowing us to implement the changes through to the end of this year and then see them run for the best part of a year, to ensure that his consideration is informed by a system that has bedded in.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I spoke to the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities and was told that its major problem was making sure procedures were followed. So when we look at the comments in a year’s time and review this, will we make sure that procedures are being properly followed and that we concentrate on that just as much?

James Brokenshire: I am sure Stephen Shaw took an overarching, wide-ranging approach in his initial report and will do so in his subsequent review. We want that to
be in short order; we do not want it to extend into months, because it is about testing whether the reforms we have put in place—there are still more to come, with the adults at risk policy in May—had the effect we intended and therefore give effect to his key recommendations. I am sure he will be focusing on the practical implementation of the steps that we have implemented.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Like others, I welcome and await the guidelines in the light of the Shaw report, but does the Minister accept that all the reports on this matter, including the Shaw review, the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group and the review by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons, have asked for a much shorter period in respect of automatic judicial oversight, at nearer one month than six months? What does the Minister have to say about that?

James Brokenshire: This needs to be seen in the context of the reforms we are putting in place in the system, which is why I made reference to the quarterly reviews. This is about having a separate function whereby the removal plans will be subject to that internal scrutiny and then there is this automaticity in relation to bail hearings. It should be noted that the vast majority of those in immigration detention are there for only short periods—fewer than four months. We therefore think this is a right step to put in place, reflecting that desire to have that external arrangement. Indeed, it is open to anybody to apply for bail at any point, but we think there is a need for a further safeguard, which is why we have acted in the way we have, in terms of the amendments before the House this evening.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I have two quick points for the Minister. On the adults at risk policy and guidance he is putting together in May, will he confirm whether he will take input and advice from independent groups that have been working with people in detention over the past few years? Before a pregnant woman is detained, will an independent assessment be made, as is the case for children who are detained, following the changes we made in the previous Parliament?

James Brokenshire: We intend to publish the adults at risk policy in May and I am sure we will seek input from external parties. I appreciate that various stakeholders and organisations take an understandably keen interest in this area and in many ways have helped to frame and develop the policies we are bringing before the House this evening. Let me come back to my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, which we consider important that we are very clear about whom we are detaining, particularly when it comes to detaining pregnant women. The Government have tabled a motion that will place a statutory time limit, broadly in line with that for families with children, which will end the routine detention of pregnant women. It would mean that pregnant women may be detained for up to 72 hours, for example, immediately prior to a managed return; to prevent illegal entry at the border where a return can be quickly arranged; or if a pregnant woman presents a public risk. There would be the ability to extend this up to a maximum of seven days in total in particular circumstances, but only on the basis of ministerial approval.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is important that we are very clear about whom we are detaining, particularly when it comes to detaining pregnant women. We know that the vast majority of people in Yarl’s Wood are victims of rape and sexual torture, and they come to us for sanctuary. The Minister talks about carrying out a review, but will he explicitly consider whether being a victim or a suspected victim of rape and sexual torture can be grounds for denying detention? It is the 21st century; and it is humiliating and not cost effective for us as a nation that we lock these women up, rather than set them free.

James Brokenshire: It is important to recognise that the majority of people in our immigration removal centres are not asylum seekers; some people will claim asylum when they have been taken into an IRC. The point...
the hon. Lady makes about vulnerability is powerful and important, which was why we commissioned Stephen Shaw to make the recommendations he did on these matters of vulnerability. I hope she will see when we publish the adults at risk strategy and those various points that weigh the relevant factors that we are taking precisely those elements into account and that the presumption should not be to detain unless there are overwhelming factors that support detention and mean it is appropriate. I ask her to hold fire perhaps until she sees that policy, and I look forward to engaging with her further once she has had that opportunity.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Stephen Shaw considered these matters and, I recall, concluded that there should be no detention of pregnant women. If the Minister is determined to go against that recommendation, surely he must have decided where those women will be detained. When will he tell that to the House?

James Brokenshire: The feedback we have received from a range of different organisations is that the facilities and support at Yarl’s Wood, and its links with the health service in Bedfordshire, provide an effective join-up to ensure that those needs are best met, but obviously we keep such matters under close and careful review. The right hon. Gentleman will recall our debates in the previous Parliament on the detention of children. The coalition Government were proud to introduce measures that pragmatically and practically ended the general detention of children, and we are using precisely that model and approach for pregnant women. We are learning from our experiences regarding the detention of children, but we recognise that there may be limited circumstances in which detention might be necessary, either to facilitate removal, or because a young person has been met at the border and the time during which they are held is still technically detention.

Mr Carmichael: I remember those debates well. They started from the presumption that Yarl’s Wood was not an appropriate place to detain children any more than Dungavel would be. Why are the Government now taking a different position?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman will probably know that Yarl’s Wood is the only immigration removal centre that specifically detains women, so when we review it we must ensure that the best facilities for pregnant women are in place. This is not just about what happens in the centre; it is about how that links up to the broader health service. That is why we judge Yarl’s Wood to be the most appropriate place, but we keep such issues under careful review, including the continuing improvements that we want to see.

I promised that I would return to the point raised earlier about assessments. The family removals process operates removal plans for children, and as I said, we are taking a new approach to the use of detention, with a focus on a removal plan. Therefore, when anyone goes into detention, that removal plan will need to be considered. As that work develops, there will be detailed consideration of the appropriateness of detention as part of a removal plan, and we are now implementing a number of reforms to detention.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I thank the Minister for acknowledging the work done across the House in changing the detention of pregnant women, and for coming before the Home Affairs Committee and responding so openly to the questions from me and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes). In the debate in Westminster Hall I mentioned the midwifery unit in my constituency. Will the Minister shed light on what midwifery support will be available for women who will now be detained for a much shorter period?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his searching questioning and desire to bring about change, and I am pleased that we are considering these amendments this evening. As I have explained, there is a link between health services in Yarl’s Wood and the way that extends and links into midwifery services provided through the Bedfordshire healthcare system. We believe that that arrangement is right to provide joined-up care, with nurses and other health professionals coming from Bedfordshire into Yarl’s Wood to provide support for pregnant women.

Richard Fuller: I do not wish to underestimate the significant change in direction on immigration detention policy that my right hon. Friend outlined today and last week, but he will understand that scepticism remains about Home Office procedures and policies when they are put into practice—hence the request for an independent point of oversight. In the steps that he is outlining, will there be scope for independent oversight prior to the detention of a pregnant woman?

James Brokenshire: The best way to approach this is to implement the changes that I have outlined to the House this evening. Stephen Shaw will review those measures in 12 to 18 months, and I suspect that he will examine how the implementation, policies and procedures will have effect. I will continue to examine how best we can provide greater transparency. Although we have recently created more management information, this is about how we provide reassurance and greater clarity about this procedure. I will continue to reflect on how we do that, so as to give my hon. Friend—and others—greater assurance on what are sensitive matters.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being so generous in taking interventions. I welcome the adults at risk strategy and look forward to scrutinising it. Will there be access to legal aid for women who have specific removal plans, so that that is as lawful as possible?

James Brokenshire: Some groups provide support and advice in immigration removal centres, but matters of legal aid are not for me at the Home Office but for colleagues in the Ministry of Justice.

Let me move on to the broader issue of Lords amendment 87. In opposing the amendment, I do not in any way question the motivation of those who tabled it in the other place, or the desire to see this country do more in the region, on the shores of the Mediterranean,
and within Europe. The conflict in Syria continues to have a devastating effect on the lives of many men, women and children who have been displaced from their homes, their country, and their futures. The stories they tell of lives that have been uprooted, and the distressing images that we see of people fleeing in search of a better, safer life, are moving and compelling in equal measure.

I know that many Members have travelled to the region, or to the Greek islands or the camps in northern France, and they have been deeply moved by their experiences. I have appreciated the opportunity to listen to colleagues such as my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), and for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), following their visit to the Greek islands, and my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate, and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), following their visits to Calais. They set out the practical issues on the ground, and the need for this country to do more.

The Government wholeheartedly share the intentions of the noble Lords to protect and support vulnerable unaccompanied refugee children, but the challenge is how we most effectively harness our strong sense of compassion and moral duty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) put it to me recently, this is about how we use both head and heart.

Our starting principle is that we must put the best interests of children first, and avoid any policy that places children at additional risk or encourages them to place their lives in the hands of people traffickers and criminal gangs. In any response, we need to be careful that we do not inadvertently create a situation in which families see an advantage in sending children ahead, alone and in the hands of traffickers, putting their lives at risk by making them attempt treacherous sea crossings to Europe. As the horrendous events in the Mediterranean last week demonstrated, that would be the worst of all outcomes.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister specifically mentioned the horrific event in the Mediterranean last week. I have heard from a number of constituents who, through their family connections, knew of people fleeing. He mentioned Syria, but people are fleeing not just Syria but conflicts across the horn of Africa and elsewhere. I have heard some absolutely harrowing stories from those who have survived those terrible crossings—people trying to travel from Alexandria being abused by people traffickers. Does he not agree that, when children survive such horrific tragedies, we need to do our bit in taking some of them here for protection in this country?

7 pm

James Brokenshire: I will come on to the broader issues that the hon. Gentleman highlights. Clear judgments have to be made on how the UK most effectively provides support. I will come on to how we can help in Europe and to look at those issues that he highlights, which include: the trafficking gangs that exploit people across Africa and the broader regions; how we are playing our role in the Khartoum process to work with African Union countries to take action; and finding that common sense of engaging and working against the people trafficking and smuggling networks.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab) rose—

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) rose—

James Brokenshire: I will if I may finish this point. As I have shown so far, I plan to be generous to all Members during the course of this debate.

No one should be in any doubt about the Government’s clear, ongoing commitment to help those most affected by the migration crisis. The doubling of our aid for the Syrian crisis to £2.3 billion—the largest ever response by this country to a single humanitarian crisis—underlines not just that commitment, but our commitment to act in practical ways to improve the lives of as many people as possible. Hundreds of thousands of people in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt are receiving food, shelter, medical treatment and support as a consequence of the actions of the UK. It is also about hope and opportunity and creating a strong sense of how we can quickly rebuild the lives of those torn apart by the war in Syria. The London conference in February galvanised commitments to create an estimated 1.1 million jobs for those in the region by 2018, and quality education for 1.7 million refugee and vulnerable children by the end of the 2016-17 school year, with equal access for girls and boys.

Tim Farron: The Minister is being very generous. He makes the point that action to help those who are stranded in Europe would somehow act as a pull factor. With respect, I think that that view is bogus, not least when we consider that there are four times more refugees in the region. The idea that Europe is the only place to which they are heading is nonsense. Even if one were to accept that, his decision not to accept the Dubs amendment is to ignore the tens of thousands of children who are in Europe now. The reality is that 10,000 have gone missing in the past year. They are in the hands of traffickers now. What will he do to help those children who are here on this continent now?

James Brokenshire: I was going to come on to that very point. Let me just say that it is about supporting those front-line member states and our other European partners to stand by their responsibilities. In essence, Europe should be a safe space; it is not a conflict zone. Therefore, we judge that the best way to make a difference and to help the greatest numbers of those in need is to support the majority of refugees to enable them to stay safely in their home region, which is why I made those points about aid and assistance. Where people have made that journey to Europe, we should help our European partners to fulfil their duties to them and to provide support on this issue of family reunification.

Peter Kyle: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way; he has indeed been generous with his time. May I point him to what the Home Secretary said in her speech to the Tory conference last October? She said: “We’ll develop a community sponsorship scheme, like those in Canada and Australia, to allow individuals, charities, faith groups, churches and businesses to support refugees directly.”

I have met the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and many of the groups that she mentioned in that speech. They are ready to do it, and they have the systems in place, but the thing that is stopping them is the Government.
James Brokenshire: I was just talking to the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), and he made it clear that that is not true. We will come forward very shortly with proposals on the issue of sponsorship, which is important and which we do want to take forward, but it is important that we get it right. That is precisely what my hon. Friend is doing as part of the vulnerable person resettlement scheme.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister’s point was effectively that the children who are alone in Greece now are Greece’s problem, but Save the Children has said that 2,000 children are alone in northern Greece and there are fewer than 500 child shelter places for them, and those are full. What does he really want those children to do when they are sleeping rough, being targeted by traffickers and smuggling gangs, and subjected to abuse? Does he really think that that is just Greece’s problem and that we should not do our bit too?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not. That is why it is right that we are providing financial aid and assistance in that area. I will come on to deal specifically with that support to underline the important commitment that this country is giving.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): A few minutes ago, my right hon. Friend mentioned the actions of our European partners. Can he give the House an indication of how this Government’s actions compare with those of our European neighbours?

James Brokenshire: When we look at all these different aspects of our involvement—our aid assistance, the work of our resettlement programmes, which I will come on to shortly, the support we are giving in Europe, and the steps we are taking against smugglers and people trafficking networks with the taskforces that we have set up—we see that we can take very great credit in terms of the work that this country has done and continues to do. It is that focus that we will continue to bring to this issue. We know that the vulnerable and those most in need and most at risk may be best helped here in the UK. We launched the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme to resettle 20,000 people over the course of this Parliament. Well over 1,000 people have been resettled to date, around half of whom are children. That means that, in the next four years, several thousand more children will be resettled in the UK under the Syrian scheme, but as I said in my statement of 28 January, we want to do more, especially for children most in need of support. That is why, last week, I announced a new resettlement scheme for children at risk. That initiative will be the largest resettlement effort to focus on children at risk from the middle east and north Africa region—children who might otherwise attempt their own perilous journeys to Europe and the UK.

We have worked closely with the UNHCR to design a scheme that will protect the most vulnerable children, resettling up to 3,000 people over the lifetime of this Parliament, the majority of whom will be children if the UNHCR deems it to be in their best interests. Children who are identified as at risk will be resettled with their family members or carers where appropriate. The scheme will not be limited to any particular nationality or group, which will allow us to assist the most vulnerable children whoever they are.

The UNHCR is fully supportive of the launch of this new initiative and the UK’s commitment to assist vulnerable refugee children at risk through further resettlement efforts that uphold the principles of child protection.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): After being at the Council of Europe last week and hearing representations in relation to the claims made by Save the Children that 26,000 children have gone missing, and hearing other countries talk about what they are doing in regard to those children, I can say that we are not doing as much as we should be doing. To say that we will not pass this amendment will be embarrassing for us as a country.

James Brokenshire: I am afraid that I disagree with the hon. Lady.

I will now move on to the support we are providing in Europe, which I think it is important the House recognises. Although our judgment is that the UK can make the biggest difference in the region, and that children in Europe should benefit from support from countries with legal obligations similar to our own, it is right that we should provide assistance in Europe where there are vulnerable children in need of support, and the Government are taking action. The UK is the largest bilateral contributor to the humanitarian response to the crisis in Europe and the Balkans, with a total contribution of £65 million. That includes nearly £46 million to provide life-saving aid to migrants and refugees, including food, water, hygiene kits, infant packs and protection for the most vulnerable, as well as support to organisations helping Governments to build their capacity to manage arrivals in Greece and the Balkans.

On top of our significant support to front-line member states, the Department for International Development has created a £10 million refugee children fund specifically to support the needs of vulnerable refugee and migrant children in Europe. The fund will be used to support the UNHCR, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee to work with host authorities to care for and assist unaccompanied or separated children in Europe. That includes identifying vulnerable children, providing for their immediate support, referring to specialist care and helping to find solutions, such as family reunification. On that last point, I am clear that it is important to help children reunite with family wherever possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister has said that one reason why the British Government will not take children from the continent of Europe is that it might encourage people smuggling from the middle east to Europe and unsafe journeys. However, when I was in Calais at Easter, I was told by aid workers that, as a result of the British Government’s refusal to take children from northern France, children are being trafficked into the United Kingdom and are attempting unsafe journeys by jumping on to or under lorries bound for the United Kingdom. Indeed, I have learned that one girl I met in one of the camps, alone and unaccompanied, has since entered the UK by trafficking methods. Will the Minister not take on board the fact
that, by failing to take children from Europe, he is actually encouraging trafficking and unsafe methods of travel from France to Britain?

**James Brokenshire:** I am very happy to address that point head-on, because I think that there are a number of important ways in which we can take, and are taking, action. That is why I made the point about reuniting children with their families. The hon. and learned Lady will know that we have seconded additional resources to the European Asylum Support Office for Italy and Greece to implement and streamline the processes under the Dublin regulations, including to identify quickly children who qualify for family reunion.

On the specific point about Calais and northern France, I take these issues extremely seriously. I am personally committed to improving and speeding up our family reunification processes so that young people there who have families with refugee claims here can be reunited. That is why we had the recent secondment of a senior asylum expert to the French Interior Ministry to improve the process for family reunion, which I think has had an impact on the number of children being reunited with family in the UK. In the past six weeks over 50 cases have been identified, 24 of which have been accepted for transfer to the UK from France under the Dublin family unity provisions, and more than half of them have already arrived in the UK. I think that we have demonstrated that once an asylum claim has been lodged, transfers can take place within a matter of weeks.

Those who want us to do more on this can help us to do so by encouraging and supporting children to use the processes that are in place to help them be reunited with their family. I know that one of the biggest barriers at the moment is persuading these children to claim asylum so that they can be considered for transfer to the UK under the family unity conventions in the Dublin regulations.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I do not feel that we are taking responsibility; at the moment, it is British citizens who are taking responsibility. I am afraid that seconding one person is not good enough. When I visited, with the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), we saw a similar example of a child who had gone missing pitching up in Kent a week later. This is happening on a daily basis. One person is not enough. Can we please try to get more resources there?

**James Brokenshire:** As I think I have indicated, we are already providing support to the French Government, as the non-governmental organisation France Terre d’Asile has responsibility for identifying children in and around the camps at Calais and making sure that they go into the system so that we can do the child safeguarding, make those connections and see that they are reunited with family. That is why I underline the need to give a clear message to those who have connections to identify and support children so that they go into the French system, because we will act. I think that we have the systems and processes in place now to be able to act effectively. That is why it is important to see that operationalised, so that we are doing what we can, alongside the French Government, our Border Force officers and France Terre d’Asile, to ensure that when children are identified, they are immediately pointed to how they can get into the French system so that we can then act.

**Yvette Cooper** rose—

**James Brokenshire:** I will give way to the right hon. Lady, as I know of her long-standing interest in this matter.

**Yvette Cooper:** I thank the Minister for giving way once again. On that point, Citizens UK has identified 157 live cases that have been put into the system, but he is saying that only 24 have in fact been accepted, and only half of those have actually made it to Britain. Why are they not all brought here straight away? Why are they still stuck in Calais, cold, living in tents in the mud and at huge risk, when he has accepted that they should be here with family who can care for them?

**James Brokenshire:** We are processing 50 cases, 24 of which we have accepted, but a number of those cases are complicated. It is a question of the safeguarding measures that need to be put in place for the children to be reunited with the families who are here. It is therefore more complex than it is sometimes presented. That is not in any way a desire on the part of the Government, or anyone else, to encourage delay. Rather, it is about the normal child safeguarding measures that I think are appropriate. I say to the right hon. Lady and to Citizens UK that if there are cases that can be linked to families here in the UK, get them into the French system. I make that point again and again, because we stand ready to act and to take charge where there are those links, and to see that if there are children in northern France who are separated from family in the UK, action is taken.

Those processes for family reunion are of course in addition to the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who make their claims in this country. With over 3,000 asylum applications from unaccompanied children last year, I pay tribute to all those local authorities that, despite the unprecedented pressure on their services, are providing support to those young people. At the same time, we need to shut down the illegal migration routes to Europe that are exploited by human traffickers, who encourage people to risk their lives to make perilous journeys. The Government remain of the view that relocation schemes within Europe risk creating unintended consequences or perverse incentives for people to put their lives into the hands of traffickers. Instead, we are committed to providing safe and legal routes for the most vulnerable refugees to resettle in the UK.

The success of the EU-Turkey migration agreement is a vital opportunity to end the misery and lethal risk that smugglers and organised criminals are causing on a daily basis. We have made an offer of UK support to help implement the EU-Turkey migration agreement. We need to close down illegal crossings from Turkey to Greece and tackle migrant flows upstream. We are offering 75 expert personnel to help with the processing and administration of migrants in Greek reception centres, to act as interpreters, to provide medical support and to bolster our existing team assisting the Commission to ensure that there is effective and efficient co-ordination.
Those teams, which are ready to be deployed, will include experts in supporting vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and those trained to tackle people trafficking. That will help to ensure that vulnerable people, including children, are identified and can access asylum and support procedures as quickly as possible. That is in addition to the work undertaken by the Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland, to visit hotspots and assess what more can be done to ensure that unaccompanied children are protected from traffickers.

Tim Farron: I want to challenge the notion that the EU-Turkey deal is a success. I was at the Idomeni camp on the Greek-Macedonian border a fortnight ago. The camp is meant to host 300 or 400 people as they pass north towards northern Europe, but there were 25,000 people—there were children there as well—crammed into that small space, and they were absolutely desperate. The reason they are not moving from that place is that they have no trust whatever in the system or in the fact that wherever they are moved to next will not mean deportation out of Europe. The EU-Turkey deal may be great in principle, but in practice it has been stitched up for the benefit and convenience of politicians, not of those desperate people rotting in the camps.

James Brokenshire: I attended last week’s Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg and I spoke to the Greek Minister. He has welcomed the offer of support that I have just set out, in terms of its practical operationalisation to help make things happen at the front end—in the Greek islands and in Greece. I have highlighted the financial and other support we are giving Greece and others to deal with some of these difficult and challenging issues, and we are playing our absolute part to address this issue and to see that the parts of the EU-Turkey deal happen and have the effect we would all want them to.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: The Minister stands there and says we are playing our absolute part, but he told us two minutes ago that we have in fact offered only 75 members of staff, when the Commission itself tells us it needs 4,000. How is that doing our absolute part?

James Brokenshire: The contribution we are making stands in very positive terms compared with what other European partners are doing. This is about identifying the right people to deploy so that we have the best effect, and that is precisely what we are doing.

I am conscious that I have spoken for an extended period, and I want other right hon. and hon. Members to get into the debate. For the reasons I have given, the approach proposed in amendment 87 is not the right one. As the selection of amendments notes, the amendment engages financial privilege, and the Speaker identified some of the issues that that raises in terms of the reasons we give the House of Lords.

Under amendment 87, we could end up relieving pressure on developed countries in Europe that have the means to support children, instead of helping developing countries that are under real pressure and that do not have the capacity to support them. The best answer is upstream intervention before children at risk try to come to Europe.

The Government are committed to making a full contribution to the global refugee crisis, particularly by helping children at risk. We strongly believe that our approach of resettling children at risk and their families directly from the region will have most impact on safeguarding vulnerable children. The significant aid package in Europe, and our practical and logistical assistance to front-line member states to ensure vulnerable children are properly protected wherever they are in Europe, is the correct way to approach this issue.

The UK can be proud of the contribution we are making, which stands comparison with any. We are doing everything we said we would to provide aid and to resettle vulnerable refugees. We are already making a real difference to hundreds of thousands of lives.

I recognise the sincere feelings of those who support amendment 87. We share the objective of identifying and protecting children at risk, but I firmly believe that the approach I have set out provides the best way to support our European partners, help vulnerable refugee children and provide the biggest impact for the contribution this country can make.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Labour Peers and the many Cross Benchers who brought these amendments before the House today. The amendments raise important issues, and none more so than amendment 87.

Amendment 87—the so-called Alf Dubs amendment—was tabled by Lord Dubs. As many people know, Lord Dubs arrived in this country in 1939 as an unaccompanied child under the Kindertransport system, so he speaks with particular authority. The vote in the House of Lords was won by 100 votes, reflecting the long campaign to change the position on unaccompanied children in Europe. That campaign has been supported by Members of this House, along with non-governmental organisations and charities. The matter was first raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who put it to the Prime Minister in September 2015. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has continually raised it, and I pay tribute to her work. I also pay tribute to Save the Children for raising this issue so much over the last year.

The issue is comparatively simple to state: hundreds of thousands of families across the world—millions of people in total—are fleeing their homes. The refugee crisis we are witnessing is on a scale we have not seen since the second world war. The Minister spoke of the devastating effect of war on so many people. We have become familiar with the images of families making treacherous journeys—often across the Mediterranean—but I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say we are all still shocked every time we see footage and images of desperate families making those desperate, treacherous journeys.

Catherine West: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that, given the emails and anguish-filled letters we receive as constituency MPs, there seems to be a lack of...
urgency among Government Members, which, to me, reflects the fact that they are out of touch with how the country really feels about this issue?

Keir Starmer: The number of constituents who have contacted me and other Members—I am sure that this is true across the House—about the plight of refugees in the last 12 months has been considerable. Many of those communications—again, I am sure that this is the same for many Members—are individual, rather than part of mass campaigns. These people have real concerns, and they usually say, “What can I do? I don’t think the Government are doing enough. Can I send money or clothes?” Many have said, “Can I take somebody in?” or even, “Can I adopt?” There is therefore a very powerful feeling out there that more needs to be done about refugees.

I have spoken of the hundreds of thousands of families—the millions of people—fleeing their homes.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. and learned Friend is exactly right. He has been to the camps in France, and I have been to the Calais camp. Much of the help there is given by individual British people who make the journey over or who organise trips, often providing substantial amounts of aid. Our constituents’ view is clear, and the Government would be wise to listen to it this evening.

Keir Starmer: I have been to the camps in Calais and Dunkirk, and, like many other people, I was shocked. I have discussed that with the Minister and with the Minister with responsibility for refugees, and what I have tried to get across—this is important in relation to the amendment—is that when I went to Dunkirk, there were 3,000 individuals, including many children, living in a swamp in flimsy tents in the freezing cold. There were eight volunteers doing their level best to help in the camp, but there was not an official in sight, apart from two gendarmes on the gate, and all they were doing was preventing pallets from being brought in. I know things have changed—I did say that when I went, and I have never been slow to acknowledge when steps have been taken—but there needs to be a reality check about the ability of children in those camps and elsewhere to access the advice and help they need to make a claim.

Mr Burrowes: I have similarly visited Dunkirk, where I was appalled by the inhumane conditions, and no one should walk by. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman have any details about deliverability if the Dubs amendment is passed? How many unaccompanied minors will come to this country, and when? How will that operate?

Keir Starmer: As the hon. Gentleman will have seen, the amendment proposes a scheme for taking children, and that is important. I accept that there needs to be a proper scheme and that things need to be done properly. As with any other scheme, accommodation, schools, healthcare and so on have to be put in place for anybody who arrives. The proposal is therefore for a scheme, rather than just a set number of children without a scheme.

I want to move on. I have described the hundreds of thousands—

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress, if I may, and then I will of course take further interventions.

I have described the situation for millions of families travelling across the world, but we are now dealing with children making such treacherous journeys on their own. It is estimated that there are 26,000 of them in Europe. I met four of them in Glasgow when I visited there. The children—two girls and two boys—were from Iran, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They told me their very powerful stories about their trip across to Europe.

7.30 pm

One of the boys described to me how, aged 14, he had to get into a boat intended for 60, but in which there were 100 adults who were strangers to him. He was ordered to dispose of all his personal items, or he would not have been allowed on the boat. That 14-year-old arrived in Europe, with no personal belongings at all, with stranger adults, and he made the rest of his journey on his own. That is a typical example.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the story he has recounted gives the lie to or shows the inappropriateness of the Government’s position in that we cannot possibly expect children to be treated the same as adults?

Keir Starmer: I would put it this way: in this country, we recognise that children cannot access their rights without significant help and the position is exactly the same in Europe, but such help is not in place and that is not happening. The stories that I heard from the four children in Glasgow were typical of those of the thousands of children who are arriving alone, frightened and with absolutely nothing.

There is the chilling statistic—from my point of view, this is a telling statistic—that 10,000 of those children are thought to be missing. That figure comes from Europol. I have done a lot of work, as I recognise have a lot of other people in the House, to try to combat sexual exploitation and trafficking. There is a shared concern that many of these children will become, if they are not already, victims of sexual exploitation or trafficking. That is the real concern driving Lords amendment 87. It is a small but important contribution to dealing with the refugee crisis, which is testing our humanitarianism.

For my part, I have applauded the Government’s resettlement scheme—I have spent time, both in Glasgow and in Colchester, with Syrian families who have arrived under the scheme—but we simply cannot ignore the children who have arrived in Europe. As has been said, they are right here, right now, and they are in a desperate and vulnerable position. The Government are not saying that nothing needs to be done, or that they are perfectly catered for and are not at risk. The Government recognise that something needs to be done and that they are at risk, but the Government are still resisting Lords amendment 87.

The Minister put this in terms of risk and of not encouraging children to take risks. I want to address what is sometimes expressed as the pull factor absolutely fairly and squarely. The first thing to say is that, on
analysis, there is flimsy evidence to support the pull factor one way or the other. The other thing is that any discussion of a pull factor should be held in a vacuum. We have been here before in relation to rescues in the Mediterranean. On one view, people argue that such rescues are a pull factor, but we all recognise that it would be abhorrent to leave people to their fate in the Mediterranean on the simple proposition that rescues might encourage others to cross the sea.

We therefore have to be absolutely honest with ourselves about what we are saying about the pull factor in relation to the 26,000 children, of whom 10,000 are missing. The pull factor argument is that we must abandon them to their fate on the basis of an unproven theory that if we did something by taking them, others might be encouraged to come. In stark terms, that is the theory that if we did something about pull factors, others would be abhorrent to leave people to their fate in the Mediterranean on the simple proposition that rescues might encourage others to cross the sea.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I hesitate to intervene on my hon. and learned Friend’s excellent speech, but does he wonder why we did not hear about the pull factor when this country took in 50,000 Ugandans, 30,000 Cypriots or 20,000 Vietnamese? We now have such a situation in Europe. A child died at the Piraeus camp in Greece when I visited just a few weeks. It was absolutely awful. That this Government are really doing what they are doing for the sake of immigration issues is a scandal. Is that not really why we are discussing the pull factor?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his very powerful intervention, which puts the pull factor in its proper context. The pull factor argument that has been deployed is not attractive in a country that has been as tolerant as this country has in providing support for those fleeing persecution. In the end, the argument boils down to saying that we will leave people to their fate for fear of encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. The Minister talked about distressed people fleeing war-torn zones. That is the context in which the argument is being applied, but this case is worse because the pull factor is being applied to children. The boy I met in Glasgow was 14 when he made his journey, and he is typical of many in that respect.

Tim Farron: The hon. and learned Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. On the pull factor, I agree with him that the evidence is at best mixed. In the sense that I found any kind of pull factor in the camps I visited in northern Greece, in the islands or in Calais and in meeting refugees who have been settled in Cologne, it was that Europe is a peaceful, decent, stable place where people can raise their children without fear of their being killed. We should be proud of such a pull factor.

Keir Starmer: The hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful point. I know that he has been very supportive of the campaigns in that respect. Certainly, several people I talked to in Calais and Dunkirk—stuck in camps that were appalling when I saw them—spoke in glowing terms about the rule of law and human rights, and our proud tradition in relation to refugees.

I have listened to the Minister. Not only on this occasion but every time that we have debated this, I have applauded and acknowledged the steps that the Government have taken. I accept that any steps taken must be proper steps within a proper scheme so that they work properly. However, not taking the vulnerable children who are in Europe—right here, right now—is simply not good enough.

This afternoon, an email pinged into my inbox from a rabbi in Kentish Town, one of my constituents, which I want to read to the House:

“As the Jewish community celebrates the...Passover, we remember not only our own journey to freedom, but all those who are not free.”

He urged me to support Lords amendment 87 and other amendments. He certainly speaks for many of my other constituents, as I am sure he does for those of many hon. Members from across the House.

Among those on the Opposition Benches, there is strong support for Lords amendment 87. I know and acknowledge the fact that Conservative Members have real concerns, which they have raised repeatedly, about our not taking in this group of vulnerable children who need our help now.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I was particularly moved by yesterday’s article by the former Archbishop, Rowan Williams. He compared the action being taken now with how we responded to the plight of children during the second world war. Does my hon. and learned Friend not agree with him that supporting the Dubs amendment “is an opportunity for us to live up to the best of our tradition in Britain of reaching out a hand to help the most vulnerable”?

Keir Starmer: I speak for Members from across the whole House when I say that history will judge how we respond to this historic crisis, which is of proportions that have not been seen since the second world war. This is the challenge of our time, and whether we rise to it or not will be the measure of us. We have the clear evidence of thousands of vulnerable children, and we now need to act to take 3,000, as proposed in the amendment. I say to Conservative Members who have campaigned and spoken out on this that now is the moment to do something about it to make a real difference by voting with us on amendment 87. I urge all Members to do so.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): We have talked a lot about pull factors, but it is worth remembering for a moment the push factors: the children as young as seven who are being forced on to the frontline in Syria, or the children raped in conflicts that are so horrific that aid workers I have worked with over 10 years are telling me that the situation is the most horrendous they have ever witnessed. These are children in Europe right now. I applaud the Government’s record on the humanitarian support they have given to Syrian civilians in the region—in Syria—and some of the efforts we have made in Europe, but tonight is surely the moment that we have to go just that little bit further. I hope my hon. and learned Friend agrees with that point.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. It reminds us that applying the “pull factor” argument in relation to refugees is inappropriate because they are,
by definition, people who are fleeing persecution across borders and taking journeys that are treacherous and dangerous. When we see families or children making those journeys, we all think of our own families, and think of the circumstances and the desperation that lie behind those desperate acts. In those circumstances, it is of course very important to take into account the push factors.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. and learned Gentleman must be aware of the Minister’s statement that we will take more children from in and around Syria. He has been arguing, as have others, about the 3,000 children to be taken from within Europe. Clearly, all of us in this House care very strongly about all vulnerable children caught up in these awful situations. Does he believe that there is a choice between taking one category before the other? Should we be taking more from Syria as well as the 3,000? How would we decide, given our ability properly to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children?

Keir Starmer: I support the statement that was made last week about up to 3,000 children being taken from the region. However, it should not be an either/or when we have a refugee crisis on a scale not seen since the second world war. This is a limited and proportionate number—3,000 children who are in desperate need in Europe right now. I, for my part, do not subscribe to the categorisation of vulnerability. I think that any child alone, fleeing across a border having made a treacherous journey, is vulnerable wherever they have found themselves. Certainly all the children I have spoken to—those in the camps and those who had made it to this country—were very vulnerable, not only when they started those journeys but when they made them. It is not an either/or.

Nusrat Ghani: rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way, but I am conscious that lots of other people want to get in, and by taking interventions I am holding them up.

Nusrat Ghani: This is a very sensitive and difficult issue. The hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned vulnerability. Surely the most vulnerable children, families and communities are not those in Europe but those closest to conflicts.

Keir Starmer: I am sorry, but I really do not want to go down this path. One of the 10,000 who has disappeared and may be subject to sexual exploitation or trafficking right now is extremely vulnerable, and I am not going to categorise him or her as being any more or any less vulnerable than a child who may be in a camp elsewhere, vulnerable though they are. Hon. Members across the House have approached this with principle and with humanity, and there has been a shared cause of concern in many of the debates we have had. The “pull factor” argument whereby we leave people to their fate lest others follow, or the idea that we categorise the vulnerability of children, are not points well made in a debate that is usually conducted in a framework of real principle.

7.45 pm

Amendments 84 and 85 deal with indefinite detention and immigration detention of pregnant women. They reflect a growing concern about immigration detention per se and of pregnant women in particular. That concern has been expressed in this House, in all-party parliamentary groups, in non-governmental organisations, and in charities. From the Labour party point of view, we had a manifesto commitment to end indefinite immigration detention. This matter has been raised throughout the passage of the Bill, and I am proud to rise to speak on it today. The solution in amendment 84 is simple: 28 days’ immigration detention with the possibility of judicial extension on exceptional grounds. That strikes the right balance while managing risk. I commend the amendment to the House.

Pregnant women are an especially vulnerable group, as everybody appreciates. Stephen Shaw was tasked to look particularly at vulnerability and, within that category, the position of vulnerable women. He made four very powerful findings. First, he said that it is obvious that detention harms both mother and baby. We start from that reminder of the obvious. Secondly, he said that the current regime for detention in exceptional circumstances is clearly not working. Thirdly, he pointed out that the vast majority of pregnant women in immigration detention are not removed. The idea that immigration detention is for those where there is a realistic prospect of removal is therefore at odds with the evidence as regards pregnant women. That drove Stephen Shaw to the conclusion that the only proper way forward was an absolute ban. I recognise that the Secretary of State has moved on this issue, but it is not enough. I urge all Members to support amendments 84 and 85.

Richard Fuller: On the absolute ban on the detention of pregnant women, which I support, I am glad that the hon. and learned Gentleman recognises the tremendous change that the Government have made, and are making. Will he reassure me and others that if pregnant women are made a category for exclusion from detention, that will not create a precedent for other groups to have a similar level of exclusion?

Keir Starmer: I hope that I made it clear that I support the Government’s changed position and recognise how far they have gone; I simply said that it is not enough. I do not think this sets a precedent. We are talking about a particular group. All those in immigration detention are vulnerable in one way or another, but it has long been recognised that pregnant women are a particularly vulnerable group within that group. This amendment speaks only to them, and therefore should be taken in those terms.

Amendment 60 deals with overseas domestic workers. This is a very important matter because it concerns another very vulnerable group, many of whom are abused by the households who employ them and find it very difficult to escape that abuse. When the Bill that became the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was going through this House, the Government, under pressure, commissioned the Ewins report. That report was clear in its conclusion that overseas domestic workers should be able to change employer and to apply for further leave for up to 30 months, and that they should be informed of their rights. The basis of the amendment is to support the Ewins conclusions. The driving theme behind the report in putting forward those proposals is that Ewins said that they are the only practical way out of abuse for this very vulnerable category of workers. There is more to
be done on overseas domestic workers, and amendment 60 addresses a very thin slice of the problems they face. However, I urge all Members to support it.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): For me, as a parent, the decision on whether to support the amendment made to the Bill in the other place on the resettlement of unaccompanied children in Europe reduces itself to simple questions. If I were separated from my children—if they were destitute in a foreign country, cold, hungry and far away from home—what would I want for them? Would I be content for them to be at risk of violence and exploitation, often sexual in nature, or would I want them to be offered safe haven with the desire that they be looked after and reunited with family members in due course? Those questions are, to my mind, rhetorical. They admit of sure and certain answers. I greatly regret that those are not answers that—with the best of motives, I accept—the Government appear to be willing to give.

Let us, for a moment, leave out of the equation what seems to me to be the grave inconsistency between arguing, on one hand, that the country has a role at the heart of the EU, and yet refusing, on the other, to shoulder the burden of the fact that Europol estimates that 10,000 unaccompanied refugee children went missing in Europe last year after they had been registered with the authorities in the countries in which they found themselves. Let us leave out of the equation the fact that the true number of minors subjected to abuse, exploitation and violence is, self-evidently, far higher. Let us even leave out of the equation the fact that, as the former Archbishop of Canterbury pointed out in a national newspaper over the weekend, doctors report that as many as half of unaccompanied African boys in the EU require treatment for sexually transmitted diseases—diseases almost certainly acquired from sexual exploitation during their passage to Europe. Let us also forget about those children we do not know about who have died cold and lonely deaths in Europe or the Mediterranean, driven from their homes and separated from their parents and loved ones, usually through no fault of their own.

Let the House instead reflect on our history in this, the greatest migration challenge in my lifetime, and on how we have behaved in the past. In that respect, the contribution that this country has always made to doing the right thing—to providing a home for children who have been driven from theirs by war and conflict—is unmatched. Exceptional times call for exceptional measures. That was the case with the Kindertransport programme, which benefited those who would undoubtedly have lost their lives in the holocaust had this country not acted in the run-up to the second world war. It was the case with those who fled Uganda after Idi Amin decided to expel them. It was the case with those who fled Vietnam and Iran in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. But now, apparently, either we should not act or we cannot act, using our heads as well as our hearts; to do so would simply encourage more children to make the dangerous journey to Europe. So says the Minister, and I accept that he has a point. That point does not, however, answer the point that these children are already in Europe, and that they are at risk as I stand here and speak to the House.

I do not doubt for a moment the Minister’s desire, and that of the Government, to do the right thing. I do doubt, based on what I have heard in the House this evening, that that is what we are proposing to do. As I have said, these children are already in Europe. They are alone, and far from their families. They are cold, frightened, hungry and frequently without help or access to those who might help or protect them. Their lives are miserable and brutish, and at least half of them have experienced or seen violence that we can only dream of in our nightmares—or, rather, hope that we do not.

Of course, the announcement last week, welcome as it is, that we will take 3,000 children from Syria and elsewhere who have not already made the dangerous journey to Europe was a good one, in the best traditions of recognising the obligations that this country enjoys in times such as the present—obligations that were recognised in January, and to which the announcement adds. That is no comfort to the children who are already in Europe, who have fled war and conflict that have torn their lives apart, and who need our help now. Those children are in Calais; they are on the Greek-Macedonian border; they are at the Gare du Nord in Paris and Midi station in Brussels; and they are sleeping rough in Berlin, Rome, Skopje and Vienna. Tonight they will sleep in fear, and tomorrow they will wake to the hopelessness to which their position exposes them. Today, in this House, we can do something. We cannot solve all their problems, remove all their troubles, or take from their consciousness the memory of the horrors that they have witnessed and endured, but we can do something.

That something is not to disagree with their Lordships on this amendment. That is the something that I can and will do, by joining the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in the Opposition Lobby this evening. This is not an easy decision, or one that I have taken lightly, but it is the right decision, made of a conviction that I have reached after searching my conscience, as I pray other right hon. and hon. Members will search theirs. The House should support the Lords in their amendment and vote against the motion to disagree.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank hon. Members throughout the House for their generous support as I make a phased return to parliamentary life. I rise to speak to Ali Dubs’s amendment 87 to bring to the UK just 3,000 of the 26,000 unaccompanied child refugees in Europe. Although I also support Lords amendments to provide other protections for asylum seekers, others will speak on those.

I speak on behalf of many hundreds of people in Bristol West who have written to me, urging me to help refugees. Many have also donated time, money and practical help in camps and in Bristol, which is a city of sanctuary. I am standing up to speak tonight because this matters more to me than I can possibly say—more than obeying the instructions of my doctor to take more rest.

I understand that there has been uproar in some quarters about a speech made in Saturday’s “Shakespeare Live!” by Sir Ian McKellen. To my mind, it was the high point of the night. Nothing else came close to the potency of the language, the power and the feeling of the delivery and the relevance today of Shakespeare’s
message, written 400 or so years ago. It was given as a speech by Sir Thomas More, sheriff of London during Henry VIII's reign, addressing rioters who protested against foreigners. He called on them to

“Imagine that you see the wretched strangers, Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage, Plodding to th’ ports and coasts for transportation”— I am no Ian McKellen. That is a vivid description of the current situation for so many children, young people and adults fleeing war today. He asks them to consider what they would do if they were refugees, which country would give them harbour, whether they would go

“to France or Flanders,
To any German province, Spain or Portugal”,
and how they would feel if they were met there by

“a nation of such barbarous temper”.

If the worst happened and our children were alone, fleeing war and persecution, would not every one of us hope that they would receive safe harbour in France or Flanders, Germany, Spain or Portugal? We must support amendment 87 to protect other people's children.

In Bristol West, my caseworkers and I are dealing with many of today’s families torn apart by war—with children who are scarred and parents who are desperate. This is one such story. Mrs Djane's family home in Mali was attacked by al-Qaeda in December 2012 because her husband was a Christian. Her husband and daughter were shot dead in front of her sons. She was beaten and left unconscious. Her sons believed that she was dead and fled the family home, taking nothing. When she recovered consciousness, her sons were gone and her husband and daughter were dead. She assumed that her sons had been killed or kidnapped by al-Qaeda, and she fled to the UK. On arrival, she was taken from the airport by a man who imprisoned and raped her repeatedly until she escaped from him approximately 20 days later. The police took her to the trafficking charity Unseen, which put her in touch with the Red Cross to see whether her sons could be traced.

Mrs Djane claimed asylum and was granted refugee status, but she spent the next two years searching for her sons. She finally found them in a border town between Mali and Guinea. They are living with strangers who have been kind enough to take them, but who do not have the means to care for them. Her youngest son tragically died last year from an infected snake bite. That death, the murder of her husband and daughter, the loss of her sons and her own imprisonment and rapes devastated Mrs Djane. She suffers from severe depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and panic attacks. We are supporting her with applications for her sons to join her, and I hope for a decision soon.

The amendment we can pass tonight will help other children who are separated from their parents and fleeing war and persecution. We must help them before it is too late. Vulnerable children are going missing now from camps across Europe. I dread to think what they are suffering, whether alone or in the hands of traffickers. We would be failing in our duties if we did not show our leadership, and meet our legal obligations and moral imperatives to those refugees and asylum seekers.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that, although the Government’s position shows tough, the fairest and most humanitarian thing to do is to take children from Syria, which is a thoroughly unsafe country, but not from a safe country like France, as that would simply encourage the people traffickers
and smugglers, and so lead to more and more misery? The Government’s position is fair, humanitarian and right.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, but frankly the situation is just not safe. It is only fair to say that we can do both—we can take children from those countries and the children who are already on their way. They are at risk. I urge us to imagine how we would feel if they were our children.

We need to do more to prepare the welcome for refugees so that they are not put in a situation where their neighbours resent them. But the time is right for a better informed public debate about how we treat refugees and asylum seekers overall. That debate should include consideration of allowing asylum seekers to work sooner and of how we can prepare local communities and public services for new arrivals. It will be difficult, and there will be strong feelings and major challenges, but we cannot let what is difficult be the enemy of what is right. Protecting refugees, and child refugees in particular, is right. It is a human right that we would expect if we or our children were fleeing conflict or persecution. It is a human rights obligation that we should be proud to honour, and in the best ways we possibly can. It says something wonderful about our place in the world when we do that. That is why I am pleased to announce this evening, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, that we will be holding a public inquiry into this issue later this year.

I also believe that there needs to be a wider, enlightened and respectful debate about how we manage migration in general. That debate needs to take place in our parties and in the public sphere. I will be active in my own party, and wherever else I can be, to listen to and respect people’s concerns, but also to help to develop well-informed policy and practice, so that we can give refugees, and children in particular, the welcome that they deserve.

I return to Shakespeare’s words, and the decision that hon. Members will make tonight. We can do our part for 3,000 unaccompanied children. We can help to protect those children, who are the same age as our own children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces. These are children who have struggled across the continent unprotected, and perhaps been abused along the way, who are hungry and in desperate need of our protection. Our leadership in our own constituencies can help to ensure that they are not met with the “barbarous temper” that Shakespeare describes and that I fear many of those children are already meeting along their way from people traffickers and others seeking to exploit them. We can welcome them with warmth and care. They will need more, and we must plan, but I hope and believe that we have it in us to manage that. Three thousand children is fewer than five per constituency. Surely we in this House can manage to support our local authorities to find foster carers, psychological support and education for five children in each of our constituencies.

As each hon. Member goes through the Lobby, I urge them to think of this. Today, they could be helping the child they have not met but who in 20 years’ time may be the doctor who saves their own child’s life, the midwife who helps deliver their grandchild, the teacher who fires up that grandchild’s ambition, the scientist who helps to find a cure for asthma, diabetes or even cancer, the engineer who finds better ways to make vehicles run on clean energy sources, the mechanic who keeps trains going, or the care assistant who will look after one of us when we are old. All of those people are children today. Some are our own children, or our children’s friends, but some are waiting in a refugee camp or the back of a lorry, or living in a ditch or worse. They are waiting for us to help them with our vote tonight.

When we are first elected, every one of us hopes that we will make a difference—that our presence here will mean something and be a force for good. Tonight we get to do all that by showing our support for Lords amendment 87, the Alf Dubs amendment to protect unaccompanied child refugees.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind Members that we have to conclude the debate at 9.26 pm, and there is a very high level of interest.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), and welcome her back to the House.

I have followed this Bill throughout its progress, in Committee and on Report. Today, I will talk about two points. This evening we have heard a lot of talk about the migration crisis that we are seeing across Europe. As a Kent MP, I have seen those troubles more acutely, because of our proximity to the Calais camps. Obviously we have all seen the troubles that have happened across Europe, and find them devastating.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the new national dispersal system announced by the Minister last week will lead to a much better, fairer and more equitable distribution of needy people around the country?

Kelly Tolhurst: Yes, I support the Government’s incentives, but I also support the measures that will be a direct outcome of the implementation of this Immigration Bill, which will help counties like mine in the dispersal of some of the unaccompanied asylum seekers we are seeing come to our county.

Last week, I was at the Council of Europe, where the EU migrant crisis was debated. It is interesting today to hear a debate about facilities and the safety of refugees and unaccompanied minors across Europe. Last week in the Council of Europe there was some criticism of EU countries: there was a recognition that they were not always fulfilling their obligations. I have heard a lot of concern about what our European neighbours are doing and I agree, especially after listening to the debate tonight, that we need to raise our concerns with our European partners about the safety of individuals in their countries. I am proud to say that the UK has been meeting its obligations, through its financial commitments and by relocating refugees. We are currently fulfilling the obligations we have committed ourselves to.
On the call to relocate 3,000 children from Europe, I want to make it clear to this House that we are already doing certain things. In Kent, we have received over 1,000 unaccompanied child refugees in the past 12 months. That is not to be taken lightly. We are doing our bit. My county has seen significant financial pressures, which I mention because Kent has a shortage of social workers and foster carers. My concern, as a constituency MP and a proud person of Kent, is to ensure we have the right facilities, the right professionals and the right funding to support the children from my county who are already struggling. It is right that we look after the young people who find themselves in our country after making such a dangerous journey, but we should not underestimate the significant issues these young people face. They may have had traumatic experiences and we need to consider the cost to the county of Kent. Kent has asked other parts of the country to help us in this battle, but we have not received too many offers of support.

The Government are taking additional steps, with the resettlement scheme, which is focused on the most vulnerable children in the middle east and north Africa, and the £10 million fund. I support the Government and I will be voting with them on the Bill.

Helen Whately: As a fellow Kent MP, I, too, am well aware of the enormous burden on Kent in trying to look after many hundreds of unaccompanied child asylum seekers, and how badly it needs other parts of the country to help. Only a handful have been taken on by other councils. Does my hon. Friend agree that Opposition Members, as well as calling for more children to be taken in, should be calling on their areas to take their fair share of unaccompanied child asylum seekers?

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely. My hon. Friend knows that over the past 12 months we have had significant representation from our county council with regard to the pressures it is under, not only in dealing with the domestic situation but the issue we are debating today. I absolutely believe that hon. Members from other parts of the country should encourage their councils to help the counties in the south-east.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Lady is aware that the Scottish Government offered to take, at the very least, Scotland’s fair share of refugees. Indeed, the Scottish Government have called for the UK Government to take more, so that our fair share will be greater. Does she accept that many of the unaccompanied children in Europe are trying to get here because their parents or other relatives are already here, and that being reunited with their family is the best option for them?

Kelly Tolhurst: I absolutely accept that young people are coming to this country to be reunited with their families. As I have said, Kent has already taken more than 1,000 of them.

8.15 pm

The amendment to allow asylum seekers unrestricted access to the labour market after six months would completely undermine the current system and the measures in the Bill. Last year, I visited the refugee camp in Calais with my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Gravesham (Mr Holloway). I spoke with a number of young people who wanted to come to the UK. They told me that they were coming to the UK to work and even told me exactly who they would be working for. However, they would be working illegally. In my mind, therefore, a move to allow asylum seekers unrestricted access to work would do nothing but encourage more young vulnerable adults or minors to come to the UK.

Stella Creasy: When I was first elected, an Opposition Member told me that there were two divisions in the House of Commons: one between left and right; and one between those who, as a matter of course in their constituency, have to deal with the UK Border Agency and those who do not. The hon. Lady is making a very compelling argument about some of the problems in our immigration and asylum system. Why then does she wish to penalise the young vulnerable people she talks about by not supporting them tonight and by not saying that the problems she identifies are to do with politicians? Let us not penalise these young people. Let us stand with them tonight and get our act together.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am a constituency MP and I represent the people of Rochester and Strood. I have had a lot of representations, over an extended period of time, about what people have seen in my constituency and across the county of Kent. I represent what a large proportion of people in my constituency believe on this matter.

To allow asylum seekers unrestricted access to our labour market after six months would encourage more young men to make their way to the camps and make the perilous journey across the channel. Personally, I do not wish to support that or be a party to it.

I am sure my hon. Friends will say I have spoken enough already, but I would just like to say that I believe the Bill, as it stands and as I saw it in Committee, is right. I think it is a great step forward for the Government. It addresses what many people in this country have identified as issues and concerns for them. I will therefore be supporting the Government this evening.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): In September 2015, Save the Children released a paper called “The extreme vulnerability of unaccompanied child refugees in Europe - a proposal for managing their relocation to the UK”. The paper charted the journey of unaccompanied child refugees to Europe: the war, conflict and violence in their home countries; and the abuse, exploitation, physical and sexual violence experienced during their long journeys to Europe, which often lasted months and years. Even if that was the end of the horror story, surely that would be enough fully to justify Lord Dubs’s amendment. In fact, it provides more than enough justification for us to say that we will take our fair share of responsibility for providing not just immediate aid and protection but the stability, education, support and care that these children require when arriving in Europe, bearing the scars of such dreadful experiences. But tragically the horror story does not end there. The scale of the crisis and the lack of co-ordination and solidarity between European countries mean that the arrival here of these children is barely the beginning of their troubles.
It is important to remind ourselves just how grim the experience in Europe is. The hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) did that powerfully earlier in the debate. In its paper, Save the Children looked at migrants and refugees on the Greek islands, in Calais and in Hungary and Macedonia. In Greece, it reported a lack of basic services and adequate shelter, toilets, clean water, health facilities and safe spaces, which put children and women at high risk of sexual harassment, physical violence and trafficking.

Unaccompanied minors are at particular risk. Save the Children reported “a lack of adequate sanitation facilities which means that women and children have to share toilets with men or are forced to defecate in the open. . . Unaccompanied minors, once in the hands of the authorities, are sometimes placed in detention with adults, again exposing them to risks of sexual and physical harassment. . . Children interviewed recounted stories of war and death and described the terrifying journey crossing the sea to Greece. Parents reported symptoms like bedwetting, nightmares, fear and extreme attachment. Most of the children had been out of school for years and have a distorted view of what constitutes ‘normality’. Food distributions are limited and erratic . . . whilst more vulnerable individuals . . . often end up un served . . . There is limited primary health care coverage across migrant and refugee sites”.

Finally, as a shocking matter of fact, Save the Children recorded that in Athens, in their attempt to leave Greece, women and children sleep in squares and parks that are frequented by drug dealers, traffickers and prostitution rings. During the period of the assessment, a 10-year-old boy was raped in one of these parks.

The fact that this is happening in Europe is not down to one or two European countries. It is a collective failure by all European states, and it is our collective obligation to fix it. As has been argued:

“Under specific criteria and safeguards, relocation is one of the few viable long-term solutions for the protection of the most vulnerable unaccompanied children”. —[Official Report, 8 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 864.]

The need for such a scheme is every bit as great now as it was then, as recent reports by Save the Children and so many other organisations—too many to mention—have shown. I know that many hon. Members present tonight have seen these awful places at first hand and will probably share some of those experiences this evening during the debate.

When I read those reports, and having seen at first hand the situation in Calais and Dunkirk, I am furious—furious about what is happening to these children, and furious also that there is any doubt about whether we will stand by Lord Dubs’s amendment this evening, and I am at a loss to understand why that should be in doubt. A strange phrase has been dropped into the argument recently by the Government—that we need to use our heads as well as our hearts. With all respect to the Minister, who I know generally chooses his words carefully, I find that expression a little bit patronising.

This is not some hare-brained plan dreamed up by well-intentioned but misguided amateurs on the back of an envelope. It is a carefully thought through proposal based on years of professional experience from experts in the field, incorporating carefully considered criteria. It was a modest calculation of our fair share, based on circumstances at the time. It is not those who support the relocation of 3,000 children from Europe who need to start using their heads. On the contrary, it is the sceptics and cynics who need to start using their eyes and ears so as to understand the full horror, extent and duration of what is going on in our continent.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We have a proud tradition going back centuries of taking in refugees. In particular, before and during the war we took large numbers of Jewish children in. Why can we not honour that commitment now?

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely. As we heard earlier, Lord Dubs was one of those who benefited from that very scheme.

I find other arguments against this very modest proposal equally disagreeable. Some have argued that we must not provide an incentive for others to come. Like the shadow Minister, I cannot believe for a second that any hon. Members are really saying that we should not rescue children from abuse and exploitation lest that create an incentive. If that is “using their head”, I have serious concerns for the sanity of those hon. Members. But if they are saying that someone else should rescue those children from abuse and exploitation, not only does the argument about incentives fall to pieces, but the question arises: if not us, then who? If the UK says “Leave it to Greece and Italy”, why should anyone else come to their aid not just in the short term, but in the medium and long term?

Even a child can understand that tens—or almost certainly now hundreds—of thousands of unaccompanied kids shared between 28 members states, although hugely challenging, is infinitely more workable than the same number left as the long-term responsibility of two or three countries. This country should not wash its hands of its responsibilities; it should roll up its sleeves and play its part.

The Government have again tried to win the day with their well-worn trump card—that we should focus on those in the conflict region. In these debates I have always welcomed what deserves to be welcomed. The support provided in the region in the form of aid has been incredibly welcome, as has the resettlement of vulnerable persons scheme and the new proposals for children, but the House of Lords passed this amendment by more than 100 votes, fully aware of all those other Government schemes, including proposals—in principle—to resettle children.

Their lordships were absolutely right to resist the attempt by the Government to set up a false choice. There are refugees in Europe, including children, who are every bit as much in need of our support as those in the conflict region. It is not a question of one or the other. Showing leadership in support of those in the region does not entitle Government to abdicate responsibility for children in Europe.

If we think about what is happening to these children on our doorstep, I shudder to think what it says about this Government and Parliament if we do not support the amendment, but what a positive message if we do. From whatever angle we approach this question, using our head or our heart; from a perspective of faith or of simple human decency; from human rights or common sense, there is only one answer. Lord Dubs’s amendment has the full support of SNP Members.
**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): We have heard some passionate speeches about unimaginably difficult conditions, but we talk as if the United Kingdom is the only country capable of doing something about the crisis. We forget that the United Kingdom taxpayer has given more than the rest of the European Union together to help Syrian refugees. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that if these circumstances existed in the United Kingdom, our social services would have taken care of those children? Does he not think that other European countries could be doing a rather better job of looking after those children who happen to be within their borders?

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I do not disagree with very much that the hon. Gentleman, my colleague on the Home Affairs Committee, says. I agree that other European countries must step up to the plate. The Save the Children proposal is based on a calculation of what our fair share as a European Union member would be: it was 11.5% of the total number of unaccompanied children at that time. It fully comprehends that other EU member states have to take their share.

I shall move on now to amendment 60, which gives us the chance to protect yet another vulnerable group, overseas domestic workers. Such workers frequently come from backgrounds of extreme poverty and are dependent on their employer for both accommodation and wages. They are often women with limited formal education. Significant numbers of them suffer from mental illness resulting from past traumas, and many have learned or have been conditioned to distrust authorities.

Again, the Lords amendment is modest. The Government asked for an independent review by James Ewins QC. All we are asking for is that Mr Ewins’s recommendations be fully implemented. The Government have moved part of the way, which is very welcome, including what the Minister said today, which is encouraging, but they still have to move further. Their insistence on going through the national referral mechanism as a condition of leave beyond the initial six months is, in our view, wrong, and although provision of information is right and welcome, it is not sufficient in itself.

As well as providing a legal right to change employer, we can and must make that right one that can realistically be exercised by all who are at risk, as Mr Ewins suggested. The right should be dependent not on going through the slow and possibly quite intimidating gamble of the national referral mechanism, but simply on notifying the Home Office, as was said earlier in the debate. As no one will employ an overseas domestic worker with a few weeks or months left on their visa, Mr Ewins was clear that extensions had to be available to all, whether they were going through the mechanism or not, for up to two years beyond the original visa. That was what he described as “the minimum required to give effective protection to those overseas domestic workers who are being abused while in the UK”.

That is the least we should deliver.

The SNP also fully supports amendment 84, which moves us closer to an effective 28-day time limit on immigration detention. The reasons we need such a limit have been set out at length in recent debates, including an excellent Backbench Business debate, in which Members from both sides of the House spoke with one voice in support of the conclusions reached by the all-party parliamentary groups on migration and refugees. Compulsory judicial oversight is also welcome. Often those with the most to gain from a legal challenge are the least likely to understand or to be able to access judicial processes, whether because of language, educational or mental health issues.

With due respect, the Government’s amendment in lieu is a non-starter. A single, guaranteed bail hearing every six months is simply not an acceptable level of judicial oversight for SNP Members. It is not a worthwhile time limit in any sense of the word, and it seeks to shift the burden of proof back on to the detainee. For these reasons, the Government’s amendment in lieu is simply not in the ballpark of what we would consider appropriate.

8.30 pm

The SNP supports without hesitation that part of amendment 85 that excludes absolutely the detention of pregnant women. Once again, this is a modest proposal. As with overseas domestic workers, all we are calling for is that the independent recommendations from a Government-initiated review be fully implemented: this time, the excellent recommendations of Stephen Shaw. They are recommendations that once again mirror the earlier findings of the all-party groups’ inquiry into detention. The Shaw review found that “detention has an incontrovertibly deleterious effect on the health of pregnant women and their unborn children” and therefore concluded that such detention must end. The Government’s amendment in lieu leaves them with an unacceptable power to continue to detain pregnant women for up to a week or to repeatedly detain them, compromising the health and safety of mother and child. Given the Home Office’s general record on detention, we take assurances that the powers would be used exceptionally with a healthy dose of scepticism. The Government have not gone far enough.

Stephen Shaw also recommended the introduction of a presumption against detention for several categories of other vulnerable people. A number of groups have expressed concern that the proposed “adults at risk” policy might see the current standards protecting vulnerable people reduced, rather than increased, as the Shaw review proposes. For example, existing safeguards for vulnerable people in detention include case reviews by the Helen Bamber Foundation and Freedom from Torture. As those groups understand it, the proposed “adults at risk” policy does not refer to those two organisations. I look to the Minister for assurances that the existing safeguards for vulnerable people through current policies and judicial decisions will not be reduced from their existing level.

In conclusion, we have made clear our outright opposition to the Bill from the start. These Lords amendments have the ability to add a thin silver lining to an otherwise very dark Bill. I pay tribute to the fantastic organisations that have shone a light on the many problems and dangers lurking in the Bill, in particular to the organisations and volunteers working on the ground across Europe. Without them, the situation facing many of the children we are debating would be even worse. They have played their part; it is now time for Members of Parliament to play their much simpler role.
**Richard Fuller:** It is a pleasure to follow the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I shall address my comments not to the substantive area of debate, amendment 87, but to other Lords amendments. As a result, I will try to limit my contribution, given that many people wish to speak to amendment 87.

Two issues of particular importance to me are, first, amendment 84, on the time limit for immigration detention, and the Government’s proposal, and secondly, amendment 85, on the detention of pregnant women. On amendment 84, I listened carefully to the Minister earlier and to the announcements by the Home Office last week, and on balance, notwithstanding the limitations just mentioned, the combination of the changes, along with the opportunity for Stephen Shaw to review the time limit, as part of his inquiry, in 12 to 18 months, gives me comfort that the Government, though they have not gone as far as I would have wished, have done enough for me to be generally supportive of their approach and certainly not to vote against them.

Unfortunately, on the detention of pregnant women, it is a different matter. Without a doubt, this is a big and welcome change, but for me it is a matter of principle: we should never detain a pregnant woman when we have the choice not to. It was January 2012 when I asked my first question in Parliament about the detention of pregnant women. I only regret that it took me 18 months as a Member to ask those questions—that it took me 18 months to become aware of a vast estate of incarceration and detention that had built up under the last Labour Government and continued under the coalition, and was detaining people in our name for no other reason than that they came here and had not proven their case to stay. Each of those many people—not just pregnant women, but others who were victims of torture and rape, as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) mentioned—should have had a better and more humane alternative.

To those groups such as Medical Justice, Women for Refugee Women, the Refugee Council and so many others that have tried in the intervening period to persuade the Home Office to move its policy away from the default of detention and a culture of disbelief to something that is understanding of each individual circumstance, the Government’s announcements over the last few weeks are tremendously welcome. They do not go far enough, however.

I can assure the Minister that we will hold him and the Government to account in respect of all the words he has said and all the frameworks he has put in place to ensure that the objectives of the all-party groups in their inquiry into the use of immigration detention are achieved. There is a better alternative to detention: it is called case management, and it means letting people know what their rights are and not leaving them in the community with no one to talk to for months after their sentence. We must engage with these people so they know that they can remain in this country if they can prove their entitlement, and we must provide them with the best possible support and advice to make that case. As I said, we will hold the Minister to account for that.

The campaign had a hashtag, as is common these days; it was called #setherfree. I regret that I cannot say to the women in Yarl’s Wood today that as a result of these changes they will be free. My hope is that we have started to change the direction, and that we are starting the process of taking that valuable phrase “asylum seeker” out of the gutter where it was left, and putting it where it should be as a place of honour—not for the individual, but for the country to which they come to claim that status. This is a judgment about us as much as it is a judgment about the people who come to this country. Let us take this step forward, but let us pressure the Government to do more.

**Yvette Cooper:** I welcome the speech made by the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and pay tribute to the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips), whose powerful speech must have been difficult to make. It was a great pleasure, too, to hear the voice of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) back in the Chamber this evening.

I shall focus my remarks on amendment 87, proposed in the House of Lords by Lord Alf Dubs. Some 95,000 children and teenagers are alone in Europe as a result of the refugee crisis—four times more than Save the Children thought the figure was for unaccompanied child refugees. This amendment asks Britain to help only 3,000 of them; and that is all. It will not solve the problem, but it will mean we are doing our bit. That is why I think the Government are so wrong to say no. We should do our bit just as we did 70 years ago when Britain supported the Kindertransport that brought Lord Alf Dubs to Britain and saved his life. It had cross-party support at that time. Those survivors of the Kindertransport are asking us to help child refugees again today.

The reason why this amendment is needed is that there are so many children who are disappearing, suffering and dying on our continent today, and other countries do not have the capacity to cope with that alone. This House has the power in its hands to vote for this amendment today.

We should be clear that we all support what the Government have done in providing aid for the region. We all support the 0.7% of GDP that goes in aid, and we also support how much has been done to help the areas affected by the Syrian refugee crisis in particular. We know, however, that aid in the regions is not enough, particularly when people are fleeing and need sanctuary, and it is not enough when we need to help children. The lone child and teenage refugees are hugely vulnerable. Thousands are sleeping rough in Europe tonight because there are simply not the places, the sanctuaries and the children’s centres that we need to give them shelter.

**Tom Elliott:** The right hon. Lady makes an important point about the number of refugees and the number of young people who are in Europe. The figure of 26,000 has been mentioned several times. I would be interested to know how the figure of 3,000 came about. Is there an explanation for that, and what criteria will be used to bring the 3,000 children here?

**Yvette Cooper:** The 3,000 figure was proposed by Save the Children, and at the time when it thought that 26,000 children in Europe were alone. We now know that the figure is much higher, and that 95,000 children are alone and at risk across Europe. It would be for the Government to work with agencies such as Save the Children to...
establish the criteria; I think that priority should be given to those with families in Britain who can care for them, but that is something that we can debate.

It is right for us to do our bit to help. Children are sleeping rough tonight because countries across Europe simply do not have the capacity to provide that help. According to UNICEF and Save the Children, 2,000 children are alone in northern Greece, but there are fewer than 500 places for them, and those places are full. In Italy, the agencies found that girls were being exploited by older men, and that half the boys already had sexually transmitted diseases. In Calais, I met 11 and 12-year-olds who were suffering from scabies and bronchitis, and who were sleeping in tents with adult men.

This is the challenge that Europe faces: teenage girls being trafficked into prostitution, teenage boys being abused and raped, children with hypothermia and pneumonia, children who are traumatised because they have lost family along the way, and children who are locked up in detention centres because there are no other places for them to go to—again, often alongside adult men. A Syrian teenager who came to Parliament last week to meet Alf Dubs told me that he had fled the violence and fighting to reach family members who were here in Britain, but the abuse and the suffering that he saw and experienced as a refugee alone in Europe were worse than the violence that he had left behind.

**Andy Slaughter:** As always, my right hon. Friend is speaking passionately. I was at that meeting, and the eyewitness accounts were extremely telling.

**Yvette Cooper:** The Minister is right to say that we should be doing more—I think that it is shocking how little child protection the French authorities have put in place around Calais, and that we need countries across the EU to do far more. There are fewer than 500 places for them, and those places are full. In Italy, the agencies found that girls were being trafficked into prostitution, teenage boys being abused and raped, children with hypothermia and pneumonia, children who are traumatised because they have lost family along the way, and children who are locked up in detention centres because there are no other places for them to go to—again, often alongside adult men. A Syrian teenager who came to Parliament last week to meet Alf Dubs told me that he had fled the violence and fighting to reach family members who were here in Britain, but the abuse and the suffering that he saw and experienced as a refugee alone in Europe were worse than the violence that he had left behind.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. Let me make my position clear. I think that other countries should be doing more—I think that it is shocking how little child protection the French authorities have put in place around Calais, and that we need countries across Europe to do far more—but how can we urge them to do more if we are refusing to do anything to help and give sanctuary to those child refugees?

**James Brokenshire:** The right hon. Lady is making an important point about family reunification. Does she accept that the £10 million fund that we are providing through the Department for International Development is intended to help Save the Children and others to support the very thing that I think she is rightly calling for—stronger family reunification, whether in the United Kingdom or in Europe more generally—and that the UK is playing an important part in that respect?

**Yvette Cooper:** The Minister is right to say that we should be supporting family reunion, but, as I said to him in an intervention, that is simply not working in Calais. He and his Department cannot even tell me how many “take charge” requests the Home Office has received. We know that only a dozen of the children from Calais have actually arrived in the first place. [Interruption.] The Minister says that it is 24 now. He has already said that 24 children have been accepted for transfer, but only half of those children have actually arrived in Britain, because the process is simply taking too long.

The Minister is, of course, right to say that we should be trying to assist family reunion from Italy and Greece, but the £10 million that he has announced is funding for charities. It is true that charities can do great work, and they are already doing important work in Calais to help children there. Ultimately, however, it is not enough to ask charities to help if the French and British Governments are refusing to do their bit to speed up the system and provide the legal sanctuary that those children need, and the same applies to the children in Italy and Greece.

Although charities can do great work, they cannot provide the necessary authorities, the legal foster care, the statutory children’s homes, and the statutory child protection. It is Governments who need to do that: the Government in Greece, the Government in Italy, the Government in France, and the Government here in Britain, who should also be doing their bit.

**James Brokenshire:** This is the last time I shall intervene on the right hon. Lady. I do not want to interrupt her flow. On that last point, does she accept that the Government’s offer to put 75 extra people on the ground in Greece, including specialists with the ability to support the Greek Government, demonstrates the fact that the UK Government are playing their role in supporting Greece to do the things that she is calling for?

**Yvette Cooper:** The Minister knows that I have welcomed many of the things that he has announced at every stage. I welcomed the announcement that the Government made in January, for example, just as I welcomed its re-announcement this week. It is sad that, at each stage, they have had to be pressurised into making those announcements, but I welcome them nevertheless. However, the International Rescue Committee and other agencies are saying that the lack of sufficient staff in Greece and Italy means that there are hugely long delays in processing the cases. With regard to the idea that those 75 people are going to make all the difference, that is still not an alternative to Britain doing its bit to provide sanctuary as well.

The UNHCR reports that there have been instances of “children engaging in survival sex to pay smugglers to continue their journey, either because they have run out money, or because they have been robbed.”

Europol has warned that children, young women and lone refugees are being targeted for exploitation because there is not sufficient protection when they arrive, and that 10,000 child and teenage refugees have disappeared, often into the arms of criminal gangs. This is modern slavery of the kind that the whole House united to condemn just 12 months ago when we passed the new legislation. It is the same modern slavery that the Home Secretary described as being “an affront to the dignity and humanity of every one of us”.

The House has the chance today to protect the dignity and humanity of 3,000 children and to stop them falling into modern slavery in Europe, so why is the Home Office still refusing to act?
I want to deal with the Minister’s points in turn. First, he says that we are doing our bit by helping children and families in the middle east and north Africa instead. I welcome what we are doing there. As I understand it, the figure of 3,000 will involve children and families, and not simply children alone, because as a result of UNICEF’s advice, the Government have broadened the scope to include children and families. However, this is not an either/or. Just because we are protecting and helping some of those from outside Europe does not mean that we cannot do our bit to help those in Europe as well. Some of the children who are in the detention centres in Greece and the tents in Calais and who are sleeping rough on the streets of Naples now face risks that are greater than those they faced when they were closer to home.

Secondly, the Minister said earlier that this was effectively a matter for the other European countries where the children are right now. The problem is, however, that Italy and Greece are overwhelmed. Germany and Sweden have done much to take in unaccompanied children, but they are struggling to find guardians or places in children’s homes and hostels for more. If we want other countries to do more, we also have to be prepared to do our bit. Of course it is not easy. There would have to be proper support, protection and safeguarding, and robust checks would also be needed. Some of the children and teenagers will have profound and complex needs as a result of the trauma and abuse that they have experienced.

It would also be wrong simply to leave this to Kent to cope with alone. I have had local councils and councillors from right across the country contacting me to say that they want to do more to help. I have heard from organisations such as Home for Good, which represents foster families who want to do more to help, as well as from community groups and faith organisations across the country who think that we should act. We especially have a responsibility to those who have family here. I have raised with the Minister my concerns about the failure to apply the Dublin agreement to Calais and about the number of children who are still stuck in the cold and the mud there: 157 cases have been identified by the U.K., yet so few have actually come to Britain. We have been raising that with Ministers over many months.

The Minister pointed out the need to do proper safeguarding checks and assessments and to investigate the families that reside here. He is of course right that safeguarding is necessary, but why is he not thinking about safeguarding them in Calais? They are there right now, in tents, at risk of huge abuse, at risk of gangs, at risk of trafficking, and at risk of taking crazy risks, because that is what teenagers do. Lives have been lost as a result. In January, a 15-year-old was killed in the back of a lorry in Dunkirk. His sister lives in west London. In March, a 17-year-old was killed in the wheel arch of a lorry in Oxfordshire. His uncle lives in Manchester. In April, a seven-year-old nearly suffocated in a lorry in Leicester. That he did not was only because an aid worker in Calais had given him a mobile phone and he was able to send a text message saying that he did not have any oxygen. The aid worker was able to alert the police, and they traced him and his older brother, who would otherwise have suffocated in a lorry. No matter how many times the Minister tells us that it is, the system is not working. He also claims that we are providing support to charities and financial support to the region, but it is not enough. It is not an alternative to Governments acting and providing legal help.

The Minister said that if we take child refugees from Europe, that will encourage more to come, but that argument is deeply wrong. Few of the child refugees in Europe have come because they want to travel to Britain. Many are trying to reach family, which will not change whether or not we take more child refugees. Many are just trying to find somewhere safe anywhere in Europe and that will not change either. Frankly, many do not know where they are going or what they are doing. They may have been trafficked or separated from family along the way.

Action on smugglers, border checks, working with Turkey, a strategy for Libya, or providing alternative safe and legal routes—all of those things may make a difference in preventing people from making a perilous journey in the first place. However, whether Britain takes 3,000 of the 95,000 children who are already in Europe simply will not make a difference to the number who try to come. These children have arrived, they are already here, and they need sanctuary and support. The danger is that the Government are actually saying that it is better to leave them to face those risks and that we should be prepared to abandon thousands of children to a life of exploitation, prostitution and abuse, because that somehow might prevent other children from getting on a boat. That is immoral, because they are children and not only should they have shelter, but they should be in school, where many of them have not been for years. Many of the refugees are a similar age to my children, who are in school and doing exams. It is an age at which children need support and help, not to be turned away.

When the Kindertransport legislation was passed in Parliament, MPs of all parties supported Britain’s leadership in helping child refugees. Alongside Alf Dubs, other Kindertransport survivors, such as Rabbi Harry Jacoby, who came across on one of the last boats out of Amsterdam, and Sir Erich Reich, have spoken out to urge us to do more now. All of them have joined with the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Church of England, the House of Lords, Save the Children, Refugee Council, Citizens UK, the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, local government, community groups and faith groups to urge MPs to do the right thing today. We are rightly proud of what the Kindertransport did and of the cross-party support in Parliament, but will today’s vote on child refugees be a similar source of pride for future generations or a source of shame?

We rightly commemorate the Kindertransport and the life of Sir Nicholas Winton, who rescued hundreds of Jewish child refugees. His picture is now on the Royal Mail’s first-class stamp. When it was launched, the Home Secretary called him “an enduring example of the difference that good people can make even in the darkest of times.” She called him a hero of the 20th century. He was. We need heroes for the 21st century, too. It is no good just congratulating ourselves on Britain’s past if we are not prepared to show the same support and sanctuary today. It is no good telling children the parable of the Good Samaritan and then saying that we do not need heroes for the 21st century. It is no good just saying that we do not need heroes for the 21st century. It is no good just saying that we do not need heroes for the 21st century. It is no good just saying that we do not need heroes for the 21st century.

[ Yvette Cooper ]
and be disappointed about how we voted today. Let us all, from all parts of this House, stand together and support the Dubs amendment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is just over half an hour to go and I see probably a dozen people trying to get in to speak. There is no formal time limit, but if each colleague speaks for no more than three minutes, a lot will get in. Otherwise, a lot of people will be disappointed.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I shall endeavour to live up to that, Mr Speaker. Like Save the Children, I believe that every child and young person should live in a supportive, protective and caring environment that promotes their full potential. But this Bill, on which I served in Committee, is about the wisest use of resources, and I support the Minister tonight in his position on amendment 87, which is about how best to help unaccompanied children. We all seek to help them, so the question is: how?

We have two large questions about resources before us tonight. The first is: do we help people better in the region or through Europe and, within that, which is more unsafe? The second is: how do we balance such action with supporting children who are already in need? The key point that the Minister has set out, on which I support him, is that of avoiding the encouragement of extra peril and the creation of an extra pull factor. In that position he is supported by the UNHCR representative to this country and the Children's Commissioner.

We have all agreed tonight that other European countries must step up, too. Europe is a place of safety; there are dozens of safe countries between Italy and Greece and the United Kingdom. I note some of the figures provided during the Lords debate on this Bill on the comparison with our European colleagues: we have relocated 1,000 refugees already, as we promised we would do by Christmas, and in that whole period the 27 other countries in Europe have managed to resettle only 650. We should look at the 21 other countries that have not taken in even one Syrian refugee.

The point we must then address is whether we are already doing enough to help the children are already in need in this country. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), I speak as somebody whose local authority does not do well on this count. I cast no aspersions on Kent, but I go on to say that Norfolk has more than 1,000 children who are in care and who need good homes. We must look at that statistic alongside this issue tonight. We must ask ourselves: how are we to provide a supportive, protective and caring environment for these children if we cannot already find enough foster homes and enough long-term homes for those children? We must balance those things tonight.

Mrs Grant: Does my hon. Friend agree that children are being trafficked younger and younger, and that they face loneliness and bewilderment? Does she agree that a child advocate support scheme similar to that trialled by the Government could be very useful for local authorities and young children?

Chloe Smith: I would be keen to look at that in more detail. I am unsure exactly how it might help in this particular case of Norfolk County Council, but I would be delighted to hear more if my hon. Friend can tell me about something I should be able to do as a constituency MP on that front.

Given these serious practical reservations, given that we do not already have enough supportive and caring environments for all the children we would wish to help, given the action that we are already taking and will take within those constraints, and given that surely it would be brutal to promise something that we are not currently able to deliver, I support the Minister’s position tonight and find it difficult at this time to support Lords amendment 87.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but to help the House there will have to be a formal three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, with immediate effect.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): First, I should refer to my relevant entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: last October, I visited Jordan with Oxfam, making a visit to the Zaatari refugee camp. I join others in paying tribute to my noble Friend Lord Dubs, who is a living success story of how refugees can be resettled successfully and make a major contribution to their new society.

The Government’s continued commitment to providing humanitarian support to Syrian refugees is hugely welcome. In all parts of this House we can be proud of the role the Department for International Development has played alongside many non-governmental organisations in the humanitarian effort in the region. I pay tribute also to those countries in the region that have welcomed huge numbers of refugees, notably Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. I welcome the announcement by the Government of an additional 3,000 places for resettlement, on top of the 20,000 they had already announced.

We can all celebrate the positive story about aid, and the positive story about resettlement is welcome. However, I do not accept the Government’s contention that this is somehow an either/or matter. It is not a choice between action in the region or action to help child refugees who are in Europe—we can do both.

9 pm

In January the International Development Committee published its first report of this Parliament on the Syrian refugee crisis. In that report we supported Save the Children’s recommendation that the Government should resettle 3,000 unaccompanied children, and that is the basis for Lords amendment 87. We have heard powerful speeches, not least from the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips), my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I urge colleagues across the House to consider those powerful arguments in favour of Lords amendment 87.

We are talking about unaccompanied children in Europe who face a frightening mixture of pressures: child trafficking, drug trafficking, sex trafficking and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford said, modern slavery. Those children are facing harsh conditions, and they are facing them on their own. The 3,000 figure is simply about us
as a country taking our fair share. I welcome the fact that this issue has cross-party support. On that basis, let us celebrate our aid and work to resettle people, but let us not see this as a choice. I urge colleagues to reject the Government’s motion to disagree, and to keep the Dubs amendment.

Mr Burrowes: If ever a debate showed the need not to have a time limit, this is it, especially given the complex issues we are dealing with. The issue of human dignity flows through all the amendments under consideration, whether they deal with child refugees in Syria or Europe, or those who have made their way to this country and need appropriate and fair treatment, and whom we must try to avoid detaining for so long.

There is no monopoly on compassion. The House will be dividing on this amendment, and it is not a binary issue about whether or not someone supports or cares for child refugees. I have been a long-standing campaigner for the Government to provide more refuge, and for such assistance to be based not on arbitrary numbers but on vulnerability. I welcome the Government’s move from the 20,000 places announced in September to an additional 3,000 refugees coming from Syria and the region.

As many speeches have highlighted, Europe has the role of providing safety from trafficking, exploitation and abuse—that is distinct from the issue of refuge within Europe. How can we practically deliver that? The number that horrifies me and to which I wish to respond is Europol’s estimate that 10,000 children have gone missing. How can we practically ensure that children do not go missing and that there is safety? The arbitrary figure of 3,000 that has been nobly championed by Lord Dubs—he is watching this debate—has provided a focus for the debate and moved the Government to provide details on the commitment that they made at the end of January.

We must consider the practical issues. Seventy-five experts going to Greece is not a good campaign slogan, but it is important because the practical deliverability of the figure of 3,000 in the amendment must lead to a result that sees experts going to Greece or Calais, and properly processing people and ensuring that there is a reception centre. The Government have committed to that, and it is important to recognise that that will provide safety.

History will judge our response to this crisis tomorrow, next month and next year. This is not the only time that we will call on the Government to provide a compassionate response, and I believe that they have done that today. I welcome the Government’s actions and look for them to go further. I will be supporting the Government. That is a difficult choice because of the passion and emotion around the Dubs amendment. However, I think that the Government are on the road to providing more safety for people in Europe, including with the groundbreaking decision to provide refuge for children at risk, which other countries must follow. I have run out of time so cannot to speak to the other amendments.

As we have heard today, something like a third of those unaccompanied children in Europe go missing. They are now in the hands of child traffickers who exploit them and use them in child prostitution.

The Government have done some good over these past few months, much of it under pressure, but, to date, they are utterly and totally stubborn on the matter of helping even a single person, particularly vulnerable children, in Europe.

I was at the Indomeni camp in northern Greece just a couple of weeks ago. It was the saddest of all the visits that I have made, because of the desperation that I saw and because of the number of children living in squalid and unsafe circumstances. These people are at risk, they are alone, and they are scared, and we could help them.

We have had a series of announcements from the Government, but they all missed the point, which is that those children who are most at risk are the ones who are now in the camps in Europe. Making the argument in favour of doing more for refugees and of taking refugees from Europe is difficult when there is a narrative out there that says that most refugees are coming to Europe. That is not true. Perhaps one in five from the region is coming to Europe. People will say that they are not really refugees, but economic migrants. Well, 95% of them are deemed to be refugees by any objective standard. Perhaps that is where the Government’s reluctance comes from. They fear unpopularity, but is this not the time for this Government not to follow, but to lead and to do the right thing? There are always reasons not to do the right thing.

When I was in Greece and Macedonia two weeks ago, a fence had been erected by the Macedonian Government in 36 hours. If a country has the political will, they can do these things. We can take these children. The blueprint that I produced over the past three or four months in consultation with Save the Children, Home for Good and local authorities gives the Government all the ammunition they need to show how they would put such a scheme into practice, and I refer the Minister to that blueprint. We need to stop the excuses and do the right thing.

This is the biggest humanitarian disaster, or crisis, facing Europe since the second world war, and this Government choose to turn their back not just on geo-political reality and on our neighbours, but on the desperate children somehow existing in the camps and in the ditches up and down Europe. This proposal before us today, amendment 87, is not the most we can do; it is the least we can do.

Heidi Allen: I wish to speak on the Dubs amendment. May I start by thanking the Minister for Immigration and the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees for their genuine commitment to this cause? I know that, in this matter, they have tried to use both their head and their heart.

Having seen the desperate scenes in the refugees camps in Lesbos and Calais, I have had a very brief window on the world of families fleeing war and persecution, and it is those memories that give me a very, very heavy heart today. Many of us from all parts of the House always felt that our initial offer to resettle 20,000 refugees was not enough. Although our financial aid to the region has been nothing short of heroic, we
have sensed that the British people, generous to the end, wanted to offer a home to more. The announcement last week that we would take another 3,000 filled me with renewed pride, not least because we were focusing on children at risk, but when did pride get to feel so numb? It was the dawning realisation that, by focusing on the camps in the region once again, we would be turning our backs on the thousands of unaccompanied children already in Europe. The argument for not helping them has always been the pull factor. If we take them, more will make that perilous journey. I know that the boats are overcrowded and not seaworthy because I saw them.

If the deal between the EU, Turkey and Greece is so fantastic in stopping the tide of daily arrivals, as we are told, then that means that the pull has stopped pulling. That can mean only one thing: these children are trapped. They cannot go forward, and they cannot go back. They are lost in Europe, lost in the chaos, but not, and never, lost on our conscience.

The confirmation that we will send 75 Home Office experts to the Greek islands is very welcome, but it has taken from the announcement in January to achieve that. We call the Greek islands hotspots. There are hotspots all over Europe: hotspots for trafficking, hotspots for abuse and hotspots for child prostitution on the Macedonian border, Italy and on our very own doorstep in Calais.

When part of the jungle was demolished, 120 children went missing. Right now there are 157 lone children with family in the UK, but there are no friendly faces, no child protection and no sign saying, “This way to be looked after.” Children cannot be expected to find the system without help. In one case, an 11-month-old baby separated from its mother was expected to claim asylum in France before any steps could be taken to reunite them—an 11-month-old baby. This is civilized Europe?

I will hear the whole debate. I had planned to abstain in the vote, because I must acknowledge the offer to take 3,000 more, and I would be playing fast and loose with their opportunity for sanctuary if I did not support the Government. But how can I forget the faces of the children I have seen in Europe? Abstention is a pathetic offering, really. Is it enough? Is it good enough?

If the Dubs amendment does not succeed tonight, I urge the Lords to continue fighting with us. We must seek to achieve a compromise amendment; something different, and perhaps less sweeping, but something that—

Mr Speaker: Order. Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern: The speech that I follow was a fine one. There have been many fine speeches on both sides of the House. This is a cross-party campaign on a cross-party amendment with cross-party support from all parts of this Parliament. I want to say a few words about something the Minister said earlier. He said that this problem arose because of a situation “in which families see an advantage”.

I cannot but argue against those words, because I do not see what possible advantage there could be for the refugee families affected. The unaccompanied children we are talking about are just that: children.

I think that the Minister’s words demonstrate what the Government feel to be the cause of this situation. We are used to debating this analysis in terms of push and pull factors. Well, I think that is a strange kind of argument that bears very little scrutiny. We all know that, fine though this country is, it is the push of conflict that has caused the problem, and the answer to the conflict is peace. We have been trying for peace for months and months, but there is none, so what then?

The Under-Secretary of State for Refugees and I served together on the International Development Committee, and I have every respect for him. I ask him to read the report produced by our former colleagues, which asks the Government to take account of this request from Save the Children. [Interruption.] He is looking at me and I know that he will read it and look again at the request. Bringing people from the region was the correct approach, but it was too slow, and unfortunately the announcement last week that sought to spike this debate today was another classic almost U-turn, but it did not go far enough.

Therefore, as others Members have said, in the knowledge that there are children who need our protection, what can we do? This is our continent. It is our job to take care of those children. We know it, and that is why we must vote for the Dubs amendment.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I absolutely support much of the Government’s programme on refugees, what they are doing with £2.3 billion in aid, what they are doing to resettle vulnerable people, and what they are doing in the camps on the borders of Syria and in the region. However, I believe that we currently have an acute crisis in Europe. I believe that any unaccompanied child who is not safe tonight is part of our problem. I do not believe that any of us would be go to France or Greece and just say, “This is not my problem.” I believe that the reason we can lead on this is that right now we have excellence in our refugee programme, in DFID and in our Home Office Ministers, and especially in the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees.

Dambisa Moyo, in her book “Dead Aid”, cited the tragic story of two teenage girls from Guinea who died while travelling from Africa to Europe. On the body of one of the girls was a note saying, “We want to study. We ask you to help us study so that we can be like you in Africa.” A lot of these children who come to this country may choose to stay here as adults, but many will choose to go home, if their home is at peace. I believe that voting for Lords Dubs’s amendment is the right thing to do tonight to give those children a safe haven.

9.15 pm

Jo Cox: We all know that the vast majority of the terrified, friendless and profoundly vulnerable child refugees scattered across Europe tonight came from Syria. We also know that, as that conflict enters its sixth barbaric year, desperate Syrian families are being forced to make an impossible decision: stay and face starvation, rape, persecution and death, or make a perilous journey to find sanctuary elsewhere. Who can blame desperate parents for wanting to escape the horror that their families are experiencing? Children are being killed on their way to school, children as young as seven are being forcibly recruited to the frontline and one in three children have grown up knowing nothing but fear and war. Those children have been exposed to things no child should ever witness, and I know I would risk life and limb to get my two precious babies out of that hellhole.
I am deeply proud of the Government for leading the way internationally on providing humanitarian support to Syrian civilians. Their commitment in terms of finances and policy to help people in the region, and across the middle east and north Africa, will save lives. However, in the chaos caused by the Syrian conflict and many other conflicts, many thousands of already deeply scarred children have become separated from their parents and carers, and they are already in Europe. The Government's generosity to date has not extended to those vulnerable children.

We know that identifying the exact number of unaccompanied minors is difficult, but the latest estimates suggest that there could be up to 95,000 such children in Europe tonight—four times the number we thought. That means that, if we decide tonight to take 3,000 of them, that will be just 3% of the total. That is our continent's challenge, and we must rise to it.

I recognise that this is not easy, but tonight we are being asked to make a decision that transcends party politics. Any Member who has seen the desperation and fear on the faces of children trapped in inhospitable camps across Europe must surely feel compelled to act. I urge them tonight to be brave and bold, and I applaud the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) for an incredibly principled, personal speech.

In the shanty towns of Calais and Dunkirk, the aid workers I spent a decade with on the frontline as an aid worker myself tell me that the children there face some of the most horrific circumstances in the world. Surely we have to do the right thing tonight and support the Dubs amendment.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): We are approaching the last moments of the debate, so I will confine my remarks to one amendment and to one argument within it—the pull factor some have expressed concerned about.

Let me share just something of my experience when I went to Lesbos with Save the Children. I was struck by many things, but one was the extraordinary contrast between the almost biblical scene of men, women and children travelling on foot and in numbers across the country, and the fact that they were carrying mobile phones. All over the camps, people were huddled not around fires, but around charging stations, desperate to keep connected. One worker described to me how any change in border access or the availability of places in the camps would be communicated by mobile to friends and families following on, and shared over and over, inspiring immediate and dramatic change on the ground.

This 21st century migration through Europe is like nothing that has come before. In the light of that, how can we say with confidence that announcing 3,000 open places for minors in the UK would not affect the decisions desperate people would make and would not create risk? I share the hopes and the fears for the vulnerable children who have been mentioned in this debate, but we must look to the long term. It has previously been said that this will not solve the problem, so we must be very clear that we are not exacerbating the situation. There is a body of anecdotal evidence that families separate when they can find only enough money to pay traffickers for one place in a boat. Knowing, as we do, that children's best chances for the long term are with their parents, every effort must be made to keep families together, and where they have been separated, to reunite them.

To finish, it was said during my time in Lesbos that the time it took to work with lone young people to establish their identity and ask all the right questions when they presented at the camps was one of the main reasons that many left to risk the perilous journey that so many Members have described this evening. We must therefore build the infrastructure, the systems and the confidence of young people that reception centres across the continent, not the open road, are their best route. This is vital work and it will, in the coming weeks and months, see increasing numbers of the children and young people already in Europe resettled with us in the UK.

Mr Speaker: Two minutes each would be better.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): This evening, we have had lots of passionate speeches about children from Members on both sides of the House. I will speak about my experience as a former foster carer, and somebody who has provided supported lodgings to minors who have presented themselves unaccompanied. Ikram was 15 when we fostered him in my home and my children were very young, and Hazrat was one of the boys we also looked after.

Hazrat told me in his own words how, when they were trying to get on to the back of a lorry, there was only one space for the two boys who needed it and one killed the other for that space. He witnessed that barbaric act, and he told me about it in person. It will haunt me for the rest of my life. It will haunt me when I look at my children; my daughter was young and I only had two children at the time.

Given the stories that these boys sat down and told us, I cannot begin to imagine the mental health trauma that they went through. Yet these boys wanted to work, to get an education and to leave that behind, so desperate were they to leave the horrors that they experienced while getting to this country for sanctuary. These children did not want to come to this country for our jobs, our benefits or anything else. These children's mothers told them, “You have a better chance of making it past the traffickers and past the exploitation. You have a better chance of making it outside here, so go, my son, go.” Those were the words their mothers spoke to these young people.

I am proud to come from Bradford West. Bradford is a city of sanctuary, in which 169 organisations have signed up to support refugees and asylum seekers. When the Minister visited, we had a conversation about Bradford being seen as a trailblazer for integrated health and social care, education and so on. Bradford could lead the way, and we would support other areas. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) said that Kent does not get such help, but we would help. Bradford will help.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said, this amounts to five children per constituency; is that really an ask? Is a debate about five children per constituency really one we should have to have today? Can Great Britain really not extend such support, as one of the greatest nations on earth? It is a
house if we do not sign up for and accept the Dubs amendment. I will do so, and I would welcome Conservative Members joining us in the Lobby tonight.

Mr Speaker: There are two minutes to go.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I would have liked to have more of an opportunity to speak, as I was a member of the Immigration Public Bill Committee, but I will confine myself to the Lords amendment calling on the Government to relocate 3,000 refugee children. I am sure that there is no one who could possibly disagree with that. It would be morally wrong and would not befit our nation, which has supported many different religions, races and nationalities in their hour of greatest need, if we did not reunite these children with their families. We must work along with other EU states to make sure that utmost priority is given to ensuring that children are not left unaccompanied and in danger. Along with other countries such as Spain, Greece, Italy and France, we must provide the very best protection and support for these children until they can be reunited with their families. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was absolutely right: it can take the French authorities up to nine months to pass on applications to the Home Office. Although all authorities are under huge pressure on these matters, this delay cannot be tolerated, and an application cannot be accepted as just another application when it relates to an unaccompanied child.

In 2015, over 3,000 asylum applications were received from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—a rise of 56% on 2014 and 141% on 2013. That puts unprecedented pressure on our system and our local authorities, as detailed by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). These numbers raise serious questions as to whether other EU countries are fulfilling their child protection obligations. It is vital that we continue to do what we are doing now, and more, but this must not stop us raising and tackling these issues with our European partners on a wider scale.

We need to ensure that we support these children and others who make the journey in the best way possible, using our heads and our hearts. While all may not agree, I think the actions that the Government are taking—

9.26 pm

Three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F). That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 87.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 276.

Division No. 246] [9.26 pm

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caudfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downer, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Ellphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gymiah, Mr Sam
Hafton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hollabone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
No 25 of 2015

Immigration Bill

1239 1240 25 APRIL 2016

Immigration Bill

25th April 2016

Tellers for the Ayes: George Hollingbery and Margot James

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie

Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Strite, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sun Set Rishi
Swaine, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warmann, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodland, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackshear, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Dukhan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive

Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foxvargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harries, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunter, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Irman
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Khan, rh Sadiq
Kninock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

### After Clause 12

**OVERSEAS DOMESTIC WORKERS**

*Motion made, and Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 60.—(James Brokenshire)*

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 268.

**Division No. 247**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
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<td>Costa, Alberto</td>
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| COX, Mr Geoffrey |
| Crabb, r/r Stephen |
| Davies, Byron |
| Davies, Glyn |
| Davies, Mims |
| Davies, Philip |
| Dinenage, Caroline |
| Djanogly, Mr Jonathan |
| Donelan, Michelle |
| Double, Steve |
| Dowden, Oliver |
| Doyle-Price, Jackie |
| Drax, Richard |
| Drummond, Mrs Flick |
| Duddridge, James |
| Duncan, r/r Sir Alan |
| Duncan Smith, r/r Sir Alan |
| Dunne, Mr Philip |
| Elliott, Tom |
| Ellis, Michael |
| Ellison, Jane |
| Ellwood, Mr Tobias |
| Elphicke, Charlie |
| Eustice, George |
| Evans, Graham |
| Evans, Mr Nigel |
| Evennett, r/r Mr David |
| Fabricant, Michael |
| Fallon, r/r Michael |
| Fernandes, Suella |
| Field, r/r Mark |
| Foster, Kevin |
| Fox, r/r Dr Liam |
| Fraser, Lucy |
| Freeman, George |
| Freer, Mike |
| Fysh, Marcus |
| Gale, Sir Roger |
| Garnier, r/r Sir Edward |
| Garnier, Mark |
| Gauke, Mr David |
| Ghanji, Nusrat |
| Gibb, Mr Nick |
| Gillan, Mrs Cheryl |
| Glen, John |
| Goodwill, Mr Robert |
| Gove, r/r Michael |
| Graham, Richard |
| Grant, Mrs Helen |
| Grayling, r/r Chris |
| Green, Chris |
| Green, r/r Damian |
| Grieve, r/r Mr Dominic |
| Griffiths, Andrew |
| Gummer, Ben |
| Gyimah, Mr Sam |

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Sue Hayman and 
Jeff Smith
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrell, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Roshindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alka
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Clhoe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soult, Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaney, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thorup, Maggie
Timpson, Eddie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trelveyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and Marjot James

NOES
Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Bowles, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alastair
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Holstein, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Iman
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Khan, rh Sadiq
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmoud, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCartney, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
Molines, Liz
Mckinell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christine
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joa
Salmond, rh Alex
Shah, Naz
Shannan, Simon
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thomson, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Tigg, Stephen
Umunna, rh Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Elididh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Sue Hayman and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 60 disagreed to.

After Clause 30

IMMIGRATION DETENTION: TIME LIMIT AND JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 84.—(James Brokenshire.)

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 266.

Division No. 248] [9.57 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afrinie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, rh Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, rh Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brine, Steve
Brokenhshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona

Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Liz
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donald, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 266.

**Division No. 249**

**AYES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ayes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cowan, Ronnie</td>
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**Tellers for the Noes:**

Sue Hayman and Jeff Smith

**Question accordingly agreed.**

**Lords amendment 84 disagreed to.**

**Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 84.**

**After Clause 31**

**GUIDANCE ON DETENTION OF VULNERABLE PERSONS**

**Motion made, and Question put.** That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 85.—(James Brokenshire)

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 266.
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 85 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 85.
After Clause 12

ASYLUM SEEKERS: PERMISSION TO WORK AFTER SIX MONTHS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 59.-(James Brokenshire.)

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 60.

Division No. 250] [10.24 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrows, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davidson, Anna
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliot, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harries, Mark
Harris, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinaan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCarten, Jason
McCarten, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prik, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quinone, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shebbooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Dr Andrew
Steward, Bob
Stewart, Robert
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Street, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Mr Desmond
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa

Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Mr Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and
Margot James

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bowcock, Philip
Brock, Deidre
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Farron, Tim
Ferrier, Margaret
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, Stewart
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Lamb, rh Norman
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan

Mc Nally, John
McCaig, Calum
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Robertson, rh Angus
Salmond, rh Alex
Shannon, Jim
Shappard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Thewlis, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Weir and
Marion Fellows

Mrs Helen Grant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to declare an interest as a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation, which I should have done prior to my earlier intervention. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make that clear now.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for her characteristic grace and courtesy in raising that point of order. Her interest, of course, is a non-pecuniary one. Nevertheless, it is most prudent to declare it. I am sure that the House will appreciate the fact that she has now done so.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H). That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 59, 60 and 87;

That James Brokenshire, Charlie Elphicke, Rebecca Harris, Sue Hayman, Stuart C. McDonald, Keir Starmer and Craig Whittaker be members of the Committee;

That James Brokenshire be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Charlie Elphicke.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS

That the draft Limited Liability Partnerships, Partnerships and Groups (Accounts and Audit) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 7 March, be approved.—(Gavin Barwell.)

Question agreed to.

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

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Leave to Enter and Remain) (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.—(Gavin Barwell.)

Question agreed to.

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

EDUCATION

That the draft Education (Repeal of Arrangements for Vocational Qualifications Awarded or Authenticated in Northern Ireland) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 11 March, be approved.—(Gavin Barwell.)

Question agreed to.

WELSH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Antoinette Sandbach be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Glyn Davies be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Nepal Earthquake: First Anniversary

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

10.39 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Nepal is one of the most beautiful countries in the world, and it has deep and long-established links to the United Kingdom. The Himalayas, Everest and the continuing story of the sacrifice and courage of the Gurkhas hides a deeper truth about the fragility of life for many Nepalese people. Some 7 million to 8 million people out of Nepal’s population of 19 million live in absolute poverty. Malnutrition rates in Nepal are among the highest in the world. More than 2 million people in Nepal do not have access to a safe water supply, and more than half the population do not have access to a proper toilet. Many families see their menfolk forced to migrate for some of each year—usually, but not always, to India—to earn a living for their families as incomes are simply too low in Nepal.

At midday on Saturday 25 April 2015, an earthquake struck Barpak in the historic district of Gorkha, about 76 km north-west of Kathmandu. More than 300 aftershocks—four of them registering over 6.0 on the Richter scale, including one measuring 6.8—followed. Almost 9,000 people were killed and 23,000 injured. One million homes were destroyed, and an estimated one third of the population of Nepal has been impacted by the earthquake. Some 31 of the country’s 75 districts have been affected, with 14 declared crisis-hit, and another 17 partially affected.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I asked the hon. Gentleman earlier whether it would be okay to intervene on him, and I thank him for allowing me to do so. He mentions the homes that were destroyed and the people who died. Some £2.87 billion has been set aside by a number of countries to help the rebuilding work, but none of that has been spent yet. Does he share my concern, and the concern of those in this House and those outside it, that not £1 of the £2.87 billion set aside for reconstruction is a major concern.

Mr Thomas: Absolutely. I am very aware of my hon. Friend’s support for the excellent work Rotary International does, not just in Ealing if he will forgive me for saying so, but in many constituencies, including mine. I want to touch on its reaction, along with that of other non-governmental organisations, in a few moments.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On that point, my hon. Friend will be aware that, within days of the earthquake striking, Rotary International delivered to Nepal a huge number of shelter boxes, which was the first western aid to reach Nepal. The Rotarians, particularly those in Ealing and Greenford, seldom get thanked for that. Will he take the opportunity of doing so this evening?

Mr Thomas: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the many charities, small and large, that have assisted. I want to draw particular attention to the contribution that many from Britain made to the search and rescue effort once reports of the earthquake had become clear, and to pay tribute to the work of NGOs such as the excellent Oxfam, Save the Children, VSO...
and Christian Aid, which have responded. CAFOD is another strong example of an international NGO operating in Nepal.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): This is indeed a very important day to remember what happened last year. A few weeks ago, I visited Nepal with my constituent Bishnu Gurung, who raised a significant amount of funds in Hounslow, along with fellow Councillor Hanif Khan, to support the work of Humanity First. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as looking at the reconstruction, it is absolutely vital to rebuild the economy of Nepal—its GDP growth dropped to about 1.5% rather than the forecast 4%—and we need to do much more to open up trade relations and to build Britain-Nepal trade opportunities?

**Mr Thomas:** My hon. Friend makes a good point about trade links. Encouraging economic growth within Nepal was important before the earthquake, given the fragility of life for many Nepalese people, but it is particularly urgent now in the wake of the earthquake. World Bank and Government of Nepal analysts estimate that the total cost of the damage from the earthquake is roughly $7 billion, or 706 billion Nepalese rupees.

With the exception of the Kathmandu valley, the central and western regions that have been affected by the earthquake are essentially rural and heavily dependent on agriculture. The quake destroyed the stockpile of stored grains and killed almost 60,000 farm animals. These districts have tended to see larger numbers of households reliant on livestock as their main, or one of their main, sources of income. The widespread loss of that livestock has caused a severe income shock in the short term for many already very poor families. Sadly, inevitably for vulnerable families with fewer assets, limited access to economic resources and a lack of alternative livelihoods, there is a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking, child marriage, and child labour. Indeed, I have had representations from Nepalese constituents of mine worried about an increase in the trafficking of young earthquake victims.

If a major earthquake was not tough enough on its own for a country to negotiate, there has been a major cross-party effort to agree a new federal constitution for Nepal. That was finally agreed in January, but it led to a 135-day unofficial blockade of food and fuel across the India-Nepal border, which has made the reconstruction effort even more difficult. It would be helpful to hear the Minister’s assessment of the level of political stability in Nepal and the strength, or otherwise, of its relationships with its two big neighbours. The tensions have, I understand, eased recently. Crucially, the Nepal Reconstruction Authority has been established, which began its work on 16 January.

**Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate, one year after the disaster happened. As hon. Members have said, many faith groups and other charity organisations have raised funds and contributed their knowledge and know-how to help to rebuild the country. Does he agree that tourism, which was the main source of income, was also affected by the earthquake disaster? This is the right time for the Government and other institutions to learn from the disaster that investment in building resilience against future disasters should increase from 6% to 10% of humanitarian aid.

**Mr Thomas:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to do what we can in the UK to support the Nepalese authorities to build back better. I will come on to his point about the proportion of humanitarian aid that is used to support countries to become more resistant to earthquakes.

I want to touch on comments made by Sushil Gyawali, the chief executive of the NRA, on his appointment in January. He made it clear that the real task of reconstruction and rehabilitation could begin only in mid-April—about now—because a detailed damage assessment and a full list of genuine victims were needed to formulate a national action plan. Although emergency relief eventually reached most people, thanks to a combination of Government, aid donors and NGO efforts, as colleagues have made clear, the next stage of rebuilding and long-term reconstruction has barely begun.

There is a series of concerns about why we are in the state we are in, which I want to put to the Minister. In doing so, let me first acknowledge the considerable ongoing support—£70 million, I understand, and counting—that the Department for International Development has provided, and the personal interest the Secretary of State and her ministerial team have taken in the earthquake response.

The NRA is reportedly heavily understaffed, and the village development committees with which the NRA needs to work at local level in the affected areas often struggle to recruit enough people of sufficient calibre to co-ordinate the considerable work that is required. Some reports suggest that as many as 75% of positions at the NRA are not yet filled. What is the Minister’s assessment of the progress that has been made in staffing the NRA and village development committees, and in the preparation of a detailed damage assessment? Has the Department placed, or at least offered to place, people in the NRA to help to build its capacity?

I understand that, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) made clear in his intervention, hundreds of thousands of people are bracing themselves for their second monsoon season in temporary shelters, because the Nepalese Government have admitted that they will not be able to finish, or in many cases even to begin, the construction of permanent housing in many districts before the rains hit. Does the Minister share that assessment? If so, what steps is the Department taking to support families in temporary shelters to prepare again for the monsoon season?

At last year’s donor conference, international donors pledged, I understand, some $4.1 billion for reconstruction, of which only $1 billion has been committed. Does the Minister recognise those figures? If he does, what further action can the Department take to galvanise agreements between donors such as the World Bank, India, China, the Asian Development Bank, the European Commission and the Japan International Cooperation Agency with the Nepalese NRA to help to speed up the financing of the rebuilding process? Given the lack of an ongoing media profile for Nepal’s reconstruction challenge, and the concern about whether aid pledges will actually materialise, is it now time for Britain to help Nepal to convene, through the UN, a friends of Nepal group of countries to help maintain the political will and so turn the aid pledges of last year into actual aid commitments, and then homes on the ground?

Some NGOs have complained that they have been prevented from building new homes that do not fit with...
NRA rules and designs for future earthquake-resistant homes. I understand the need for strong co-ordination and enforcement of sensible planning rules, but again I would welcome the Minister’s assessment of the extent to which those difficulties have been ironed out.

The scale of reconstruction activity needed provides an opportunity to challenge some of the long-term social problems in Nepal and, for example, ensure rebuilding programmes are inclusive of women and those who are landless—some of the poorest and most marginalised people in the country.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. Does he agree that it is critical for the longer-term sustainable redevelopment of Nepal that local democratic institutions—locally elected councils and provisional councils—are put in place and that the UK Government are uniquely placed to support that through their local governance programme?

Mr Thomas: I share the hon. Lady’s view. As I understand it, the village development committees that I alluded to fulfill that role, and there are real concerns about the staff available to those committees. As I said earlier, it would be good to hear the Minister’s assessment of their effectiveness.

Women in Nepal have traditionally had limited land rights and access to entitlements. Recent new legislation and policies have begun to change that, but entrenched culture can mean that although policy might be good in principle it does not actually change things on the ground. NGOs, including Oxfam, have put it to me that the lack of rights and access to land ownership faced by many women in Nepal have been exacerbated by the earthquake, as their lack of documentation, or the fact that they are not named on documentation, means they have to rely on local advocates to put their case forward to the authorities. Similar issues affect those who are landless. It would be good to hear how the Minister’s Department is thinking through those issues and responding to them on the ground.

The Minister will know that shortly after the earthquake the International Development Committee raised a series of concerns about corruption in Nepal. What is his assessment of the progress being made to tackle those issues?

Lastly, I would welcome hearing from the Minister about the extent to which donors and the Nepalese Government are planning for future possible earthquakes and other national disasters in their reconstruction work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) made clear, Christian Aid argues that investment in building resilience to future disasters needs to increase from 6% to 10% of humanitarian aid. Will the Minister comment on that point?

I was lucky to visit Nepal as a Minister in the Department for International Development; I am lucky now, as a constituency MP, to have a strong, articulate Nepalese community who are proud to be British, but proud too of their Nepalese roots. They look to us as Nepal’s oldest friend to stay with them on the journey of reconstruction, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Mr Gareth Thomas

The relief effort was a success and I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration—frustration evident in the House tonight—and the clear frustration of the people of Nepal that after that initial effort the pace of reconstruction was so slow. Clearly, in a country with difficult terrain, the remoteness of the areas most affected, monsoons, and a long winter and therefore a short building season, there should be a greater sense of urgency than would normally apply. That was not my perception when I visited Nepal last summer. The Government’s attitude was: “No, no, it’s over. Nepal is open for business. Let’s get the tourist trade going again.” I entirely understand that attitude and the importance of reopening the tourist trade, but I felt—it was my prejudice—that the determination to show that Nepal was back in business came at the expense of concentration on the continuing need for humanitarian relief, particularly in outlying areas.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for bringing this issue to the House in such a timely fashion, on the anniversary of the earthquake. I will endeavour to deal with the issues he has raised in the short time available, but first I want to emphasise the success of the relief effort. We have already heard about the tremendous interventions by, for example, Rotary International. The response to the Disasters Emergency Committee was tremendous—DEC raised £85 million. In addition to all that fundraising, through a number of independent organisations, I anticipate that the contribution from British people’s own pockets was in excess of £100 million; we should add to that the £70 million that the Government provided.

In the time available, I will not go into itemised detail about the relief effort that we provided—hon. Members can read the book—but I will draw attention to the effort made specifically on behalf of women. Thousands of dignity packs were provided for women in difficult circumstances, as were safe spaces, psychological advice and counselling.

The one piece of international development effort that the popular press actually approves of is disaster relief for this sort of emergency, but the hon. Gentleman was right to identify the need to build in resilience beforehand. The lesson of the success of the relief effort in Nepal is that it was built on the millions of pounds spent—including by DFID when he was the Minister responsible—in advance over the years. Let us face it: an earthquake in Kathmandu was no surprise to anyone, but the success was based on the fact that we prepositioned supplies and rehearsed volunteers in their distribution. We trained people to be first responders and for search and rescue. We put a blood bank in place. We created the logistical space, equipment and warehousing at the airport, so that seven weeks of cumulative effort could be saved to respond to what happened. People imagine that after an earthquake all of a sudden from nowhere come resources, with highly trained people with sniffer dogs and so on, but clearly there has to be effort and investment in the core costs of organisations throughout the year so they are ready when there is an earthquake.

As the hon. Gentleman so rightly said, we need to spend significantly more on building resilience beforehand.

The relief effort was a success and I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration—frustration evident in the House tonight—and the clear frustration of the people of Nepal that after that initial effort the pace of reconstruction was so slow. Clearly, in a country with difficult terrain, the remoteness of the areas most affected, monsoons, and a long winter and therefore a short building season, there should be a greater sense of urgency than would normally apply. That was not my perception when I visited Nepal last summer. The Government’s attitude was: “No, no, it’s over. Nepal is open for business. Let’s get the tourist trade going again.” I entirely understand that attitude and the importance of reopening the tourist trade, but I felt—it was my prejudice—that the determination to show that Nepal was back in business came at the expense of concentration on the continuing need for humanitarian relief, particularly in outlying areas.
The hon. Gentleman mentioned the constitution. To be fair, we have been pressing for progress on the constitution for months and months and years and years. To an extent, the earthquake galvanised the political class to push on with the constitution. Unfortunately, what happened thereafter—infighting, the problems in the Terai region and the blockade—led to a very substantial slowing up in any kind of relief effort. We in DFID were actually commissioning mules to carry our relief supplies into the mountains because of the fuel problem arising as a consequence of the blockade. The earthquake put some 600,000 people into poverty, but the blockade drove 800,000 people into poverty. The Nepal chamber of commerce estimated that the blockade did more harm to the economy of Nepal than the earthquake.

The hon. Gentleman said that the reconstruction authority, as of 6 January, has now started, well behind what we could have anticipated. It is understaffed, as he says, but nevertheless work has begun. The surveying of needs is supposed to be concluded by the end of this month. Grants have started to be issued. We have issued cash to 100,000 people already. Of the £70 million that we committed, £35 million has been spent and a further £35 million is committed.

We are concentrating on providing technical assistance and training. We have trained 600 masons in earthquake-resistant building techniques and 150 sub-engineers in the same disciplines. We are concentrating on the worst-affected areas and the more remote areas. We are prioritising the need for police stations and healthcare facilities. We are back in business in healthcare, which was always our main effort, restoring the services to 5.6 million people.

Jim Shannon: Helicopters are one way of restoring contact with remote areas. What helicopter supplies have been given to the Nepalese army to ensure that aid gets to the areas where it is needed?

Mr Swayne: DFID commissioned some 2,000 hours of helicopter flights. We provided Chinooks, which were not used. I am very disappointed that that was the case. We never quite got to the bottom of it, but I would rather stand in this House and say that we believed that helicopters were desperately needed and we provided them, even if they were not used, than find myself standing in this House knowing that helicopters were desperately needed and we did not send them. I think the right decision was made. It cost some £3 million, but emergencies demand such commitments.

The reconstruction effort continues. The problem, as I see it, going forward—the hon. Member for Harrow West alluded to it—is that there remain significant political problems in Nepal. Although there has been an easing recently of the problem in the Terai, I do not believe for one moment that it has gone away. The hon. Gentleman rightly referred to the problem of endemic corruption and the problems with governance and bureaucracy. Nepal must transform its investment environment if there is to be any significant prospect of recovery in the long term. It has huge assets in respect of hydropower—

Mr Thomas: I welcome what the Minister has said and the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and of the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). May I press the Minister on conversations with other donors about fulfilling their pledges and turning them into commitments, which the Nepalese Reconstruction Authority can use to speed up progress on the ground?

Mr Swayne: We are having conversations all the time with other donors, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN agencies. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to press for a greater sense of urgency, but frustration has been evidenced in the donor community as well. There is a question of our ability to spend while the specifications of the reconstruction authority about how things are to be done have yet to be delivered. That has been part of the problem and I can understand the frustration of the donor community in that respect. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s challenge to do more to galvanise and take a leadership role in driving that forward.

Fiona Bruce: Does the Minister agree that now that the constitution has been agreed, it is vital that Nepal presses forward and has elections for the provincial governments and the local councils, so that there are appropriate democratic structures through which reconstruction aid and sustainable provision can be delivered?

Mr Swayne: Indeed. That is very important, but equally the focus has to be on reconstruction and on building back better. Principally, the Nepalese must deal with their stifling bureaucracy and the problems that stand in the way of foreign investment. That is the only long-term solution for Nepal. It must deal with the problems of governance and endemic corruption.

I see that time is nearly up. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West again for concentrating the mind of the House on this important issue, and for having so forensically identified the very problems that are holding up progress in Nepal.

Question put and agreed to.

11.10 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 26 April 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mental Health

1. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of provision for people with mental health issues in the criminal justice system. [904662]

10. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of provision for people with mental health issues in the criminal justice system. [904672]

14. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of provision for people with mental health issues in the criminal justice system. [904676]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Mental health is taken extremely seriously across the criminal justice system. Mental health services are commissioned by NHS England and by local health boards in Wales, and they are based on locally assessed need. We are working with health partners to improve services in custody and in the community.

Jeff Smith: Liaison and diversion services are really important in ensuring that people with mental health issues get the help they need. The expansion of the programme is welcome, but about half the country is still not covered, and there has been a long wait for the business case on getting to 100%. Will the Minister explain what the delay is, and will she confirm when all areas expect to have a liaison and diversion service in place?

Caroline Dinenage: We have developed liaison and diversion services in partnership with other Departments to divert some offenders away from the criminal justice system and into the support they need. Through that system, clinicians assess those with mental health needs and refer them to the treatment they need—ideally, that happens at the earliest contact with the criminal justice system. The liaison and diversion system is working well, and it is very much a joint government programme. I would like to see it rolled out as early as is convenient, and we will certainly keep the hon. Gentleman updated.

Imran Hussain: The mental health charity Mind has said that people with mental health problems are sometimes unable to advocate for themselves, so cuts to legal aid will undoubtedly have impacted on their ability to access justice. Should the Government not rethink their refusal to conduct a full post-implementation review of the damaging effects their harsh legal aid cuts are having on some of the most vulnerable?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are spending £1.6 billion, so this is one of the most generous legal aid systems in the world. However, he is absolutely right that vulnerable people should be supported at every point in the criminal justice system. That is why the judiciary are trained to be able to assist those people, and the changes to the court system will support that.

Jess Phillips: An increased number of survivors of domestic abuse are forced to represent themselves in the family courts as litigants in person. The 2015 Women’s Aid survey found that 25% of women had been directly questioned by the perpetrator in court. Being cross-examined by the perpetrator, who may have beaten and raped them, is undoubtedly causing mental distress. What is the Minister doing to improve access to legal aid for victims of domestic abuse, as the current system is clearly not working?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Government are absolutely committed to supporting all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses—especially those who have been subjected to domestic abuse—as well as to helping them give the best possible evidence and to seeing offenders brought to justice. That is why we have put in place measures that give witnesses the ability to give evidence using things such as a screen in the courtroom or a live videolink from a separate room or a location away from the court building. The hon. Lady will also know that, following the Court of Appeal judgment, we are taking immediate action to change our arrangements, and we are more than doubling the original time limit for evidence in domestic violence cases, from two to five years, and introducing a provision on the assessment of evidence of financial abuse.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister outline how the Government’s prison reform plans will give prison governors greater autonomy, allowing them to tailor services such as mental health provision for the benefit of all prisoners?

Caroline Dinenage: We are moving towards full co-commissioning of mental health services between governors and NHS England, meaning that prison leaders can have much more say in defining the services their prisoners need and how the available budget is used. That will begin in reform prisons; if successful, it will apply nationwide from 2017. It will be backed by a high-quality, modern prison estate with rehabilitation and treatment at its core.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The criminal justice system is complicated enough whether someone has mental health issues or not. Will the Minister ensure that victims of crime who have mental health issues are given the particular help they need to submit victim impact statements to the court in the proper way?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes; this is absolutely fundamental. Supporting people through their individual circumstances is fundamental to everything we are looking at in the Justice Department at the moment. Judges are trained to be able to support vulnerable witnesses and victims at every stage.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): There is a key relationship between mental health and addiction, so can the Minister assure me that when these matters are dealt with in court there is effective referral to effective treatment? When I accompanied the Justice Secretary to Highbury Corner magistrates court, it was evident that some local authorities had provision for drug treatment, particularly for youth offenders, but other authorities did not. Can we ensure that there is proper, uniform provision when people get referred from court?

Caroline Dinenage: This is a really crucial point. We are already working across Government to bring together mental health and drug and alcohol treatment at every stage, alongside police, courts and prisons and probation. That includes making sure that appropriate treatments are made available if they are part of sentences with mandated health interventions.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Charities like Langley House Trust offer specialist mental health support to prisoners when they have left prison and have been rehabilitated in the community. It has recently acquired a property on Milton Street in Fleetwood. Will the Minister support my call for it to meet the town council this evening to reassure the local community about its fears and to show that charities like Langley House Trust and communities can work together to ensure that prisoners can be rehabilitated?

Caroline Dinenage: I would very much like to look at the circumstances that the hon. Lady has mentioned. Our Transforming Rehabilitation changes have put in place the sort of support that sometimes prisoners who had very short sentences might never have had before. The community rehabilitation company might be able to give some support on that as well.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The jury have just given their verdicts at the inquest into the death of 96 fans at the Hillsborough disaster. Today is a hugely important day for all those who seek to protect and promote justice. In particular, our thoughts are with those families who have fought for almost 30 years to establish the truth of what happened on that day.

The number of suicides in prison between 2013 and 2015 was 53% higher than over the previous two years and amounted to one person tragically taking their life every four days. Only 40% of those who died last year had been identified as at risk under the assessment, care in custody and teamwork process. Will the Minister explain why so many vulnerable prisoners are not being identified in the first place, and even when they are, why so many are not getting the help that they need?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the Hillsborough report. I understand that the Home Secretary will make a statement on that tomorrow.

The hon. Lady is right to say that every self-inflicted death in prison is an absolute tragedy. We are committing to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison. There have been no more this year than there were last year, but every single one is absolutely a tragedy. We will overhaul how mental health is treated in prisons, giving governors a much greater say over what services their prisoners need and how the available budget is used. However, it was Labour's inexplicable refusal to introduce waiting times for mental health care at the same time as introducing them for physical healthcare that set back the cause of mental health for so many years, and in some cases saw people being sentenced to prison in order to access the support that they could not get in the community.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very disappointed that the Secretary of State is not sitting at the very heart of his ministerial team. I hope the right hon. Gentleman is not lurking uncharacteristically in the shadows—we would not want that.

Prisoners: Meaningful Work

2. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What progress his Department has made on ensuring that offenders are engaged in meaningful work in prison.

6. Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What progress his Department has made on ensuring that offenders are engaged in meaningful work in prison.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): We want prisons to be places of hard work and high ambition. That is why we will give governors more autonomy and hold them to account by publishing employment outcomes for prisoners so that we can compare results between prisons.

Victoria Prentis: We know how beneficial employment is for the rehabilitation of young adult offenders, in particular. Will my hon. Friend advise the House on specific plans that he has to increase employment in this cohort?

Andrew Selous: I know how seriously my hon. Friend takes this issue, and she is right to do so. I point her, particularly for young offenders, to construction, where I think that there are huge opportunities. For example, the National Grid young offender scheme has a 10-year reoffending rate of less than 7%. I was with Balfour Beatty, which employs young ex-offenders, in a prison in North Yorkshire last Thursday. We now have two Land Securities construction academies, comprising dry lining, scaffolding and tunnelling. I am assured that the last two activities have been risk assessed. [Laughter.]
Mr Speaker: What a worthy representative the hon. Gentleman is of his Government.

Dr James Davies: Is the Minister aware of an outstanding pathfinder project at North Wales Women’s Centre in Rhyl, in my constituency, which offers holistic support to women offenders in line with recommendations in the Corston report? Will he join me in urging the Government to pursue improved provision and rehabilitation for women offenders to help to avoid the cost and family disruption of incarceration for relatively minor offences?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing the House’s attention to the good work of the North Wales Women’s Centre, and I commend it for what it does. The Government are committed to supporting vulnerable women to turn their lives around, and we plan to expand that important work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Minister and the recumbent Secretary of State that one of the real problems that we face—it is World Autism Week—is that when prisoners go into prison, they are not assessed properly for autism, literacy skills and many other things? Could we have a system in which autism is important? Many people who go into prison are on the autism scale.

Andrew Selous: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue, and I am extremely proud that the United Kingdom has the world’s first autism-accredited prison in Feltham, which I visited recently with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). I want more prisons to go down that route, and he is absolutely right to raise the issue.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister has two laudable objectives: work in prison and reducing reoffending by getting prisoners employment outside prison. How does he intend to achieve those objectives when staffing is under such severe pressure because of the reduction in the number of officers, and when does he intend to produce the guidance to governors on reoffending in their prisons?

Andrew Selous: We continue to recruit prison officers at full throttle. Last year, we recruited 2,250. I am optimistic about the employment agenda as more and more employers realise that our prisons can be part of the answer to the nation’s skills shortage. We will provide governors with all the guidance that they need as we roll out the reform prison agenda.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I do hope that the Minister can assure the House that the prisoners he mentioned a few moments ago were given their tunnelling skills after they left prison, not as a means of departure. Has he looked at some form of apprenticeship programme within prisons to give vocational skills to those who need them?

Andrew Selous: I am very keen to develop the avenue down which my hon. Friend is taking me. We could certainly look at a traineeship, which is often the first step towards an apprenticeship, within prisons. I will shortly meet the apprenticeships Minister—the Minister for Skills—to try to take forward this matter.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister hold discussions with Justice Ministers in the devolved legislatures so that best practice—particularly as practised in the prison in my constituency, where prisoners near the end of their sentence are relocated outside prison for work—is followed and prisoners can do the productive work that leads to lower reoffending rates?

Andrew Selous: I will certainly seek to learn from that best practice. If the hon. Gentleman would be kind enough to write to me with details of the good work going on in the prison in his constituency, I will certainly look at that.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Another day and another critical report is published by the chief inspector of prisons. This time, it is about Lewes prison. The Minister’s words about meaningful work in prison ring very hollow when inspectors found prisoners at Lewes routinely kept in their cells for 23 hours a day. This follows their report on Wormwood Scrubs, which is described as continuing “to fall short of expected standards”.

At the time of their inspection, there was “little cause for optimism.” Suicides, self-harm, violence, psychoactive substances and alcohol finds in prisons, and reoffending rates are at an all-time high. The Justice Secretary has been in his job for a year now, and we have had a lot of talk about reform. Is it not time for him to stop talking and to start doing something?

Andrew Selous: The Government recognise that we have a long way to go to improve our prisons, which is why the Secretary of State has laid out a full reform programme. I went to Wormwood Scrubs last week,
and I can tell the hon. Lady that there were a number of jobs fairs in the prison that have led to jobs. We have a good new governor there, and I am hopeful that we will see improvements. I have looked at the Lewes report. There are of course things that we will take further, but there are also some positives, not least the very good relationship in Lewes between the prison and the community rehabilitation company.

**Prisoner Education**

3. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What plans he has to reform education in prisons. [904665]

11. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What plans he has to reform education in prisons. [904673]

17. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What plans he has to reform education in prisons. [904679]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your tender solicitude earlier, but as you can see, I have an amazingly talented team of Ministers. They are the Arteta, the Oxlade-Chamberlain and the Özil of this Parliament, and for that reason I am very happy to be on the subs bench for most of the time. I am also very happy that you have allowed me to group these questions.

Dame Sally Coates has been leading a review of education in prisons. Her interim report made clear her view that governors should be able to choose their education provider and hold them to account for the service they give.

**David Warburton:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is imperative the recommendations of the Coates review are acted on in a way that focuses on both paths into employment and the wider non-utilitarian personal and moral benefits that education can bring?

**Michael Gove:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Colleagues may know that as well as being a distinguished Member of Parliament, he has also written for Inside Time, the prisoners newspaper, about the need to improve prison education. His own experience both in music and in education equips him superbly to make the point.

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend strikes at the heart of three of the principal problems that prisoners face. It is very often the case that prisoners have had a very poor educational experience. That is one of the reasons—it does not of course absolve them of moral responsibility—why they can often be drawn into criminal activity. As Dame Sally has made clear, we need to screen every prisoner effectively when they arrive in custody so that we can ascertain the level of skills that they have, and we need to judge prisons on the value that they add. As for removing the taint of drugs or substance abuse, that is a huge problem and one to which we will be returning.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But in Ofsted’s annual report, Sir Michael Wilshaw highlighted the fact that provision for learning, skills and work in the prison estate was among some of the worst available in the higher education sector. What more is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that that vital part of prisoners’ rehabilitation is brought up to scratch, as it should be?

**Michael Gove:** Michael Wilshaw has been a brilliant chief inspector, and he is absolutely right about the situation in our prisons. There are some outstanding examples of educational provision in prison, but, sadly, too few. One problem has been that a small group of providers has been responsible for providing education in prison, but large and inflexible contracts have meant that those providers have not necessarily been as responsive to the needs of individual prisoners as they should have been. That is changing, thanks to the Coates report. One thing that will not change, however, is the amount that we spend on education, which has been safeguarded and ring-fenced.

**Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Are there any formal links between the Prison Service and further education colleges to develop the apprenticeship schemes that we heard about earlier?

**Michael Gove:** I am very anxious to expand apprenticeship schemes in prison, and have been working with my hon. Friend. The Minister for Skills, who is responsible for apprenticeships, and of course the prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), do just that. One challenge is that, although, as I say, there are excellent examples of good practice, current further education providers in prisons have not been as responsive as they should have been in every case.

22. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that educational progress in prisons will form one of the metrics of the new league tables for prisons?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that if we give people greater autonomy—governors, in particular—they need to be held to account. It is absolutely vital that, in the new prison accountability measures and league tables, they are held to account for educational performance and the value they add.
Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State’s personal commitment to this issue is very clear from his excellent interview in *Inside Time*, which a lot of us read. Does he accept that, as well as provider quality, one of the biggest obstacles is the fact that in the current prison estate prisoners are locked up for great lengths of time, as the physical facilities needed are not there? That makes it difficult to achieve anything on this. Will he assure us that this issue will be integral to the prison renewal programme and the new estate and new properties coming forward?

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Justice Committee is absolutely right, as is the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), to point out that it is simply not good enough that prisoners are in their cells for up to 22 or 23 hours at a time. Time out of cell is a key indicator of how effectively a prison is run—it is not the only one, but it is really important. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to point out that when we think about new prison design we should concentrate on the time out of cell. I was privileged to visit a prison just outside Berlin where prisoners spend far longer out of their cells than they do at work or in education, than in most institutions in this country. We can learn a great deal from the Germans.

Personal Injury Law

4. Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of planned changes to personal injury law and whiplash claims on access to justice.

Mr Raab: Our reforms are precisely aimed at weeding out spurious, frivolous or trivial claims, and ensuring that we preserve access to justice for important and meritorious claims. At the same time we must ensure that we preserve access to justice for important and meritorious claims. At the same time we must ensure that people who pay their insurance premiums year in, year out, are not penalised by those who are taking the power to strike out fraudulent claims, why should the innocent majority of genuine claimants be penalised because of the potentially criminal behaviour of a few?

Mr Raab: Our reforms are precisely aimed at weeding out spurious, frivolous or trivial claims, and ensuring that we preserve access to justice for important and meritorious claims. At the same time we must ensure that people who pay their insurance premiums year in, year out, are not penalised by those who are taking the system for a ride.

Dangerous Driving: Sentencing

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Question 6, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was quite close, but we are on Question 5. She is ahead of herself, and not for the first time I am sure.

5. Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What progress he has made on reviewing sentencing for causing death by dangerous driving.

Mr Raab: The Government are committed to ensuring that we have robust and consistent punishment for those who cause people to be killed or seriously injured on our roads, and we intend to consult on further proposals this year.

Mr Raab: The Law Society quite properly protects the professional interest of its members. We must consider all evidence that we receive and look at this in the round, rather than just take into account what the lawyers think.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Even if the number of fraudulent claims is as high as the 7% that some believe it is, given that courts already have the power to strike out fraudulent claims, why should the innocent majority of genuine claimants be penalised because of the potentially criminal behaviour of a few?

Mr Raab: Our reforms are precisely aimed at weeding out spurious, frivolous or trivial claims, and ensuring that we preserve access to justice for important and meritorious claims. At the same time we must ensure that people who pay their insurance premiums year in, year out, are not penalised by those who are taking the system for a ride.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): The Government are committed to ensuring that we have robust and consistent punishment for those who cause people to be killed or seriously injured on our roads, and we intend to consult on further proposals this year.

Mr Raab: Our reforms are precisely aimed at weeding out spurious, frivolous or trivial claims, and ensuring that we preserve access to justice for important and meritorious claims. At the same time we must ensure that people who pay their insurance premiums year in, year out, are not penalised by those who are taking the system for a ride.

Heidi Allen: I was unnecessarily keen, as always, Mr Speaker. I asked that question on behalf of one of my constituents, 21-year-old Alex Jeffery, who was killed by a dangerous driver. The sentence given was only four years and three months, and we all know that it will
probably end up being less than that. Will there be a
time when sentences for causing death by dangerous
driving are the same as those for murder? A car can be a
weapon in the wrong hands.

Mr Raab: I am very aware of the tragic case of my
hon. Friend's constituent, and our deepest sympathies
go to his family. Since 2010 the custody rate for causing
death by dangerous driving has risen from 52% to 61%,
and the average prison sentence has risen by around six
months to just under four years. We will look again at
that area, and my hon. Friend is right to say that there
should be commensurable consistency with sentencing
for homicide offences.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The review
of sentencing in this area was announced in May 2014,
so simply to say that there will be “consultation” this
year is not good enough. Will the Minister give the
House a clear date, and will he consider ending the
charge of causing death by careless driving, which
denies families justice?

Mr Raab: As I have said, we will consult this year and
consider the full range of driving offences. It is important
to ensure that there is proper accountability, as well as
consistency between bespoke sentences for offences in
this area and wider sentencing, particularly for homicide
offences.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): One
key driver of deaths on the road, and indeed all dangerous
driving offences, is alcohol. Given the enormous success
of the pilot in Croydon, with 93% compliance, and the
compelling evidence from the United States, will the
Minister consider alcohol abstinence monitoring orders—
otherwise known as compulsory sobriety—as a mandatory
punishment for those who are convicted of driving
offences when alcohol is involved?

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point
that is grounded in practice from overseas, and we
would certainly be willing to consider that during our
consultation.

Courts and Tribunals: Technology

7. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What progress has
been made on the modernisation programme to upgrade
technology in the courts and tribunal estate. [904669]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
(Mr Shailesh Vara): I assure the hon. Lady that significant
progress has been made to upgrade technology in the
courts and tribunal estate. The vast majority of our
criminal courts are now equipped to work digitally, and
we are reducing reliance on paper bundles. New digital
services such as in-court presentation, shared drives and
wi-fi are enabling professional users, the judiciary and
court staff to work digitally.

Holly Lynch: As the Minister knows, the magistrates
court and the family and county court in Halifax are
due to close. An answer to a recent written question
revealed that overall investment plans for the courts and
tribunal estate have not changed or been updated following
the announcement that 86 courts were to close across
the country. What plans are there to update the digitalisation
programme to include measures that ensure that justice
is accessible in areas that are soon to be without a
court?

Mr Vara: I know the hon. Lady takes this issue very
seriously, and I want to assure her that it is at the top of
the agenda in my regular meetings with the senior
management of the Courts and Tribunals Service. A lot
is happening, however, not all of which gets into the
public domain. For example, we are reducing reliance
on paper bundles in the criminal courts, and the digital
case system in Southwark Crown court now holds
over 94,000 pages of information that would otherwise
have been printed in triplicate. Also, the new national
automated rota system for magistrates, which is now
live for 2,500 magistrates, has eliminated a complex and
error-prone manual process.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I
welcome the upgrading of technology in the traditional
court setting—for example, for civil claims, the Rolls
Building now takes claims on line—but will the Secretary
of State also be implementing the more radical proposals
of the Civil Justice Council to include an online dispute
resolution service for low-value claims?

Mr Vara: We are keen to have the most up-to-date
and modern courts system in the world—one fit for the
21st century—and we are ruling nothing out.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The National Audit
Office warned against focusing all our attention on
technology, and not users, so what is being done to
encourage buy-in from the legal profession and to help
with training?

Mr Vara: First, we need to recognise the world we live
in, which is technologically advanced, and we are working
closely with users, lawyers and everyone else involved
in the legal process. I am happy to confirm to the hon.
Gentleman that, at the moment, the buy-in from the
judiciary, the lawyers and the public is very optimistic.

G4S: Secure Training Centres

8. Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab):
What recent discussions he has had with G4S on its
proposal to sell its contracts for the operation of secure
training centres. [904670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
(Andrew Selous): The MOJ has been in regular contact
with G4S. We are closely monitoring the progress of the
potential sale to ensure that it does not jeopardise the
delivery of care at its secure training centres.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am sure the Minister agrees
that the breach of care at Medway secure training
centre demonstrates the risks involved when a state
duty of care is entrusted to a private organisation. How
will he ensure that any transferee of the contracts
observes the duty of care more robustly, and what
assessment has he made of transferring such contracts
back to the public sector?
Andrew Selous: The MOJ retains its rights over determining any transfer of the contracts from G4S, and the Secretary of State appointed an independent improvement board at Medway, whose recommendations we will consider and which will no doubt be of value for the future. Finally, the Charlie Taylor review is looking at youth justice and how to put education at its heart by creating a safe and nurturing environment in which people can make real educational progress.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Next week, we will see a new contract holder for the Rainsbrook secure training centre. The contract has been awarded to an American company called MTC Novo. Given G4S’s appalling record at Rainsbrook and Medway, how can the Minister justify the contract being awarded to a company that has one of its American prisons under judicial oversight, owing to “cruel and unusual punishments” being administered by its staff?

Andrew Selous: I think there is some dispute over MTC’s American history, but I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on that point. We are agnostic on provision; we want the best possible provision. As he will know, G4S runs extremely high-quality prisons in Wales, such as Parc prison at Bridgend. I also remind him that the contract with G4S ran under three successive Labour Governments.

Access to Justice


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shaiilesh Vara): The Government are determined to deliver a swifter and more certain justice system that is more accessible to the public. We are investing £700 million in our courts and tribunals, and our reforms will digitise the justice system to speed up processes and provide services online; remove unnecessary hearings, paper forms and duplication; cut costs for litigants; and make justice more accessible. Moreover, they will remove hearings from the courtroom that do not need to be there; ensure we make full use of judges, courtrooms and legal teams only where necessary; and support people in resolving their disputes by means of more informal and less costly remedies.

Drew Hendry: The UK Government are proposing fee increases of up to £800 for a full hearing in asylum and immigration tribunals. This means that applicants seeking to challenge decisions on their right to enter or remain in the UK will struggle to afford this, despite the Home Office’s often getting the decision wrong. Does the Minister agree with me that access to justice should never depend on an individual’s ability to pay?

Mr Vara: It is important that we have a court and tribunal system that either pays for itself or goes towards paying for itself. In many cases, there is a remission system to which people can apply, as appropriate under the circumstances.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Citizens advice bureaux, including those in Havant, play an important role in helping people to access justice and to understand the legal system. Will the Minister join me in congratulating them on their work and in encouraging more people to use them?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Citizens Advice service provides invaluable advice to the population. I wholeheartedly congratulate citizens advice bureaux, and I suspect I speak for the whole House in commending them for all the wonderful work they do.

15. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Claudia Lawrence from York was last seen on 18 March 2009; she is still missing, as are around 2,500 people in the UK. In the midst of their grief, families have to battle to deal with financial and property affairs, and they need access to justice. There is a simple solution: guardianship on behalf of the missing person. The Government promised this over a year ago. Will the Secretary of State commit to putting it in this year’s Queen’s Speech?

Mr Speaker: That is a very good example of what I call “shoe-horning”. The hon. Lady shoe-horned in a later question into this one, and was just about in order. She is very ingenious.

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady raises a very good point. There is a huge amount of sympathy across the political divide for the individual about whom she spoke. She will appreciate, however, that it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt what will appear in the Queen’s Speech.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): In order to avoid discriminating against people with disabilities, will the Minister confirm that personal independence payments will not be used in calculations that determine whether or not someone is entitled to help with employment tribunal cases?

Mr Vara: Much consideration is given when assessing the criteria to be taken into account. The Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions and others are involved, and it would be inappropriate for me to make a decision right now from the Dispatch Box in the way the hon. Lady asks me to do.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): I listened very carefully to the Minister’s previous answer, but I still find it very difficult to understand that while this Conservative...
Government voted not to take in 3,000 refugee children, the Ministry of Justice is proposing to raise written first-tier immigration and asylum tribunal fees by a massive 512%. How on earth are vulnerable people going to be able to challenge what are quite often errors by the Home Office? Will the Minister please tell me where the justice is in this?

**Mr Vara:** I simply say to the hon. Lady that there are a series of exemptions for vulnerable people. We need to recognise that the court system has to be paid for, and it is perfectly reasonable for the British taxpayer to expect those who use our court system to make a contribution towards its running.

**Legal Aid**

12. **David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing the cost to the public purse of legal aid. [904674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): Before the process of legal aid reform began in 2010, our legal aid system cost the taxpayer over £2 billion each year. During the period 2014-15, the legal aid spend was £1.64 billion.

**David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): Ours is still the only country in the world that pays foreign nationals to sue our own soldiers, and last week the Supreme Court told us that the Government did not have the power to curtail legal aid for that purpose. The only solution, apparently, is primary legislation. Will the Minister tell us how he intends to make progress on this matter?

**Mr Vara:** I refer my hon. Friend to some of the comments that I made earlier. However, he has made a good point about the residence test. He will appreciate that, while I have enormous sympathy with his view—as do many other people, including, in particular, millions in the country outside—we for our part await the written judgment of the Court, and will reflect on it.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Every solicitor who practises in England and Wales, as I did, has a client account. In some jurisdictions in north America, the interest earned on moneys held in client accounts is devoted to legal aid. Would the Government consider introducing such an arrangement in England and Wales?

**Mr Vara:** We already have one of the most generous legal aid budgets in the world. As for what solicitors’ firms do with the interest on client accounts, the regulation of the legal profession is independent of the Government.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): When it comes to legal aid, I wonder what help will be given to the family of Lance Corporal Young. They have been refused legal aid and therefore cannot take civil action against John Downey, the republican bomber who is believed to have been behind the Hyde Park bomb, and who was let off as a result of the “on the run” letters.

**Mr Vara:** All decisions on whether or not legal aid is paid are made independently of Ministers. They are made by the Legal Aid Agency, on the basis of individual cases and individual facts. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I cannot comment in the House on a specific case.

**British Bill of Rights**

13. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When he plans to publish a consultation on a British Bill of Rights. [904675]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): We look forward to presenting proposals for a Bill of Rights in due course, and we will consult on them fully.

**Mr Carmichael:** The Minister will recall saying to me, on 30 June, “the United Kingdom has a strong tradition of respect for human rights that long predates the Human Rights Act 1998. The Government are proud of that tradition and will be true to it in delivering our reforms. As I explained...our plans do not involve us leaving the convention. That is not our objective.”—[Official Report, 30 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 429WH.]

Is that still Government policy?

**Mr Raab:** The right hon. Gentleman was absolutely right when he said last month that the Human Rights Act was not the last word on human rights. I look forward to debating the proposals with him.

The Government’s position on the European convention on human rights remains clear. We cannot rule out withdrawal forever, but our forthcoming proposals do not include it, not least because we have been clearly advised that if we withdrew from the convention while remaining a member of the European Union, that would be an open invitation to the Luxembourg Court to fill the gap, which could have far worse consequences, and also because the convention is written into the Good Friday agreement.

We are confident that we can replace the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights and reform our relationship with the Strasbourg Court, and that is precisely what we intend to deliver.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): A condition of entry for new applicants to join the European Union is that they must be signatories to the European convention on human rights. Would putting into practice the Home Secretary’s welcome announcement yesterday of what I presume is now the Government’s policy to withdraw from the convention require us to leave the European Union?

**Mr Raab:** My hon. Friend is tempting me—coaxing me, I might say—down a route that I am not going to take. I have set out the Government’s position very clearly, and our current plans, at least, do not involve withdrawing from the convention.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister says that he and the Government want to stay in the convention, but we know that he wants to leave the European Union. The Home Secretary told us yesterday that she wants to leave the convention, but she wants to remain in the European Union. Should we
understand that the Government are as divided on the question of ECHR membership as they are on the question of EU membership?

Mr Raab: No.

Joanna Cherry: SNP Members have been asking for a long time when the Government will publish their consultation paper on repeal of the Human Rights Act. Does the Minister understand that the Home Secretary’s statement yesterday has caused particular concern in Scotland, because in Scotland the convention is embedded in the devolution settlement, as it is in the other devolved Administrations? Does he appreciate that the convention could never be withdrawn from without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, and that there is no question of that consent ever being given?

Mr Raab: I hope that I have reassured the hon. and learned Lady by reiterating the Government’s position.

Topical Questions

T1. [904652] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to associate myself with the remarks made earlier by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). Today we had the decision by the jury sitting in the inquest into the tragic death of 96 people at Hillsborough. It has been a terrible tragedy, and it has taken a long time for those families to arrive at justice. Today is a significant day and I simply want to place on record my thanks to the coroner and his team and to the jury for their work.

Mims Davies: Victims of domestic violence need a modern family court system that provides special, well considered safety measures for people who are directly facing the perpetrators of those horrific crimes. Can the Minister assure me that the Department is doing everything possible to ensure that we have a modern family court system that protects vulnerable individuals at those times?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Yes, the Government are absolutely committed to supporting all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, especially those who have been subjected to domestic abuse, to help them to give the best possible evidence so that offenders can be brought to justice. That is why we have put measures in place including, as I said earlier, the ability to give evidence while screened from the accused in the courtroom, by live video link from a separate room within the court building or from a location away from the court building altogether. Our changes to the courts will only help this.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): In a year of saying little and doing less on his flagship manifesto policy of repealing the Human Rights Act, the one thing that the Lord Chancellor has made clear is his position on the European convention on human rights. To quote his official spokesman in February, “Our plans”—not “our current plans”—do not involve leaving the convention”.

We now know that the Home Secretary said yesterday that we should leave the ECHR regardless of the result of the EU referendum. So who is right on this? What is today’s policy, and who is in charge of justice policy? It does not seem to be the Lord Chancellor.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind inquiry as to my welfare. The policy is as was spelled out earlier by my admirable colleague the Minister with responsibility for human rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab).

Andy Slaughter: Let me make sure that I have got this right. We have the leaders of the Tory Brexit campaign saying that we will stay in the ECHR, while the Home Secretary is explaining her support for remain by saying that we should leave the convention altogether. Is that not a shambles? Was not the former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), right to say that the Lord Chancellor’s “single-issue obsession” with Brexit means that he is “no longer seeing the wood for the trees” and that he is relying on arguments that are “unfounded and untenable”?

Michael Gove: I am, as so often, at one with my right hon. and learned Friend. Both of us believe that we should remain within the European convention on human rights. Both of us also recognise that a far greater threat to our liberty and sovereignty is the European Court of Justice, which he has described as an institution that is “predatory” and often inimical to Britain’s interests. That is a view I share.

T2. [904653] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Last week, the Justice Committee was at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where the judges praised the UK for incorporating the Court’s principles into our law to provide effective redress. However, the Lord Chancellor wants to tear up the Human Rights Act and it now looks as though the Home Secretary wants to leave the convention altogether. I know that an attempt was made to get an answer to this question earlier, but can we actually have some clarity on this? To the outside world, it looks as though the Conservatives have a blind spot in relation to anything containing the words “European” and “human rights”.

Mims Davies: The Government are absolutely committed to staying within the European convention on human rights. We now know that the Home Secretary said yesterday that we should leave the ECHR regardless of the result of the EU referendum. So who is right on this? What is today’s policy, and who is in charge of justice policy? It does not seem to be the Lord Chancellor.

Michael Gove: I am, as so often, at one with my right hon. and learned Friend. Both of us believe that we should remain within the European convention on human rights. Both of us also recognise that a far greater threat to our liberty and sovereignty is the European Court of Justice, which he has described as an institution that is “predatory” and often inimical to Britain’s interests. That is a view I share.

T3. [904654] David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): In view of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association’s campaign concerning certain cases relating to taxi and private hire drivers refusing carriage to guide dog owners, will the Minister tell the House what the Government’s position is on this important issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Yes, the Government are absolutely committed to supporting all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, especially those who have been subjected to domestic abuse, to help them to give the best possible evidence so that offenders can be brought to justice. That is why we have put measures in place including, as I said earlier, the ability to give evidence while screened from the accused in the courtroom, by live video link from a separate room within the court building or from a location away from the court building altogether. Our changes to the courts will only help this.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): The European convention can be implemented in UK law, but we have to trust the Supreme Court to apply it. It is odd that the Labour party, which set up the British Supreme Court, is so keen to subordinate it to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that when the Government bring forward their plans for a British Bill of Rights, they will restore power to the British Supreme Court and British common sense to the human rights debate?

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend makes that point powerfully. It is precisely one of the issues that we want to address.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Joint Committee on Human Rights was also in Strasbourg last week and heard testimony from representatives of countries that do not enjoy the tradition of stable democracy and human rights that we have in this country. Their message was clear: Britain provides leadership and inspiration in a troubled world. What kind of message do Ministers think they are now sending by providing such confusion and ambivalence over Britain’s commitment to the European convention on human rights?

Mr Raab: The Government led the world on human rights before the Human Rights Act and will do so afterwards.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Too many prisoners enter and leave prison without qualifications. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that prisoners get recognised qualifications in prison, so that they can have a second chance and a second career when they leave jail?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under a Conservative Mayor of London, tough action has been taken against crime. That is why it is vital that the Conservative candidate secures election on 5 May instead of the radical, divisive figure whom Labour has chosen as its candidate.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): A report by Citizens Advice states that “nine out of 10 people who have gone through the family courts, under new rules that heavily restrict access to legal aid, suffer strain in their mental and physical health, working lives and finances”, which is surely unacceptable. What will the Minister do to put that right?

Mr Vara: As was said earlier, much is being done for people who need legal aid, particularly in the family courts. Our judges are aware of the difficulties of the people before them and are trained to help and assist them. The Government have also provided much money and support for litigants in person. People talk about more legal aid, but it is important to remember that it is taxpayers’ money and to recognise that we spend £1.6 billion on legal aid, which is one of the largest such budgets in the world.

T8. Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to identify and remove preachers who are radicalising prison inmates?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend draws attention to an important issue. Shortly after being appointed, I asked Ian Acheson, a former prison governor with experience of working with the Home Office, to consider radicalisation and extremism in our prisons. He recently submitted a report to me, and we will be acting on it and publishing it shortly.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) highlighted the division between Government Members on membership of the European convention on human rights and the European Union. Does the Minister agree that that sends a message to my constituents that a single, stand-alone Bill of Rights would not be fit in a 21st-century system of legal governance? Does he also agree that we need something more, which is to remain part of the European Union and the ECHR?

Mr Raab: I have set out the position on the ECHR clearly. When it comes to a Bill of Rights to replace the Human Rights Act, we will consult widely, including the devolved Administrations.

T9. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Last year, 15 teenagers were tragically stabbed on the streets of London. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential that we elect a Mayor of London on 5 May with an action plan to drive knives off the streets and to ensure tougher sentences?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under a Conservative Mayor of London, tough action has been taken against crime. That is why it is vital that the Conservative candidate secures election on 5 May instead of the radical, divisive figure whom Labour has chosen as its candidate.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State in a position to inform the House when he expects the review of education in prisons conducted by Dame Sally Coates to be published?

Michael Gove: It will be after 5 May, when I hope our Conservative candidate is returned as Mayor of London and also when I hope that Ruth Davidson takes over as leader of the Opposition in the Scottish Parliament. It will be a triple reason to celebrate.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): A constituent of mine and her sisters were sexually abused by their father over many years. He is now in prison. The sisters were eligible for compensation, but my constituent was not as her abuse stopped before 1979, yet she continues to suffer the trauma of the abuse. Will the Minister please look again at this unfair rule?

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): My hon. Friend kindly informed me of this case, and I would like to meet his constituents, if possible. This is difficult because even when the 1964 scheme was amended in 1979 this was not done.
I can understand what the family are going through, but it is a difficult situation when a line is drawn and a date is put in any compensation scheme. It has not been retrospective in the past, and probably will not be in the future.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): What use is made of ex-prisoners who have undergone mental health treatment in our prisons to feed back into our mental health service and perhaps support current prisoners who are undergoing this treatment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Ex-prisoners are very useful in rehabilitation, drug abuse and other services, and we will absolutely explore what further role they can play in mental health services as we progress work in that area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway) is to be congratulated on her marathon on Sunday. She is looking in remarkably good nick.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Perhaps my colleagues would like to join me next year, as I try to smash my time of seven hours and 17 minutes.

Last month, I visited a prison in Nottingham that serves as a primary prison for many offenders in Derby. Today, an ongoing inquest into the death of a Derby man who died in his cell revealed that traces of legal highs were found in his body. What assurances can the Minister give me that the Department is doing all it can to tackle the levels of legal highs in our prison system?

Andrew Selous: Obviously, my hon. Friend raises a tragic case, and I can tell her that it will shortly be a criminal offence to possess lethal highs, as I prefer to call them, in prison. In addition, we are starting a testing regime. Together, those two measures will help us get on top of this evil trade in our prisons.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Understanding the impact of crimes on victims should be central to education in prisons. What steps are Ministers taking to help develop that agenda, particularly among prisoners who have committed the most serious crimes?

Mike Penning: I believe the whole House would think that restorative justice, and victims’ involvement in it, is crucial. That will be part of the victims’ law proposals that we will come forward with in this Parliament.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to early publication of the report on counter-radicalisation policy within prisons? He will understand the significance of this issue, and the Justice Committee is carrying out an inquiry into prisoner safety as part of that. Will he and his ministerial team come to update us on progress on that report?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted to do that. The Chairman of the Select Committee’s question gives me an opportunity to confirm that we will be publishing the report in a suitably edited form, because it contains some material that cannot be shared in the public domain as it relates to sensitive security issues. I would, however, be delighted to accept an invitation from the Select Committee to talk to it, both about the problems that have been identified and the steps we need to take. I know how much the Committee wants to ensure that appropriate steps are taken, and I look forward to appearing before it as soon as is possible.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): A National Probation Service report on the murder of my constituent’s sister has just been published. Davinia Loynton was brutally murdered by an offender who had been released on licence, following a conviction for previous violent crime. The report shows that there were a number of failings by the NPS. Will the Minister review the serious further offence report into this tragic death and ensure that Dale Loynton is satisfied that the NPS is doing what needs to be done to ensure that the public are properly protected?

Andrew Selous: I am sure the whole House would want to pass on their deepest sympathies to the family of Davinia Loynton following this horrific incident. Although the serious further offence review makes it clear that Kevin Hyden bears the full responsibility for Miss Loynton’s death, it also found that the NPS could have done more. As such, we will make sure that the NPS does all it can to learn the lessons from this tragedy so that future operational practice can be improved.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Having represented many innocent drivers who have been caught up in fraudulent low-velocity impact claims, I have seen how rackets are operating to exploit the low thresholds, and the technical and legal loopholes. I therefore welcome the rise in the small claims threshold. Will the Minister confirm whether there are any plans to explore reform of the standard of proof, evidential requirements and causation to make it even more difficult for such unmeritorious claims to succeed?

Mr Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We will have a proper consultation on that in due course, and she raises the kind of issue I imagine we can incorporate and consider at length.
European Convention on Human Rights: UK Membership

12.34 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Office if she will make a statement on the UK’s membership of the European convention on human rights.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I am answering this urgent question today on behalf of the Home Secretary, but my right hon. Friend will be making a statement to this House on the Hillsborough inquest findings tomorrow. Mr Speaker, I hope that it is in order for me to make a brief comment on that subject before I turn to the right hon. Gentleman’s question.

As the House knows, the inquest jury has now returned its verdict. I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in thanking the jurors for the considerable public service that they have performed. As a result, this morning I have written to Members advising that care be exercised when making public statements, to ensure that nothing is said that suggests that any individual or organisation has been found to be criminally liable. Ultimately, a jury in a criminal trial may need to decide that issue, and it is important that nothing is said that may prejudice the right to a fair trial, or make it more difficult to pursue appropriate prosecutions.

On the subject of this urgent question, the United Kingdom is a founder member of the European convention on human rights, and lawyers from the United Kingdom were instrumental in the drafting of the European convention. We are signatories to the convention and we have been clear throughout that we have no objections to the text of the convention; it is indeed a fine document that enshrines rights that British citizens and others should continue to hold as part of a reformed human rights framework.

However, this Government were elected with a mandate to reform and modernise the UK human rights framework: the 2015 Conservative party manifesto said that a Conservative Government would scrap the Human Rights Act and introduce a British Bill of Rights. As with all elements of our manifesto, we intend to meet that commitment in the course of this Parliament. Members will be aware that we have set out our intention to consult on the future of the UK’s human rights framework both in this country and abroad, and that consultation will be published in due course. We will fully consult on our proposals before introducing legislation; in doing so, we will welcome constructive contributions from all parts of the House.

The intention of reform is to protect human rights, to prevent the abuse of human rights law and to restore some common sense to the system. The Prime Minister has been clear throughout that we “rule out absolutely nothing in getting that done”. Our preference, though, is to seek to achieve reforms while remaining members of the European convention. Our reforms will focus on the expansionist approach to human rights by the Strasbourg court and under the Human Rights Act, but although we want to remain part of the ECHR, we will not stay in at any cost. We have been clear that if we cannot achieve a satisfactory settlement within the ECHR, we may have no option but to consider withdrawal.

However, the question before the people of the United Kingdom in June—again, thanks to this Government—is not about our future membership of the European convention on human rights, but about our future membership of the European Union. It is important that, in taking that significant decision, people do not conflate those separate questions.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear: the United Kingdom has a proud tradition of respect for human rights that long pre-dates the Human Rights Act—and, indeed, the European convention on human rights. Any reforms that we make will maintain that protection. Those are not just words. This Government and the coalition Government who preceded them have a strong record on human rights, both here and abroad.

We brought forward the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to protect some of the most vulnerable and exploited people in our society and to punish those responsible for that exploitation. We have fought to promote and protect human rights internationally. We are one of the leading members of the UN Human Rights Council, leading negotiations to set up international investigations into human rights abuses in Syria and elsewhere. We have transformed the fight against sexual violence in conflict, persuading more than 150 states to agree for the first time that sexual violence should be recognised as a grave breach of the Geneva convention. We have been leading the world on the business and human rights agenda: we are one of the first states to argue for the UN’s “Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights”, and the first state in the world to implement them through a national action plan.

That is a track record of which we can justifiably be proud, and it is that track record on which we will build when we set out proposals for the reform of the human rights framework in the United Kingdom.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the Attorney General for that answer. I should make it clear that I hold him in the very highest regard; I enjoyed working with him as a Minister in the previous Government. But he is not the Home Secretary, and he should not be responding to the urgent question today. The Home Secretary was the one who could make the speech yesterday and she can, apparently, come and make a statement tomorrow. She should be here today. Yesterday she went rogue; today she has gone missing.

There is total confusion at the heart of Government policy. What the Attorney General has just said at the Dispatch Box contradicts clearly what has been said previously. Yesterday the Home Secretary said:

“The ECHR can bind the hands of parliament, adds nothing to our prosperity, makes us less secure by preventing the deportation of dangerous foreign nationals—and does nothing to change the attitudes of governments like Russia’s when it comes to human rights. So regardless of the EU referendum, my view is this: if we want to reform human rights laws in this country, it isn’t the EU we should leave but the ECHR and the jurisdiction of its court.”

That contradicts what the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab),
who has responsibility for human rights, previously told the House at Justice questions and in a succession of Westminster Hall debates. On 30 June, he said:

“...our plans do not involve us leaving the convention; that is not our objective” —[Official Report, 30 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 426WH.]

Clearly, there has been a major shift in Government policy and this House should have been the first to hear about it. The Home Secretary tells us that she wants to remain in the European Union but leave the convention; the Under-Secretary of State for Justice wants to leave the EU but remain in the convention; and the Lord Chancellor wants to leave the European Union, stay in the convention, but ignore the jurisprudence of the Court. Thank goodness we do not have the instability of a coalition Government any more.

It has been apparent for some time that everything in Government thinking is seen through the prism of the European Union referendum. Now it seems that the Home Secretary has taken that to the next level. She has an eye on the next election—the Conservative leadership election.

To be a member of the European Union requires us to be a party to the European convention. How is the Home Secretary’s speech yesterday consistent with that policy? The devolved settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have the European convention hard-wired into them. They are required to abide by the convention. How can that be done if the United Kingdom as a country is no longer a party to the convention? Does the Attorney General, a decent man who genuinely respects human rights, honestly want to see his country and mine stand alone with Belarus against the convention?

The Attorney General: May I start by returning the right hon. Gentleman’s compliments? I very much enjoyed serving in government with him and I have the highest regard for him as an individual. He is a little unfair about coalition government; in my experience, it was not unstable much of the time. We should recognise—he and I, and all other Members of the House—that what we did in coalition was to produce pieces of legislation such as the Modern Slavery Act that recognised the real actions we could take in pursuit of defending human rights, and this Government will continue that course.

It is not right to say, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested, that there is confusion on this policy. I have set it out and he was here in the Chamber when my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Justice did the same. There is no confusion here. What has been said throughout—by the Prime Minister and all other Ministers—is that we rule nothing out in seeking to achieve the policy objective that we have set and for which we have a clear mandate from the recent general election.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about membership of the European Union. It is not, I am afraid, in any way clear that membership of the European Union requires membership of the European convention on human rights; as with most of these things—he and I are both lawyers—he will understand that there are considerable legal complexities, so that is certainly not a clear statement that I or he can make.

Let me simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman: what the Home Secretary was doing yesterday—in a speech with which, I suspect, he broadly agreed, and which I certainly found made a very persuasive case for remaining in the European Union—was setting out some of the difficulties with the human rights landscape as it stands. We think there are considerable difficulties: there is an absence of common sense and there have been cases that have demonstrated that human rights law is headed in the wrong direction. Restoring that common sense is the objective of the entire Government.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that our fight against terrorism and excessive immigration has been persistently undermined by not only the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg but the European Court of Justice adjudicating on the charter of fundamental rights, and that the only answer is to leave the European Union?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree that there have been cases in both Luxembourg and Strasbourg with which we have found difficulty and which we have sought to contest. It is certainly right, as my hon. Friend suggests, that not everything about our membership of the European Union is wonderful, and the Home Secretary made that point very clearly yesterday. However, it is a question of deciding whether, on balance, it is right or wrong to be in the European Union—whether, on balance, it is better or worse for the United Kingdom to be there—and he and I have come to different conclusions on that.

On my hon. Friend’s specific point about the charter of fundamental rights, he will know that the charter covers areas where European law is applicable; it does not cover other areas, so it is not quite the same as our membership of the European convention on human rights.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): One thing we can say about this Government is that we are not short of a choice of policy on the European convention on human rights. The Prime Minister reminded us yesterday that he wants to see reform of the ECHR—not, we note, withdrawal. The former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who is on the sensible wing of the Tory party, called the ECHR a “central pillar of foreign policy.”

When the Ministry of Justice clarified its position in February—that took some time—its line was:

“Our plans do not involve leaving the convention”

and the Justice Secretary has repeated that today. However, the Home Secretary was absolutely clear yesterday that we should leave the ECHR, whatever the outcome of the EU referendum. What status do the Home Secretary’s remarks have? Are they Government policy? Do they bind the MOJ and the Government, or is it just the Home Office that is coming out of the convention?

It is always a pleasure to see the Attorney General, and I mean no disrespect when I say that this is rather like “Hamlet” without the prince—or the princess. Why could the Home Secretary, or even the Lord Chancellor, not have clarified Government policy, as they have caused the confusion? [Interruption.] It would be comic if it were not tragic.

The Home Secretary has set out a series of legal nonsenses. She claims there is no connection between the EU and the ECHR, but it is a requirement of EU membership that countries joining the EU sign up to
the ECHR. She elides the fact that European Court of Human Rights judgments are advisory and that the UK Parliament remains sovereign. She wrongly dismisses the importance of Britain’s membership of the convention as an example to Putin and his ilk, downplaying this country’s record on human rights and its influence in Europe. She also ignores the success of the Human Rights Act in incorporating the ECHR into UK law, giving a remedy to vulnerable people suffering discrimination.

I thought the legal, moral and practical arguments had persuaded the Government to abandon attempts to leave the ECHR. We are not going to deal with the legal and technical arguments today, but will the Attorney General say when the consultation will be published so that we can get down to that? Will he at least clarify today what the Government’s policy is? If what the Home Secretary said is not Government policy, what is the status of her remarks? Are they just a stump speech for the Tory party leadership?

The Attorney General: It is, of course, an immense pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman too. I pass over what I am sure my hon. Friends, at least, will regard as the supreme irony of being lectured by a member of the Labour party about unity and common purpose.

What the hon. Gentleman will find is that I am saying, the Home Secretary is saying and the Lord Chancellor is saying that the status quo on human rights law is not acceptable so we are bringing forward proposals for reform. We will do that when they are ready. The contrast is marked between what Conservative Members say, which is that there is a deficit of common sense in much of human rights law, and what Labour Members say, which is that the status quo is fine, all is well and we should leave it all alone. The hon. Gentleman will find that many of his constituents, like many of mine, do not think the status quo is acceptable and do wish to see reform. That is what we had a mandate for in the general election, and that is what this Government will deliver.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does not this unholy muddle demonstrate the trouble we get into when we contract out our policy to the tabloid leader writers? Is it not the truth that the simplicities that suit them override this immensely complex issue and that our nation should send out a message about our commitment to human rights through an unswerving commitment to the convention? The Court has been made to work better over the course of the past four years, not least by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and others. I have mentioned some of the things that we have achieved, and there have been others. We were the Government, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, who reduced the maximum period that someone can spend in detention without charge to 28 days. We were the Government, too, who abolished ID cards. These are pro-human-rights measures. We demonstrate our commitment to the protection of human rights by what we do.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Attorney General for what he has said so far, but his response, and the absence of the Home Secretary, simply will not do. There is confusion here. Less than an hour ago, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), assured me that the Government have no plans to withdraw from the ECHR, but yesterday in her speech the Home Secretary said that withdrawing from the ECHR was a must. Why is she not here to answer this urgent question? Does she not realise that what she said yesterday has caused grave concern across these islands, particularly in Scotland?

I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House that the unity and purpose missing from the Conservative and Labour parties is present in the Scottish National party in relation to the ECHR and human rights, and also present in the majority of the elected Members of the Scottish Parliament, who made it very clear that under no circumstances would they ever consent to a repeal of the Human Rights Act.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, the ECHR is hard-wired into the Scotland Act. Everything that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament do is governed by the ECHR. I assure the British Government that given the composition of the current Scottish Parliament and the likely composition of the next one, there is no question of the Scottish Parliament ever giving its consent to Britain’s withdrawing from the ECHR. Does the Home Secretary not realise that if Britain were to attempt to withdraw from the ECHR, it would cause a constitutional crisis within these islands?

On EU law, it is correct that all EU member states and candidate states are required to be signatories to the convention. If the Attorney General is in any doubt about that, he could consult a number of legal academics, including Professor Sionaidh Douglas-Scott, the professor of European and human rights law at Oxford University, who has written extensively on this issue. I was going to suggest that the Attorney General needed to give the Home Secretary a tutorial on European Union law, but if he does not accept that signatories to the EU must also be signatories to the convention, perhaps he himself needs such a tutorial. [Interruption.] Yes, there is a question. When will this much-promised consultation come forward? Prevarication will not do any longer. When will the Government bring it forward, and will it include withdrawal from the ECHR as well as the HRA?

The Attorney General: There is a risk in this discussion that we make a little too much of what happened yesterday. Let us be clear. I have said a number of times,
and the hon. and learned Lady has heard different members of the Government make it clear a number of times, what our policy is in relation to human rights reform. I say again that the Prime Minister has been clear and we have all been clear—we rule nothing out. It follows from that that we do not rule out withdrawal from the convention should we not be able to achieve the changes that we all believe are necessary.

I accept that the hon. and learned Lady’s party and the official Opposition do not take the view that the status quo is unacceptable; we disagree about that. What I find odd about her position and, indeed, that of the official Opposition is that, as far as I can tell, they are saying to us: “Whatever you do on human rights reform we will oppose it. There is nothing you can do that we will ever support. There is no reform you can bring forward that we would ever regard as valid, but would you please get on and bring forward your reforms, which we will oppose anyway whatever you say?” That is not a sensible position for her and her colleagues to take.

The hon. and learned Lady is right, of course, that whatever proposals we make, there will be significant devolution consequences. As she has heard me say, and ministerial colleagues say, when we bring forward proposals we will ensure that full consultation happens with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we work through those issues.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Those of us who represent this House in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are acutely aware of the fact that the convention on human rights has been extended way beyond the original remit that was drawn up, in part by the United Kingdom, in the immediate aftermath of the second world war. My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to seek to pursue changes. Will he do so as swiftly as possible to get the thing back under control?

The Attorney General: The difficulty, as I have said, is not with the convention but with its interpretation, which has been extended well beyond what the original drafters intended. Perhaps the most evident example of that is in so-called extra-territorial jurisdiction. It was not intended that those conducting themselves and making decisions on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan should be subject to European human rights law; we have international humanitarian law that does a good job in that field, and it was not intended that that should happen. My hon. Friend is therefore entirely right.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): The more the Attorney General and the Justice Secretary say that they have not ruled out the UK leaving the European convention on human rights, the more it sounds to me like exactly the direction of travel they intend to take, and I find that chilling. The Attorney General cited the proud tradition of this country in establishing this international system of guaranteeing human rights here and abroad, yet it is that very proud tradition that he appears to be about to kick into the gutter. Does he recognise that we cannot both be a signatory to the European convention and reject the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights?

It is not just about having these substantive rights and paying lip service to them; it is about accepting the jurisdiction of the international court to enforce those rights. Does he recognise that every Government in this country needs to have that restraint? All Governments are tempted to abuse their power, and this international system is an important guarantee. Does he recognise, as Conservative Members have said, how important it is for those who are struggling for human rights in other countries to be part of a system that we play a part in guaranteeing? I hope that enough Members in this House and the other place will share that view, so that, if the Government drift towards a position of trying to leave the European convention, this Parliament will stop them.

The Attorney General: I will start at the end of what the right hon. and learned Lady has said. She is quite right to say that the example that we set to other countries is something that should occupy our minds. Again, I make the point that the example we set comes from our actions—from what we do—and I do not think that there is any prospect of this Government or any other likely British Government moving away from a clear wish to protect human rights in this country and abroad. I have set out some of the ways in which the Government have done that.

I think that the right hon. and learned Lady attaches too much significance to the convention and the Human Rights Act. I understand why those who were in office in the Labour Government that introduced that Act feel very attached to it. She must also recognise that that Act and what it attempted to do—no doubt from the best of motives—have been tarnished by a number of cases that followed, which have led many of our constituents to believe that “human rights” is a term to be deprecated, not a term to be supported and celebrated. I am sure that she and I agree that we need to get back to a place where all our citizens are keen to support human rights and their protection.

My final point is this. In terms of restraint and what we are prevented from doing, as the right hon. and learned Lady would put it, by our membership of the convention on human rights, I am surprised that a former Law Officer overlooks the role of our own courts, which are robust in the way in which they hold Government to account and restrict the freedom of manoeuvre of Ministers—quite rightly so. I do not believe that we need to rely solely on the exercises of foreign jurisdictions to restrict our Government appropriately.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Attorney General has been properly measured and thoughtful in his comments. There is a lot of fuss about what is really obiter dicta at the moment. Does he accept that the commitment of the Government and our domestic courts to human rights is demonstrated by the fact that only 0.4% of live cases before the ECHR involve the United Kingdom as a state party? Does he also accept that, as is recognised by many Strasbourg jurists, it would be perfectly possible to take word for word the protections in the convention and incorporate them into a British Bill of Rights, while staying entirely compliant with the convention, as most of us would wish to be?
**The Attorney General:** There are, as my hon. Friend wisely suggests, many ways in which reform might be achieved. I will not, of course, pre-empt the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor will introduce. My hon. Friend is right that there are many cases that the United Kingdom fights and wins, and it is worth recognising that. He will recognise, however, that one of our difficulties is the fact that, even when we fight and win, we spend a good deal of time and effort doing so. If cases are brought because people are encouraged to do so by an expansionist view of human rights law in Europe and elsewhere, we have to spend a good deal of time and effort dealing with those cases when perhaps that is not appropriate.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The convention on human rights was drawn up by British lawyers and has been hugely powerful in spreading standards of human rights and our common humanity not only across Europe, but much more widely. The Home Secretary did not say yesterday, “We should try to reform the Court and then have a think about it.” She said that we must pull out of the convention. Is that the Government’s policy—yes or no?

**The Attorney General:** I think I have been very clear about what the Government’s policy is. The Home Secretary yesterday explained why the status quo is unacceptable. There is a difference between the convention that was drawn up in the 1950s and the interpretation given to it by judges in Strasbourg since that time. It is with the latter that we have an issue, not with the former.

**Sir Edward Garnier** (Harborough) (Con): One of the great advantages of the Attorney General’s coming to speak on behalf of the Home Secretary is that he is not enmeshed in the near-Trappist reticence that normally applies to a Law Officer. Given the freedom that the Home Secretary has kindly given him, will he invite her, next time he has a candid conversation with her, to explain something to the Turkish journalists, media organisations, police and judges, all of whom have been the subject of some pretty revolting treatment by the Turkish Government, and who look to the convention and to the Court for protection that they cannot get in their domestic courts and jurisdiction? Will he ask the Home Secretary to look those people in the face and say that we leaving the convention would not affect their rights or undermine their proper reliance on the standards of civilised behaviour, with which I thought we agreed?

**The Attorney General:** There is very little doubt that I have fundamentally abrogated my Trappist vows this morning. My right hon. and learned Friend makes the crucial point that there are real human rights abuses in the world today, and this country should stand four-square against those abuses. We should do so regardless of what international convention we may be part of and regardless of what Act we have passed. We should make that position clear; as I have no doubt responsible Governments in this country will do, now and in the future. It is important that the Foreign Office and, indeed, all parts of Government do their part to enhance human rights here and abroad.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): Post-1945 Europe should be proud to have such a convention, which has existed for so many years. If the argument is that from time to time, the judgments are faulty, what about judgments in this country, such as those in the cases of the Birmingham six and the Guildford four? Surely, they were hardly an argument for changing our judicial system. The reason the Attorney General is putting this forward, whether or not it represents his own personal and political views, is that there is an extreme element in the Conservative party that deeply resented having the convention in the first place.

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say that no court system is perfect. All systems are capable of making mistakes, and we should be grateful for the fact that our judicial system permits those mistakes to be corrected, as they were in the cases that he mentioned. I do not think that that is comparable to the exercise that has been conducted by Strasbourg jurisprudence on the European convention on human rights, which has moved that document fundamentally away from its founders’ intentions. That is a different thing. The Labour party is content to allow it to proceed, but we are not content to let it go.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): A rule of thumb in life, I have found, is that when you throw a grenade, you usually retreat for cover. I wish that the Home Secretary were here to answer this urgent question, because I feel as though this has come up under the pressure of concerns about criminals, borders and so on. Conflating the two issues is fundamentally wrong. I would like to know whether the Home Secretary discussed her views before she made them known, because bringing them up now has made it look as though our Government are in disarray over the matter, and that is not acceptable. The Home Secretary should make it very clear whether she supports being in the ECHR. I respect my right hon. Friend’s views on the matter, but we cannot get away from the fact that she made a very clear statement yesterday, which was not helpful in the debate that many of us are having about control of our borders and criminals coming and going.

**The Attorney General:** I understand my hon. Friend’s concerns. If she reads the speech that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made yesterday, however, she will see that there was no conflation of the European convention on human rights and our membership of the European Union; indeed, my right hon. Friend made it very clear that they are two different things, to be approached in different ways. I do not think that there is a conflation, and we must all be cautious about making sure that we understand clearly what our colleagues are saying before we comment on it.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): Following on from the comments that the Attorney General has just made, does he accept that there is a distinct parallel? Six months ago, many Members in this Chamber accepted the sincerity of the Government’s statement that they ruled nothing out but would seek substantial and meaningful reform of the European Union. If the point made yesterday was that the European convention on human rights is binding on this country and that that is a problem, why should Members accept today the veracity
of statements about reforming or leaving? Does not the speech made yesterday prove the fundamental principle that, when someone tries to please everyone, in the end, they please no one?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we have not succeeded in pleasing everyone. I grant him that, but there is no doubt, so far as the European Union question is concerned, that the Government’s position is very clear. It is that we have secured substantial and meaningful reform, and on that basis the Government can recommend to the British public that we should remain within the European Union. We are all entitled to our own views about whether that judgment is right or wrong, but that is the Government’s judgment. We have not yet made the same judgment about the European convention on human rights, because we have not yet brought forward our proposals or, indeed, negotiated a different settlement. That issue is yet to be determined, which is why it is in a different category from the European Union question.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I support my right hon. and learned Friend in making the case for sensible reform of our domestic human rights architecture. Is it not the case that whether such human rights are upheld in a supranational court or by our own courts and Parliament, there is no doubt that there will always be respect for fundamental human rights in this country, many of which have been guarded and promoted by Parliament itself? By contrast, is it not the case that the most egregious human rights abuses are found abroad, as evidenced, for instance, by the brutal murder of the editor of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender magazine in Bangladesh yesterday? Should the UK not use the full force of its influence to stand against such abuses?

The Attorney General: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. He makes the case very well for what we consider to be a sensible way.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Attorney General confirm that, if the Home Secretary’s wish came true, the UK would no longer have a British judge at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and we would therefore not be party to making judgments to uphold international law across the whole of Europe?

The Attorney General: Again, I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is more to help to promote human rights, and we should continue to do so.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for showing himself also to be gallant in defending the Home Secretary’s position? There seem to be a couple of errors in her speech. One was that she said it was the European Court of Human Rights that stopped us deporting foreign people, when it was in fact the ECJ that stopped Abu Hamza’s daughter-in-law being removed, contrary to the Home Secretary’s view.

On the issue of whether we have to be in the European convention on human rights while in the EU, I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to article 6.3 of the treaty on European Union:

“Fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the European Convention...shall constitute general principles of the Union’s law.”

Furthermore, the Commission, when asked specifically what would happen if a member state left the convention, said it would consider using article 7, which allows for the suspension of a member’s voting rights. It seems to me that, for once, European treaties are written in clear language that is understandable even to non-lawyers.

The Attorney General: On my hon. Friend’s last point, if only that were true. I do not think there is the simplicity that he suggests there is on that point. He is of course right that ECHR principles contribute to European Union via the charter, but that is not the same as putting together the European convention on human rights and European law and saying that they are indistinguishable and indivisible from each other. That is not the position.

In relation to deportation, the difficulty we often face, as my hon. Friend will know, is the interpretation of article 8 of the convention, which deals with the right to a family life. That is a good example of the way in which rights drawn up perfectly sensibly in the convention can be extended beyond where they were meant to go, or of how the balancing exercise at the heart of all human rights law is not conducted in what he and I would consider to be a sensible way.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In his reply to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the Attorney General conceded that there would be substantial proposals in respect of devolution, but that there would also be “full consultation”. Does he accept that it is not a matter of full consultation, but of fundamental change to the way that the Welsh Assembly and the other Assemblies actually operate, so how will they operate?

The Attorney General: As I have said, we will have to wait for the proposals to be brought forward before it is sensible to discuss them in detail, but the hon. Gentleman has my undertaking, as he has had that of other Ministers, that when the proposals are brought forward, there will be a full conversation about how the devolution aspects of such proposals will be managed.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have given evidence at four trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The ICTY judges told me that the UK had a superb record on upholding human rights. I must say that was very pleasant for my men and me to hear, having had to go through four trials. Does my right hon. and learned Friend think that such a verdict could be applied to all other members of the European convention on human rights?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that being a member of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the convention is no guarantee that a
country’s human rights record will be spotless. It follows logically, of course, that not being such a signatory does not mean a country cannot have a hugely impressive record on the protection of human rights. Many countries around the world that are not signatories to that document have demonstrated exactly that.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Since the urgent question was asked, the Attorney General has made several references to the UK Government’s commitment to human rights being demonstrated by actions rather than by words. How can that commitment be squared with the UK Government voting yesterday against the human rights of child refugees requiring shelter in this country?

The Attorney General: Mr Speaker, I am sure you will not want me to rehash the arguments made in the Chamber yesterday. I think that the hon. Lady should at least accept that this Government’s record in providing huge amounts of aid to those in need—not just in Syria, but around the world—demonstrates that we do care and that we do act in defence of the most vulnerable. Human rights is only one aspect; there are other very real needs that we help to support. The fact that this Government, against considerable opposition across many areas of opinion, have maintained our commitment to spending 0.7% of GDP on foreign aid shows that as clearly as anything does.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Surely the test is how our human rights work. The fact that this Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which is leading the way in Europe—I must say that it was largely due to the intervention of the Prime Minister—shows that we have an excellent human rights record.

I am grateful to the Attorney General for being at the Dispatch Box because there is one thing I would like to know in legal terms. From what has been said, this is a confusing issue. Can a country remain in the European Union and still come out of the convention? What is his legal opinion on that?

The Attorney General: As I have suggested, the legal position is not clear. Neither my hon. Friend nor I have the time to go into all the ins and outs of that particular question now, but I suggest it would also be wrong to say that it is clear in the opposite direction. It is not at all clear that if the UK left the European convention on human rights, it would not be able to remain a member of the European Union. It is certainly not clear, and it would be wrong to suggest that it was.

As my hon. Friend has mentioned the Modern Slavery Act, may I take this opportunity to pay tribute to his own part in the process? I think the whole House recognises that my hon. Friend played a leading role in making the arguments on a subject that was not well known and not especially prominent. He brought it to prominence and secured a remarkable piece of legislation.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I make it absolutely clear from the very beginning that I hold the Home Secretary in the highest regard? However, I was horrified—absolutely horrified—by her suggestion yesterday that the United Kingdom would leave the European convention on human rights. I am horrified by that suggestion. After 30-plus years of appraising violence in Northern Ireland, the Belfast agreement signed on Good Friday was hard won after hard negotiations, and the European convention on human rights was an integral part of that agreement. It was voted on in two referendums, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, by thousands and thousands of people. I want the Attorney General not to assure me that there will be consultation, but to tell me what consideration the Home Secretary gave to the implications for the peace settlement in Northern Ireland, and particularly the implications for the Belfast agreement, before she made her statement yesterday.

The Attorney General: The Home Secretary is clearly aware of those complexities, as is my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor. It is difficult for me to discuss the details of proposals that have not yet been brought forward. The best thing I can do is to assure the hon. Lady—I know she does not want me to do so—that there will be an opportunity to discuss the issues in more detail. That is the best I can say at this point.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Government are in something of a pickle. As well as needing multiple Parliaments, this great European project also needs two human rights frameworks. The result is a state of confusion, as set out by the European Scrutiny Committee’s 43rd report of the 2013-14 Session, “The application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in the UK: a state of confusion”. How will the Government ensure that any Bill of Rights will be able to survive the European Court of Justice?

The Attorney General: Again, my hon. Friend tempts me to talk about proposals that are not yet before us, and I cannot do that. He is right, of course, to reinforce the point that these matters are exceptionally complex. Anyone who suggests that they are simple is wrong. We will, of course, have the opportunity to discuss the issue in some detail when the proposals are brought forward, in contrast with the position when the Human Rights Act was introduced, when there was precious little opportunity for consultation.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): There is clearly some confusion and discomfort among those on the Government Benches about human rights, but there should be no confusion about the issue in the minds of voters on 23 June. The European convention on human rights is a creature of the Council of Europe and something that I absolutely support. The European Union charter of fundamental rights is quite a different matter: it was created by the EU and has been shown to be not quite so fundamental when it comes to worker and trade union rights, because it has found in favour of employers on a number of occasions when it should have found in favour of trade unions and workers. Does the Attorney General accept that it is very important to make it clear that leaving the EU on 23 June would not mean leaving the ECHR, and that if we challenge anything it must be the EU charter of fundamental rights, particularly where trade unions are concerned? Does he also agree—he probably does not—that the way to guarantee trade union and worker rights in this
country is to elect a Labour Government under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)?

**The Attorney General:** I was nearly all the way there with the hon. Gentleman, but I could not quite go with him on the last part of his question. As he says, there is a distinction between the convention on human rights and membership of the European Union and all that flows from that. I hope I made that clear in my earlier remarks, but I am happy to restate it. He is wrong to say that there is confusion among the Government on human rights. I have made our position very clear: we are in favour of human rights here and abroad, and we will fight hard to defend them regardless of our future proposals for reform. The hon. Gentleman will know that protocol 30 of the treaty negotiated by the last Labour Government makes it clear that the charter of fundamental rights creates no new rights in this country.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful for the Attorney General’s statement on the Government’s support for human rights. Will he confirm that we will remain signatories of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights, regardless of the ECHR? Given that that document was drafted in the 1950s and contains derogations for national security and other matters, does he agree that it is right to update the Human Rights Act to reflect changes in subsidiarity, which, after all, is an EU principle?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend is right to say that the UN declaration is a separate document; it is not affected by any decisions we might make about the European convention. She is also right to mention how things may develop. Those who support the status quo cannot have it both ways: if they think that it is perfectly reasonable for the Court in Strasbourg to extend the scope of the convention in the way that it has, they should also recognise that we should keep up with the times in other ways, too.

**Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The UK’s withdrawal from the ECHR would present the most unwelcome of incentives to those who disagree with the international order surrounding human rights. What message does the Attorney General think that sends to the world’s despots and tyrants about respect for human rights?

**The Attorney General:** I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but he is wrong to suggest that despots and tyrants around the world do not fully understand the British Government’s view of the protection of human rights. That is something on which I do not think we could have been any clearer: not only have we spoken about it, but we have acted domestically and internationally to support and protect human rights.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): In the European Court of Human Rights there are pseudo-judges, many of them political appointees rather than proper judges, over-reaching their remit under the convention with ridiculous decisions such as votes for prisoners. Why should this House vote for something we do not believe in, which our constituents do not believe in, and which makes the Prime Minister physically sick, just because some ludicrous judges in Strasbourg went way beyond their remit to comply? If we are not prepared to accept such rulings, which I am not, is not the only sensible course of action for a country that believes in the rule of law to leave?

**The Attorney General:** As ever, I wish my hon. Friend would simply say what he really thinks. He is right to say that the status quo, which he has described, is unacceptable to quite a lot of the people we all represent in this country. The case for reform is unanswerable, and that is what this Government are going to do.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Office has downgraded the global abolition of the death penalty in its human rights fund from being its top priority to being the bottom bullet point in a passing reference. Does the Attorney General agree that, taken together with the possible withdrawal from the convention on human rights, that will be seen as a green light to Saudi Arabia, China and other countries that administer the death penalty, and to Russia and Turkey, which abuse such rights? It is a way of dividing and ruling the European Union’s human rights record.

**The Attorney General:** No, I do not think that that follows. The British Government, including Foreign Office Ministers whenever they travel abroad and speak to interlocutors from other countries, have made it clear that they oppose the use of the death penalty in all circumstances. We will continue to make that very clear.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): I support our membership of the convention, but does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that if we are to stay in the ECHR, and if we are to reabitalize the reputation of human rights in the UK, it is important that the European Court curtails its reach and does not intrude into matters such as prisoner voting, which are properly matters for this House?

**The Attorney General:** Yes.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Originally proposed by Winston Churchill and drafted mainly by British lawyers, the European convention on human rights is an important part of our post-war history—it is, in essence, a British Bill of Rights. How are the public to trust the Government to ensure that the hard-won advances on equality, privacy and justice, and our wartime legacy, will not be at risk from their cruel agenda?

**The Attorney General:** I will make two points in response to the hon. Lady. First, it is important to distinguish the Human Rights Act, and even the convention, from the promotion and protection of human rights. They are two different things and this Government’s record is very clear. Secondly, we have a very clear mandate for reform of the human rights framework. We set out what we intended to do in our manifesto at the general election. As it happens, parties that support reform of human rights law received more than 50% of the vote in that election, so the British people’s mandate for action is extremely clear.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Attorney General shares my surprise at some of the comments we are hearing about the idea of Britain having a system on human rights that is similar to that in many other countries, namely domestic rights legislation overseen by a Supreme Court. That is what Germany does with its own basic law. Given what we have heard about how well the ECHR protects human rights, and given that Russia is signatory to it, will the Attorney General outline how it has been protecting those of people living in eastern Ukraine?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. As I said earlier, it is no guarantee that a country will have a spotless human rights record if it is a signatory to the convention. We must be clear that we support the protection of human rights wherever in the world they may be abused, and the British Government will continue to take that position.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Had it not been for the Strasbourg Court, gay men and women in this country would not be serving in our armed forces, but because of the 1999 judgment there has been a rainbow revolution in our armed forces. Is that not just one of the many reasons why we should stick with the ECHR?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to an undoubted positive change, and there have been others. But he is wrong to minimise the role of our own courts and, indeed, of democratically elected Governments of all political colours in making such changes. It is wrong to suggest that the only way in which we can achieve outcomes such as the one he described is to pursue the status quo on human rights law. That is not the right approach.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Prime Minister said that he felt “physically sick” at the ECHR’s proposals to give prisoners voting rights. My constituents in Kettering are increasingly fed up with Europeans lecturing us on human rights when were it not for this country, our Dominions and our empire, who stood alone in 1940, there would be no human rights at all on the continent of Europe, let alone a convention. Many of us on the Conservative Back Benches do not recognise the conflict that many members of the Cabinet are struggling with between membership of the European Union and membership of the convention—we would be very happy to leave both.

The Attorney General: I understand my hon. Friend’s position very clearly. He is right, of course, that that record of protection of, and respect for, human rights, and indeed of fighting on behalf of those whose human rights may be being infringed, is a proud and long-standing one. That will not change.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Article 3 of protocol 1 of the ECHR states:

“The High Contracting Parties undertake to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot, under conditions which will ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature.”

Given that the majority of legislators in this country are unelected—that is, the Members of the House of Lords—is the Attorney General satisfied that the UK Government actually comply with that protocol, or is that another reason why they want to withdraw?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to give some legal advice in the Chamber, which I must not do. I am grateful to him, however, as what he has just read out is part of the part of the convention relied upon by the Strasbourg Court to suggest that prisoners should have the vote. I did not detect any reference to prisoners’ having the vote anywhere in the text that he just read. I maintain the view that that is for this Parliament to decide.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Attorney General is quite correct that this country has a long and proud record of human rights. He is also correct in pointing out that our actions count more than mere signatures. Does he therefore agree that it follows that the international community looks to this country for our reform agenda, on issues such as abolishing slavery?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend make a very good point. Both what we have done in the past and what we are doing now send the kind of signal to other countries that Members have said today that they would wish us to send. We have a proud record of acting, not just in the past but now, to encourage others to do better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I believe that the statement by the Secretary of State yesterday undermined the remain campaign. It revealed a further camp of thought—the “not so sure we should remain” camp. The Attorney General has stated to us today that this is a complex legal matter of clarity in the legislation about leaving the EU and remaining in the ECHR. How will he marry two very different points of view, and which is right?

The Attorney General: As I say, it is a complex matter. On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, I do not agree that the Home Secretary undermined the case for remaining within the European Union yesterday. On reading her speech, one sees that she made an extremely powerful case for remaining within the European Union and set out the argument with a great deal of clarity.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): After all is said and done, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there are real issues with Strasbourg acting, in effect, as a final court of appeal, and that a UK Bill of Rights will seek to address that?

The Attorney General: That is exactly the sort of issue that the Bill of Rights will seek to address, and I know that my hon. Friend will scrutinise it carefully when it comes forward.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As I am sure the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) will remember, in 1997 the then British Government placed before this House, with the eventual agreement of both sides, a proposal to place before the sovereign people of Scotland a proposition, in a referendum, to reconstitute the Scottish Parliament. At the core of the reconstitution of that Parliament is
the European convention. Now that the Government—a Government rejected by Scotland fundamentally at the last general election—are seeking to undermine that very settlement, how does the Attorney General square that with the democratic will of the sovereign people of Scotland as expressed in the referendum in 1997?

The Attorney General: The sovereign will of the Scottish people was expressed in the independence referendum in 2014. When they expressed their view, they concluded that they wished to remain part of the United Kingdom. Much as I know that the hon. Gentleman does not like it, that was the outcome and as result the United Kingdom Government will consider this matter for the future.

House of Lords Reform (Exclusion of Hereditary Peers)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.35 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the House of Lords Act 1999 to remove the section 2 exception under which 90 persons have the right to sit, speak and vote in the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage; and for connected purposes.

Last week a Member was elected to an ancient and world-revered national Parliament in a by-election following the death of a sitting Member. Once elected, they would be able to make laws, hold the Government to account, have influence and make a real difference to the lives of households up and down this country. Nominations for the vacant post closed on Monday 11 April 2016 at 5 pm. Those nominated, of which there were seven, all had to convince the electorate of their merits to secure a simple majority, at which point one would be elected.

All that should sound familiar to hon. Members. Any democracy has the same pathway for gaining a seat in Parliament—win the argument and get elected. This election, however, was different. It was not modern or open, and it was certainly not democratic. This election was for a place as one of the last remaining 92 hereditary peers to sit in the unelected Chamber.

Members should be aware of the details of last week’s process, as it deserves full scrutiny. To be nominated for that seat in Parliament, a nominee had to be on the register of hereditary peers and be of the party of the previous Member. The electorate that held the power of electing the noble peer to the House of Lords was, in this case, three people—the three Lib Dem hereditary peers remaining in that House were the whole electorate. I remind the House that this is the 21st century.

This House will recall the great fights about the 1832 Reform Act. That Act abolished the constituency of Old Sarum, which used to be able to send two Members of Parliament to this House. Old Sarum had 11 voters, making it positively huge—almost the Isle of Wight, dare I say it—in comparison with the electorate for the election that the noble Lords held last week.

As I said, last week’s electorate consisted of three Liberal Democrat hereditary peers, the noble Lord Addington, and the noble Earls of Glasgow and of Oxford and Asquith. Baron Addington’s peerage dates back to 1887, when his ancestor, a businessman and Conservative Member of Parliament, a nominee had to be on the register of hereditary peers and be of the party of the previous Member. The electorate that held the power of electing the noble peer to the House of Lords was, in this case, three people—the three Lib Dem hereditary peers remaining in that House were the whole electorate. I remind the House that this is the 21st century.

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As I said, last week’s electorate consisted of three Liberal Democrat hereditary peers, the noble Lord Addington, and the noble Earls of Glasgow and of Oxford and Asquith. Baron Addington’s peerage dates back to 1887, when his ancestor, a businessman and Conservative Member of Parliament, a nominee had to be on the register of hereditary peers and be of the party of the previous Member. The electorate that held the power of electing the noble peer to the House of Lords was, in this case, three people—the three Lib Dem hereditary peers remaining in that House were the whole electorate. I remind the House that this is the 21st century.

Each hopeful in the election had the opportunity to write 75 words on why they should be trusted with a seat in the mother of Parliaments. The manifesto of the eventual winner, Viscount Thurso, was excellent for the environment. It was a blank piece of paper. For the gang of three who voted for him, there were no words saying what he would do or why.
The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Lords. Lord de Mauley was Under-Secretary of State in peers. Viscount Younger of Leckie was an Under-Secretary worse, we have Ministers of the Crown who are hereditary a peerage granted to a Labour peer. To make matters legislation or remove support for the most vulnerable in Attlee would not have voted to curtail trade union the same way as his grandson will today. The real Clement Earl Attlee—a Labour Prime Minister who implemented earl Attlee. It beggars belief to think that the first of that type in the 21st century.

Hereditary peers existed for hundreds of years, and through patronage, favours and who they knew, laws were made by an elite rather than by those who were accountable or elected. The House of Lords Act 1999 reduced the number of hereditary peers from more than 1,300 to 92, and that Act was introduced by the Labour Government to try to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative. The first stage of that was the removal of 92 hereditary peers as a “temporary” measure, but we are now 17 years on, and that temporary measure needs to be terminated. The lawmakers were retired, and although they were allowed to keep their title, their right to vote, speak and govern was lost for ever. However, 92 hereditary peers remain, and the question for our modern democracy concerns what legitimacy they have for the future.

Lord Fairfax of Cameron is a Conservative peer who sits in the Lords. His ancestor, Thomas Fairfax, was given a seat in the Lords because he was the first Englishman to travel to Scotland and swear allegiance to the new King James I. I happen to think that the ability to make laws should not be based on the skill of someone’s ancestor in catching a coach to Edinburgh in the 17th century.

Another ridiculous example is the current Conservative peer Earl Attlee. It beggars belief to think that the first Earl Attlee—a Labour Prime Minister who implemented some of the most dramatic reforms in Britain’s history—would have sat in the House of Lords and voted the same way as his grandson will today. The real Clement Attlee would not have voted to curtail trade union legislation or remove support for the most vulnerable in our society, yet through the hereditary principle his grandson today takes the Conservative Whip, thanks to a peerage granted to a Labour peer. To make matters worse, we have Ministers of the Crown who are hereditary peers. Viscount Younger of Leckie was an Under-Secretary of State for business and is now a Whip in the House of Lords. Lord de Mauley was Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. That is simply not acceptable in the 21st century. My Bill seeks finally to remove those whose place in Parliament is by birth rather than by merit.

Why is that important? We need change in the House of Lords, but in this House we cannot agree on what that change should be. Surely, however, the abolition of the hereditary principle would be a move towards a more equitable Parliament, and a Chamber where people are not excluded because of their place of birth, or given a place in Parliament because of their parentage.

We all have our views on Lords reform, and we all take different positions. I have always voted for its total abolition, but others want a hybrid system, an appointed second Chamber, or a fully elected Senate. The key point is to make some change. If the method used in last week’s election was used to elect a trade union general secretary, this Conservative Government would have cracked down on it years ago. If that were the method of electing a housing association board, this Government would have sold off the housing and abolished the board. If it were the method of electing a mayor or local council leader, the Government would have abolished that council or reformed its election system years ago. However, it is not—this is a forgotten election.

Let me give the Government another reason to act. The House of Commons will face dramatic change, and its Members will be reduced from 650 to 600. It is now time for the Lords to take their share. This Bill could mean a saving to the taxpayer. The expected annual saving from the boundary review could be £12.2 million in allowances and costs. It is important to keep fair political boundaries, but we must also have a proper elected Government because we are “all in this together”.

I have had a number of sponsors, but I particularly wish to thank those who I could not list, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for North Durham (Mr Jones), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for Caerphilly (Wayne David), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Bury South (Mr Lewis), for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff).

Let us end this farce and ensure that we have an elected House of Commons, and not a House of Lords that is based on the hereditary principle.

**Question put and agreed to. Ordered.**

That Mr David Hanson, Helen Jones, Debbie Abrahams, Diana Johnson, Jenny Chapman, Helen Hayes, Fiona Mactaggart, Dan Jarvis, Albert Owen, Ian C. Lucas, Mr David Anderson and Matthew Pennycook present the Bill.

Mr David Hanson accordingly presented the Bill. **Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 166).**
The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): I beg to move,

That the Order of 7 March 2016 (Policing and Crime Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Consideration shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceedings</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 1, other than new clauses and new Schedules relating to the inspection of fire and rescue services.</td>
<td>Two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 3; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to firearms, knives and flares; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 7; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 8.</td>
<td>The moment of interruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 5; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 9; remaining new Clauses; remaining new Schedules; remaining proceedings on Consideration.</td>
<td>One hour before the moment of interruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New clauses and new Schedules relating to the inspection of fire and rescue services; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 2; new clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to Part 4.</td>
<td>Three hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration on the second day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(5) Proceedings in legislative grand committee and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the second day.

I have no intention of delaying the House for more than a few minutes. In Committee we had very sensible debates and we agreed on most parts of the Bill; where we disagreed, we did so in a fair way. I thought it important to ensure that we had plenty of time on Report to consider some of the measures that we did not have time to consider in Committee, so I have suggested two days on Report—hopefully the House will agree on that—before we come to Third Reading.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I will be brief. We will soon come to the substantive issues, but the Opposition agree with the proposed procedure. We have agreed what measures should be considered today, and on the second day—that will now be on a carry-over Bill, following the Queen’s Speech—we will return to the further issues as outlined. The amendments are clear today, and we want to focus particularly on the proposals on fire and volunteers.

Question put and agreed to.
Policing and Crime Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

[1ST ALLOCATED DAY]

New Clause 20

STATUTORY DUTY ON FLOODING

The Fire and Rescue Services in England shall make provision to lead and co-ordinate the emergency services response to—

(a) rescuing people trapped, or likely to become trapped, by water; and

(b) protecting them from serious harm, in the event of serious flooding in its area.”—(Lyn Brown.)

This new clause would make the Fire and Rescue Service in England statutorily responsible for leading the emergency services response to flooding.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.48 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 21, in clause 2, page 3, line 14, at end insert—

‘(3) An order under section 4A, whether modified or not by the Secretary of State has conducted a review assessing the funding required by the fire and rescue service to secure the minimum level of cover needed to secure public safety and maintain fire resilience.

(8) The review carried out under section (7) must assess the impact of the level of cover on—

(a) fire related fatalities;

(b) non-fatal fire related casualties;

(c) the number of dwelling fires and other fires;

(d) the number of incidents responded to, and

(e) the strength and speed of response to incidents.”

This amendment would require the Home Secretary to conduct a review on the level of funding the FRS requires in order to secure public safety before she may make allows police and crime commissioner to be a fire and rescue authority.

Amendment 6, page 157, line 33, at end insert—

‘(4) An order under section 4A, whether modified or not by the Secretary of State, may only be made with either: consent of all of the relevant local authorities and relevant fire and rescue authority, or a majority vote by local people through referendum.”

This amendment would ensure that a PCC can only take over a Fire and Rescue Service with the approval of local people or their local representatives.

Lyn Brown: I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We oppose the Government’s proposals to allow police and crime commissioners to take over fire and rescue services, and amendments 3, 4 and 5 would delete the provisions in the Bill that would enable them to do so. We have also tabled amendments to mitigate the risks if the Government’s proposals are enacted.

Amendment 6 would ensure that a PCC could take over a fire and rescue service only with local support expressed either by elected councillors, with the unanimous agreement of all the local authorities affected, or directly through a referendum. Amendment 20 would require the Home Secretary to review the level of funding the fire service needed to secure public safety. New clause 20 would give fire services in England a statutory responsibility to deal with flooding. The Minister said in Committee that he was minded to consider that particular provision. He has not jumped to his feet to say he wants to take it as a Government new clause, but I live in hope.

When the Minister responds, I hope he will set out what benefits he believes PCCs will bring to the fire and rescue service. What skills and expertise do they have that our fire and rescue authorities do not? How will they help the fire service to cope with the new challenges it faces when dealing with major incidents such as flooding and terrorist attacks? What indication is there that the governance of the fire service is broken or substandard and needs replacing? The Government have not even begun to answer these questions or to make a case for the reforms.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the reason that the governance of the fire service needs to be changed is that very few of our constituents would know the name of every person on the local authority fire panel? Given her involvement with the Bill, could she herself name every person on her local authority fire panel?
Lyn Brown: My fire service is provided through the Greater London Authority, and I know that should I want to talk to anybody about London’s fire service, I could talk to those elected GLA Members—and I do know their names—or to the Mayor. When people in my local authority want to have an impact on a local service, they tend to approach their local councillors, which I think is not a bad route, but the reforms would change that. People would not be able to go to their town hall to talk about services that have an impact on them. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) heckles me gently in a low voice and says, “They would be elected.” I know that Newham might be unusual but its councillors are elected too, and certainly the councillors at the GLA are elected.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): But they are not elected to a specific responsibility, as PCCs are. People who vote for PCCs know they can hold them to account specifically for policing, and that will now be extended to the fire service.

Lyn Brown: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the turnout last time for PCC elections was dismal. I hope it will be significantly better this time, but when I was on the doorsteps last year, in parts of the country other than my own little patch in London I did not find that people knew who their PCC was. I say gently to him that our constituents do not know that when they go to the polls next week they will be electing a PCC who might be taking over their fire service. The Bill will not have been enacted by then.

I think that the timing and, as I will explain, the way we have done this has been wrong. The consultation preceding the Bill did not seek the views of experts and specialists on the substance of the proposals. It set out how a PCC could assume control of a fire and rescue service and then asked consultees what they thought of the process. It did not ask them what they thought of the proposals themselves, and it did not ask whether the proposals would increase public safety or lead to better governance.

It is not in the impact assessment—that very thin impact assessment, which I am sure that the Members who sat on the Bill Committee will have read—but the Knight review of the future of the fire service recommended that PCC takeovers be attempted only if a rigorous pilot could identify tangible and “clearly set out benefits”. The Government chose to ignore this key recommendation and are instead proceeding before any evidence has been gathered about the likely benefits, costs and threats to the plan. It is utterly reckless. The impact assessment is threadbare. The only rationale offered for this intervention is the Government’s belief that there needs to be greater collaboration between emergency services. No one thinks otherwise, but the Government have not provided any justification of why it is more likely to occur under PCCs or any analysis of the current barriers to collaboration. It is policy without evidence or clear rationale.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I agree with everything my hon. Friend is saying. She knows—and surely the Government know—how much co-operation already goes on. It does not have to be prescribed in this top-down way; it works organically and it works really well.

Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is really good collaboration now between all parts of our public services—between fire and police, fire and ambulance, and fire, ambulance and police—and I understand the Government’s wanting to move that agenda further and encourage more collaboration, but this bit of the Bill does not do it. As I will explain, I believe it will in fact deter some boundary and border merges, which would be a massive problem.

The Government’s cavalier approach to this public service upheaval is completely indefensible, given the significant risks that the proposals represent to the fire and rescue service. PCCs are still a nascent institution. The Home Affairs Select Committee has said: “It is too early to say whether the introduction of police and crime commissioners has been a success.”

We do not know whether they have succeeded in their core duties, so why are the Government proposing to expand their portfolios by giving them control of the fire service too? I think the Government want to bolster the powers and budgets of PCCs to help them through their difficult inception and that the proposals are a step towards PCCs becoming mini mayors. A vital public service, such as fire, should not be pawned off to save struggling Whitehall inventions or to overturn a public vote against the creation of a mayor. Unlike mayors in combined authorities, the PCCs will be completely free from the democratic scrutiny provided by local government, and the creation of the extended office will not have been approved by local people.

The most serious risk, however, is that fire, with its much smaller budgets and less media attention than policing, will become an unloved, secondary concern of its new management—a Cinderella service. I have raised this point repeatedly with the Minister in Committee and in other debates, but he has not indicated what he might do to mitigate the risk. I am not the only one who thinks this: Peter Murphy, the director of public policy research at Nottingham Business School, has argued that if the fire service were to slip into the status of a Cinderella service, it would only repeat what happened the last time fire had to share an agenda with policing. I will quote him in full, because it gets to the heart of the matter:

“If the proposals are implemented, there is a very strong chance that the fire and rescue services would go back to the ‘benign neglect’ that characterised the service from 1974 to 2001 when the Home Office was last responsible for fire services. Police, civil disobedience, immigration and criminal justice dominated the Home Office agenda, as well as its time and resources. If the fire service becomes the lesser partner in a merged service, the long-term implications will include smaller fire crews with fewer appliances and older equipment arriving at incidents. Prevention and protection work, already significantly falling”—he is so right about that—“will result in fewer school visits and fire alarm checks for the elderly”.

What a chilling vision for the future of our fire service!

2 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree that this proposal, combined with the 17% cut that we have already seen in the service across the country, could lead to a risky situation, particularly for many vulnerable households?
Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and I shall return to the point a little later in my speech.

The Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): I listened carefully to the quotations, and I would be chilled if any part of what was said were factually true. If there were an attempt to combine the emergency services, fire and police, we would have moved to one funding stream. I categorically ruled that out, so this sort of scaremongering—not from the shadow Minister but from others—is flawed. There is a separate funding stream in the precept for the police. The only bit that is going to be amalgamated, should the PCCs be like the Metro Mayors in this respect, would relate to the back office and the administrative side.

Lyn Brown: But should a PCC take over the fire service, we would have a person in charge whose main attention was on policing and all that policing involved. The media focus much more on policing than they do on the fire service. The fire service will be secondary. Although the Minister rightly says—I do not doubt him—that the two funding streams will be different, I do not know how long that will last, and in truth, neither does he, because things move on. We had police and crime commissioners under the last Government; this Government are now proposing police, crime and fire commissioners. What will happen in a couple of years’ time? I do not know. There might be accounting efficiencies in order to save costs, and the budgets might well be merged. I do not think that these proposals make any sense.

A further risk is that these proposals will make mergers of fire services more difficult, which would be a real setback, as inter-fire mergers increase resilience and achieve significant savings. The 2007 merger of the Devon and Somerset fire services was supposed to deliver £3 million of savings in the first five years. It actually bettered that target by £600,000.

The Minister will know that Martyn Underhill, the Independent PCC for Dorset—I am trying to keep this politically neutral—has said that he has no interest in running the fire service. Why? It is because Dorset and Wiltshire fire service has undergone a merger that proposes efficiencies in order to save costs, and the budgets might well be merged. I do not think that these proposals make any sense.

There are some people who would not welcome a policeman into their home without a warrant. Police officers turning up at the door can be a scary experience. Firefighters go into people’s homes and work spaces, and check that smoke alarms and electrical appliances are safe. They fit sprinklers and even look for worrying signs that might concern other services, such as the NHS and council care services. This preventive work is not an add-on to the fire service’s work; it is at the core of what it does—keeping people safe, so that they do not have to be rescued further down the line.

Mike Penning: I do not quite understand—perhaps I do, but I do not think it is fair—why the shadow Minister is conflating operational work that the police do with operational work that the fire service does. Of course, a lot of work is done together, particularly at road traffic collisions, but there is nothing in the Bill that would conflate the two in the way that the shadow Minister suggests.

Lyn Brown: First, they will not be equal partners, because we are talking about a big service and a small service. Secondly, in the minds of some of our communities, the police and the fire service will become one and the same. They will have one boss, and there will be an anxiety that someone coming through the door to fix a smoke alarm might have a different agenda.

Mike Penning: The hon. Lady’s constituency is in London, where there is a Mayor, and the mayoral system will take over fire. Is there the same concern in London and in Manchester? Actually, the Labour candidate in Manchester wants the powers as a Metro Mayor.

Lyn Brown: In London, the service is run by a Mayor and elected councillors. It is not run by an individual whose other job is to be the police commissioner. I think there is a difference, and I believe that our communities will think there is a difference. We cannot prescribe how people think and what they worry about, but this concern has been raised with me.

James Berry: Does the hon. Lady not accept that her comments could be interpreted by the police as quite insulting? They do a lot of preventive and humanitarian work. As she knows, the hon. Lady’s submission comes right out of the Fire Brigades Union’s consultation document, which I also thought was quite insulting to the great work that our police officers do in the very areas that she highlighted.

Lyn Brown: The police I meet on my doorsteps and streets are dead pragmatic souls. They understand the sensitivities that some communities have: they treat some of my refugee communities with extraordinary sensitivity to overcome the natural barrier that is there. What I am saying to the hon. Gentleman is that there is a natural barrier. That is no slur on our police force; our police force are an enforcement agency, and not really a humanitarian service. The police are there to implement the law. Let us move on.

The Minister is not passing over a service that does not have some difficulties. The fire and rescue service has been subject to a cumulative cash cut of £236 million or 12.5% since 2010—and, of course, there is more to...
come. [Interruption.] Is the Government Whip trying to engage me? Does he want to intervene? It seems not. I just thought I would give him a chance.

Mike Penning: I believe that what one of my colleagues was trying to say from a sedentary position is that we should not wash over the debacle and the huge costs of the regional fire control centres that the previous Labour Administration forced on the fire service. [Interruption.]

Lyn Brown: Is that right? When I was a Whip, I was taught that I should be seen and not heard. I am sure that the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay) did not want to intervene on me at all. The issue of regional fire control centres has been well thrashed out in this Chamber. There were a myriad reasons why they did not work, and I accept that they did not.

Let us return to what the Government have been doing. Here we are in 2016, and it feels as though they have been here forever. The fire and rescue service has been subject to a cumulative cash cut of £236 million, or 12.5%, since 2010, and, of course, there is more to come. We know from the local government funding settlement that fire and rescue services are expected to cut spending by a further £135 million by the end of the Parliament. A stretched service will be squeezed even further.

As a result of these cuts, 7,600 firefighters have already been lost, and the Government have repeatedly ignored warnings that the cuts may be putting services at risk. Their proposals will not protect a single firefighter’s job, or put a single firefighter back in service. I have been told by fire chiefs that their services will “not be viable” under the Government’s proposed spending plans, and I am sure that they have told the Minister exactly the same thing.

The National Audit Office has calculated that there was a 30% reduction in the amount of time spent on home fire checks and audits over the last Parliament. That is a huge reduction. The NAO has said that the Government have “no idea” of the impact of that on public safety. It has also said that, as the Government refuse to model the risk of cuts, they may only know that a service has been cut too long after the fact—that is, after public safety and the lives of the public have been put at risk.

I was not surprised, although I was dismayed, by the latest English fire statistics, which cover the period between April and September 2015. They show that there were 139 fire-related fatalities during that time, 31 more than occurred during the same period in 2014. There were 1,685 non-fatality fire casualties that resulted in hospital treatment, a 10% increase on 2014. Fire and rescue services attended about 93,200 fires, 7% more than in 2014.

The Government have cut the fire service, cut firefighters, and oversee a massive reduction in the amount of preventive work undertaken. I know that we are talking about a spike over just a couple of quarters, but there are statistical signs that the service may be feeling the awful effects of the cuts that have been made. So what do the Government do? Do they stop the cuts while they undertake a proper risk assessment? Do they begin to develop minimum standards for the number of stations and firefighters, and for preventive work? No. The Government want to pass on the responsibility to police and crime commissioners, who have had to deal with similar cuts in police budgets, and who have lost 12,000 front-line police officers. They are not even assessing the level of funding that PCCs would need to maintain resilience and keep the public safe.

This is a good line. By passing the buck without the bucks, the Government could be asking PCCs, who will be new to the fire service and its complexity, to undertake further potentially dangerous cuts. The PCCs will not know what the risks are, because the Government refuse to model them. That is why we tabled amendment 20, which would require the Home Secretary to carry out an assessment of the level of funding that fire services need to keep the public safe.

Our fire and rescue authorities are trusted experts on the fire service. The councillors who serve on them often have years of experience, and have gained a genuinely deep knowledge and judgment from overseeing the strategic direction of fire services in their areas. Given the trust and respect that local fire authorities have, allowing PCCs to take over a fire and rescue service without their support poses the clear risk that employees, and the public, will perceive newly empowered PCCs as an unwell central imposition. Our amendment 6 would ensure that a PCC who does take over a fire and rescue service can do so only with the approval of the locally elected representatives on the relevant councils, or, alternatively, of local people through a referendum.

Lyn Brown: The referendum would take place on the same day as any local council election. We would not want an election to be prohibited by costs. As for where the costs should lie, I think that they should lie with the Government, because, after all, it is they who have proposed these changes. If the hon. Gentleman wants someone else to pay, perhaps it should be the Government’s arm, the PCCs. As he has rightly pointed out, their budgets are larger than those of any fire authority.

Jake Berry: First, will the hon. Lady tell us what her amendment would do, and who would pay for it? Secondly, will she tell us what estimate she has made of the cost?
Lyn Brown: One of the joys of being in opposition is that we have to do our own work ourselves; we do not have a phalanx of willing employees to do it for us. Once the House had passed the amendment, I would need to rely on the Government and their civil servants to help us to work out the cost. If the cost became prohibitive, I could suggest that the Government drop this silly idea altogether, and save loads of money.

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): I have sat patiently while, on a number of occasions, the hon. Lady has referred to elected councillors being elected to fire authorities. Can she clarify, for the edification of the House and the public, that no elected councillors are elected to the fire authority in London—which covers her constituency—or, indeed, to the vast majority of fire authorities in the country?

Lyn Brown: I wonder what kind of interaction Conservative Members have with their local councillors, but I can only imagine that it ain’t good, because every time I raise this issue, anxiety is expressed about the genuine nature of locally elected members.

I can only say that I have a much better relationship not only with Newham councillors, but with GLA councillors. They are elected. They face the electorate. They are elected to a body which then places them on another body that is responsible for fire, just as they are given responsibilities for social services, education, leisure services, and so forth. It is the same process. I support democracy and I support my democratically elected councillors, who are doing a jolly good job in very difficult times to keep services going. Conservative Members should not denigrate their local councillors quite so much.

James Cleverly: I assume that this is entirely my mistake; I probably did not make my question clear enough, and I take full responsibility for that. I will have another crack at this. Can the hon. Lady name any local councillor or London Assembly member who has been elected by the people of Newham to sit on the fire authority?

Lyn Brown: In London, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the people of Newham elect a GLA councillor and the GLA councillors then determine which parts of the work they will undertake for the GLA. I do not see that that is a problem. The same thing happens in Newham. When we elected 60 Labour councillors—and zero councillors from any other party—we then give them jobs looking after social services, education, recreation and so on. I can tell the hon. Gentleman the name of the councillor who has the fire remit in my council. He is Councillor Bryan Collier and he is a wonderful bloke. He has been doing the job for decades and he has lots of knowledge.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Speaking as someone who was a councillor until this time last month, I bow to no one in my appreciation of the importance of local government. However, the shadow Minister demonstrates a strange understanding of democracy given that she seems to prefer the patronage of local council group leaders to the direct mandate involved in being elected on to a body by voters.

Lyn Brown: I am bemused by the contempt that Conservative Members are showing for local councils. I hope for the hon. Gentleman’s sake that he does not have a Tory-led local authority waiting for him when he goes back home on Thursday. Frankly, if I were a member of his council, I would be sitting on his doorstep waiting to have a word, because that is really not on. [Interruption.] Oh, really? That is such a shock! The chuntering from the Government Back Benches is outrageous. I don’t even know where I got to in my speech.

If the Government do not trust local authorities—and it seems clear that they do not—perhaps they will be pleased to accept our amendment, which would allow the decision on whether to place PCCs in control of fire services to go directly to the electorate. The Government’s reforms are fundamentally about the transfer of power from the collective democratic representation of local councils to a single individual, and the creation of mini mayors across England. The Minister knows this to be true, and he knows there is no democratic mandate for it—none at all. If he accepted our amendments, he could right that wrong and ensure that each local community could decide for itself what was in the best interests of its fire and rescue service. That would be a real localism agenda.

New clause 20 would give fire services in England a statutory responsibility to deal with flooding, as is already the case for their Scottish and Northern Irish counterparts. In December, much of the north of England was devastated by flooding. Many homes were flooded, bridges connecting communities were washed away, major roads were blocked and, in Lancaster, a sub-station was flooded leaving tens of thousands of homes without power. In December alone, firefighters responded to more than 1,400 flood incidents across the north-west, and on Boxing day, 1,000 people were rescued in Greater Manchester. The work of our firefighters was brilliant during those difficult days. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House would agree on that, if on nothing else.

However, fire services have expressed concern that they were not properly equipped to deal with that situation and that they lacked basic kit such as boats and dry suits. Frankly, that is not good enough. I believe that this stems from the fact that it is unclear who holds the primary responsibility for responding to floods.

When flooding is not formally the responsibility of any service, it will not be given the priority it deserves in budgeting and planning. If we are going to continue to ask fire services to deal with major incidents such as flooding, we should say so in this place so that proper provision can be made and they can prepare comprehensively for incidents. Stories of volunteers and the Army mucking in might be heart-warming, but that is simply no substitute for a properly organised and funded rescue service.

Before I finish, I would like to touch on the issue of privatisation. The Minister gave us categorical assurances that there would be no changes or movement in that regard, and that is why we have tabled no amendments on privatisation. I am going to hold the Minister to his word, but I am sure that those in the other place will
want to do a bit of digging to ensure that I am right and he is right, and that there can be no privatisation of our fire services under this legislation.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): I would like to speak to amendment 2, which is in my name and those of several right hon. and hon. Members across the House. Part 1 of the Bill sets out the measures to encourage greater collaboration between emergency services, a topic that I have spoken about several times in the House. Clauses 6 and 7 will give police and crime commissioners the opportunity to extend their responsibilities to include fire and rescue services. I have been calling for that extension for some time now, and I secured a Westminster Hall debate on the topic last year. As I said on Second Reading, I welcome the inclusion of those clauses in the Bill.

The introduction of police and crime commissioners in 2012 created greater transparency and democratic accountability in policing, with PCCs replacing unelected and unaccountable police authorities. Extending the responsibilities of PCCs to include fire and rescue authorities will mirror those benefits. As we have been hearing, fire and rescue authorities are made up of elected councillors, but they are not directly accountable to the public for those specific roles, as they are appointed to those positions. As I have said before, that is very different from, and should not be confused with, democratic accountability.

The introduction of directly elected PCCs means that the public can scrutinise their performance, precept and priorities, and exercise their approval—or, indeed, disapproval—at the ballot box. The public will get their chance to decide on the performance of the first tranche of PCCs in a couple of weeks’ time, on 5 May. It is absolutely right that the guardianship of the fire and rescue services should also be directly accountable to the public, and given the synergies between the two services, it is logical that PCCs should take on that responsibility, too.

**James Cleverly:** Does my hon. Friend agree that, far from overlooking the attributes of our firefighters, it would be an advantage to local communities if highly trusted, experienced firefighters were given the opportunity to extend their preventive remit to areas such as crime prevention advice as well as fire prevention advice?

**Amanda Milling:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. This is about collaboration, and prevention extends across our emergency services.

Amendment 2 is designed to provide the public with greater clarification on the role of the police and crime commissioner. If a PCC does take on the responsibility for fire and rescue services, it is important that the public are clear that the individual is responsible for both the police service and the fire and rescue service. I have called for the title change in the House before, and it will help to address some concerns raised on Second Reading, in Committee and earlier that the change represents a police takeover.

2.30 pm

The services will remain operationally distinct under the legislation and the precepts will be distinct, too. To be clear, there is no suggestion that police officers will be fighting fires or that firefighters will be arresting criminals. The legislation simply reforms the governance of the two services and ensures that one democratically accountable individual has responsibility for them both. Although the Bill is designed to be flexible and does not mandate PCCs to take on responsibility for fire and rescue services, which will happen only when a case is made locally, there is a need to ensure that the new title is nationally recognised. That is why amendment 2 would give the Secretary of State the power to make the title change in secondary legislation at some future point.

The danger of leaving the decision in the hands of the PCCs who have taken on extended responsibilities is that we could find a patchwork of different titles being used across the country, which would create real confusion for the public at future elections. To continue to increase the profile of these nationwide roles and the elections, we need to ensure clarity in the title. The amendment does not state what the title should be, leaving that decision in the hands of the Secretary of State. Many different titles could be used—I have mentioned several in previous debates—but I am sure that the Secretary of State would want to consult to ensure that the title is appropriate, clear and not misleading in any way. That would also give various organisations and individuals the opportunity to make their representations.

The amendment is meant to be probing and might not be made to the Bill at this stage, but when the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, it would be helpful if he could provide clarity about the discussions he has had with the Department regarding the title change and about his views and intentions as the Bill continues to progress through the House.

**Kate Hoey:** I rise to support new clause 20 in particular. I declare an interest as chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. Giving fire and rescue services a statutory responsibility for leading the emergency services in response to flooding is something on which we have had meeting after meeting over the years with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers, who have all said that they supported it, and with Ministers from different Departments. It goes so far, but then it stops. There is clearly a Treasury argument here somewhere, but I feel strongly about the matter. There has been an increase in floods over recent years, and we have seen how our fire and rescue services have responded. What is happening seems wrong when we rely on them.

Let us look at the data from last year. Thirty-four fire and rescue services provided assistance in the worst-affected areas. Data collected by the FBU, which does a good job in getting it, from individual fire and rescue services found that firefighters responded to at least 1,400 flood incidents across north-west England and 450 incidents in Yorkshire. As we saw on our television screens, with politicians lining up to thank them and say how brave they had been and how wonderful they were, firefighters rescued people from a wide range of hazardous situations, evacuating people in advance of coming floods and rescued people from a wide range of hazardous situations, making various other emergency interventions. It seems strange that we give our firefighters great praise for doing something that we and local people automatically expect them to do, yet we do not make their leading of the emergency services a statutory responsibility. I can...
only assume that the Government do not want to spend what might be some extra resources on ensuring that firemen and firewomen and all the rescue services are properly equipped.

We have seen terrible examples of when firemen and women have not had the right safety or protective equipment and have had to do things without the correct clothing, with things running out in some areas. They still did those things, but that is wrong and I genuinely do not understand the situation. I am sure that the Minister supported the proposal at one time. Many Ministers have supported it, but when they get into a position in which they actually have to make the decision or are allowed to get involved in it, they seem to change their mind. I hope the Minister will respond to that and that we will get the opportunity to support the change in a vote today.

I now turn briefly to the other issues. I share the position of the shadow Front-Bench team on police and crime commissioners. There is no public appetite for change. Wherever I have been around the country, no one has been clamouring for reform of how we govern our fire services or for any responsibility to be transferred to PCCs. I have not heard any evidence today—we may hear it from the Minister, but I doubt it—that there is a problem with the current governance arrangements. No one has convinced me that the change would deliver an emergency service that is more economic, efficient and effective or would help to improve public safety. We all want co-ordination, and I welcome that co-operation and co-ordination have gone further in some parts of the country than in others. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said from the Front Bench, we want to see more of that, but we do not need to bring it in this top-down, totally anti-democratic way.

I am not at all ashamed to say that I believe that firefighters and police officers perform different roles. That does not mean that we do not value equally the roles of both, but they perform different roles and have different remits. A police officer is seen as a legal person and someone who is there to uphold the law. A fireman or firewoman, or anyone involved in the rescue services, is seen very differently. Having a single employer will begin to confuse that in the public mind. The preventive work that firefighters do and the way that they are trusted, implicitly and completely, by the public could well be jeopardised if the changes go through.

The Bill and this change would do nothing at all to invest in fire and rescue services’ resources. I have already mentioned the work that goes into responding to large-scale flooding incidents and providing emergency medical response. The Government should focus on putting extra resources into initiatives that will actually lead to the changes and to co-ordination.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that this is frankly more about saving money than improving the service. She probably noticed that the burden has been shifted to local authorities, with the 2% increase. Eventually, the entire burden for fire and police will be shifted on to local authorities. Then we will have a situation of profligate spending—we have been here before—and local authorities will get capped.

Kate Hoey: Absolutely; there is no doubt this is a cost-cutting exercise. I accept that these days everybody has to have constraints on the public purse, as far as is possible, but there are ways of doing that and this bureaucratic way seems to have been brought in by people who have had the idea for a long time and now have seen an opportunity to push it forward. The Government should not be pursuing these almost ideological ways of trying to save money. They should be looking at ways of improving our emergency services and ensuring that they co-ordinate well together. It would be wrong to transfer this responsibility to a PCC.

We have a valuable, popular fire service that has the confidence of the public, and we should be very wary of making those changes, which I think will have a really detrimental effect on not only how the public see the service, but on its effectiveness out there in the country. I hope we will be able to make some changes to this proposal and that when Members get the opportunity they will vote to put a stop to something that is very wrong indeed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call James Cleverly.

James Cleverly: I am obliged to you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I apologise if I leapt to my feet rather more quickly than colleagues had anticipated. I am keen to speak in this debate, having served on the Bill Committee and, for a number of years, as chair of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. I feel that I speak with a fair degree of authority on the implications of different governance models, because the LFEPA had to go through the process of making substantial changes to the London fire brigade and I saw at first hand the widespread misunderstanding of the governance arrangements, both of the London fire brigade, through the London fire authority and to the Mayor, and more widely and nationally.

I like clarity; it is a cornerstone of democracy that people can follow the golden thread from the decisions they make at the ballot box, through to the people who make the decisions about the provision of their public services and, ultimately, on to the delivery of those services. This is important, because when things go right in the delivery of those services, people should know who to reward at the ballot box. Perhaps more importantly, if things do not go well, voters should know who they can punish at the ballot box. That is a cornerstone of the democratic model, to which I am sure we all subscribe.

Previously, when we had police authorities, there was a break in that golden thread, because people did not know who ran their police force. They were probably aware of where the police headquarters were, although I am being generous when I say that. I suspect that in many parts of the country people might have had a vague idea that the police headquarters would be in the big town—the county town. People in my constituency are aware that the police headquarters were in Chelmsford, but I would be surprised if many were able to name their chief constable and absolutely amazed if any were able to name the local councillors who sat on the police authority.
Catherine West: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, in that my mailbox is full of matters such as housing. However, the mail on policing and fire is more about anxiety at the level of cuts since 2010. I would like a reassurance that all this meddling on governance is not going to lead to further service reductions in terms of our crucial bobbies on the beat, firefighters who turn up on time and all the rest of the expectations that the community rightly has of our emergency services.

James Cleverly: I intend to deal a little later in my speech with some of the financial benefits that come with greater collaboration and co-working in the back office. If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I will return to that point.

2.45 pm

Jake Berry: I wish to bring my hon. Friend back to his point about how people may know the name of their chief constable but would not know who was on their former police authority. Does he agree that one real benefit of a PCC is that people will know not only the name of their chief constable, but also of their PCC? In addition, they will be involved in setting the priorities for policing in their own area. In the forthcoming PCC elections in Lancashire, one of our top priorities, which we are out there campaigning on—with success, we hope—is tackling rural crime, which is hugely important to the towns and villages around Rossendale and Darwen. The PCC election has given us the opportunity to say, “Tackle cybercrime and speeding, but also prioritise rural crime” and, thus, get people really involved with their own policing.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which goes to the heart of the fundamental change in the relationship between people in the local community and the police force that represents it. It gives those people an opportunity periodically—once every four years, or indeed sooner—to hold PCCs to account. We have seen an example of where the priorities and the actions of a PCC have fallen below the level of legitimate expectation. That person was then forced to stand down and a PCC by-election took place, which really focused the minds of the people in South Yorkshire about what the role of their PCC should be. That requirement for PCCs to hold themselves to account before the electors goes to the heart of the success of the PCC model, and it is important to expand that success to the fire and rescue service.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edginstbury) (Con): The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) spoke about cuts, but Cheshire’s PCC has been very successful at putting more officers on to the frontline. He is collaborating with his local fire and rescue service, and there will be co-location in the police headquarters in Winsford. That is an example of where co-operation is delivering more for less very effectively, and in a way that is protecting people in Cheshire, particularly in my constituency.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which reinforces one of my beliefs. We hear a lot of talk in this Chamber about what people want, but all the evidence I have received, including from the extensive research carried out during the changes we made to the London fire brigade in my former role as the chair of the LFEPA, shows that what people really want is certainty. That goes to a point Opposition Members have made about people having quality public provision when they need it, where they need it. We should subordinate structures to the delivery of that agenda. I also believe that the changes proposed by the Government go a long way towards protecting those structures.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my incredulity at the Labour party’s talk about cuts, given that, if I am not mistaken, it was the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who went on the record calling for 10% cuts in the police budget? Perhaps my hon. Friend will reflect on that for a moment—

Lyn Brown: Rubbish!

Julian Knight: It is on the record.

James Cleverly: My view is that we judge people by what they say. I know that there will be indignation from Labour Members, but as we have seen when the Labour party was in government the quality of the delivery of public services is not always totally interwoven with the budgets allocated to them. Indeed, there are massive opportunities to get more for less, and surely that should be the acme of performance.

Lyn Brown: May I say to the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who has just taken his place in this Chamber, that, frankly, this has been a better debate than that? His unreasonable slur on the Opposition is about our stance on the police services rather than on the fire services. It would be really good if he read the Whips’ report more carefully before he intervenes next time.

May I say to the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), to whom I have been listening, that his points are interesting and have some validity, but London is rather different from areas outside London? Over decades, London has got used to having a single seat of government—even though there was an interregnum when the Greater London Council was disbanded. The reality is that when our constituents do not know where to go to complain about a service or to bring up an issue, they end up at the door of our town halls. It does not matter whether we are talking about Newham or Newcastle, that is where they go.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Just before we proceed, may I say with great respect to the hon. Lady that, although she has many points to make which the House should hear, interventions must be short.

James Cleverly: London’s exceptionalism is often held up as the reason why things that happen in London cannot possibly happen elsewhere. I have to say that, having served in office both in London and in Essex, I do not subscribe to that view. There are many things that national Government can learn from what a Conservative administration has done in London. I will
go even further and say that London could learn plenty of things from other parts of the country, including from my wonderful county of Essex.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting arguments, but the problem that we have in the west midlands—if we leave the Mayor and his authority to one side—is the frequency of change in the local superintendents. They change and the public do not really get to know them. In the past, before the Layfield report and the major reorganisations of the 1970s, people were able to identify who was in charge of the local police force and knew exactly who to go to. That is the problem that we have in the west midlands.

James Cleverly: That is a fair point. I have had a number of people talk to me about the speed with which police officers move through posts, so I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman.

Let me drag myself kicking and screaming back to the point that I was trying to make, because I have inadvertently found myself speaking more about policing than about fire and rescue services. I think it is legitimate, because what we have seen in London is a very clear line of accountability. Londoners may not be able to identify their nearest—I do not use the word “local” here—fire authority member. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned the local councillor on Newham council who has responsibility for fire and safety, but that councillor does not sit on the London fire authority. In fact, the reason I asked her specific questions is that I know who sits on the London fire authority—I am probably one of the few people in this Chamber or elsewhere who does—and I know that no one from the London borough of Newham, either elected or appointed, is on that authority. When the people of Newham want to cast judgment on the delivery of fire services in that borough, the only person they can either reward or punish at the ballot box is the Mayor of London, who, we should remind ourselves, is also the police and crime commissioner for London.

I want to address the hon. Lady’s point about the fire service being starved of resources so that we can support what she feels is the higher-profile policing service. After the changes that the London fire authority made, the Mayor of London, who is the budget holder for both the police and fire authorities, made a commitment to protect the London fire budget irrespective of the budgetary award from central Government. He was able to do so, because he could flex his budgets over the two areas. Far from starving resources from fire and rescue to give to policing, he was able to protect fire and rescue by dipping into his broader budget. Therefore, I fundamentally disagree with this idea that a police and crime commissioner who has responsibility for both policing and fire services would automatically and obviously rob Peter to pay Paul. That view is reinforced by the fact—the Minister has stated this from the Dispatch Box on a number of occasions—that the budget lines are separate.

Before I conclude, I will touch on the concerns that were raised by the shadow Front-Bench team about the single employer model. There are many instances where the employer has very different types of employee in terms of public sector delivery. No one confuses civil servants at the Ministry of Defence with members of the Special Air Service. Ultimately, both are employed by the same organisation; there is no confusion in the minds of the public there. Indeed, in the fire and rescue service and the police force, we have both uniformed and non-uniformed members of staff. The police service has warranted officers, police community support officers and non-uniformed civilian staff, and they are all under the same employer and there is no public confusion about the different roles. The idea that, somehow, the British public are too dim-witted, or too slow on the uptake, to be able to tell the difference between a copper and a firefighter is an argument that is so bereft of power that it should be disregarded.

The British people deserve to know who to punish or to reward at the ballot box in relation to fire and rescue, because, like policing, it is a vital public service. I have no doubt that, next week, we will see a much greater engagement and turnout in the police and crime commissioner elections than we have seen previously because people now understand in more detail what they are voting for. They have seen where the police and crime commissioners have done well, as highlighted in Cheshire by my hon. Friend the Member for Edisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and where they have done less well, and the PCCs will be held to account at the ballot box. When it comes to the delivery of fire and rescue services, the British people deserve just as much a say as they do on policing, so I am happy to support the Government’s position, and I call on the House to reject the new clause put forward in the name of the shadow Minister.

Jake Berry: Having spoken on Second Reading and served on the Bill Committee, it is a real pleasure to be here on Report. Initially, I want to address my comments to new clause 20, which was proposed by the Opposition. The aim of the new clause, which is to give fire and rescue services the lead in flooding, is good. However, I disagree with the new clause overall, and I will go on to say why I do not think it is necessary.

I was selected as the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Rossendale and Darwen in 2007. On 13 January 2017, it will be 10 years since I was selected—hopefully, there is a big celebration to come. In that period, the village of Irwell Vale in my constituency has, I think, flooded four times. The aptly named village of Waterfoot has flooded three times, and Whitewell Bottom has flooded twice. Like so many areas that have grown up because of the industrial revolution, the towns and villages of the Rossendale and Darwen valleys are built on the valley floor so that the manufacturers and industrialists of the day could take advantage of water power.

Like many other areas in the north-west of England, we have been subject to severe floods over the past 10 years, no more so than on Boxing day when we had what the Environment Agency called a once-in-75-years flood, having had a once-in-25-years flood a few years previously. Having been working closely with the residents of Irwell Vale who are still out of their homes four months on from the flood, I know the huge impact that flooding has and the huge family disruption it can cause.
One thing that was fantastic to see on Boxing day—the one ray of sunshine on what was a miserable day for so many—was the amazing response not just of our fire and rescue service but of our police force, and in areas of Lancashire such as the Ribble Valley and South Ribble the Army came out. Apparently, as the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is indicating from a sedentary position, the Army came out in Wyre too. Local people helped: people from all over my constituency volunteered to help with the clean-up. That is why I am not sure that placing a statutory duty on fire and rescue services always to take the lead in a flooding situation would work.

When I speak to members of the fire and rescue service in my constituency, it is clear that they do not need the Government to pass a law to tell them that they are responsible for flood recovery, flooding help and the prevention of loss of life. But knowing my own situation in Rossendale and Darwen, I could almost imagine a situation where the police would turn up first. Environment Agency officers, or in some cases the armed forces, might turn up first and feel unable to take immediate action because the fire service was not there to take the lead.

**Julian Knight:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful case from personal experience. Does he agree that flexibility is crucial? That is what he is describing. Surely if someone has the skills and the wherewithal to tackle the situation and they are on the scene, they should be allowed to do so without fear of legal recourse.

**Jake Berry:** My hon. Friend makes my point very clearly. People should try to prevent flooding or loss of life only when it is safe for them to do so and when they believe that they have the capacity to deal with the situation—for example, members of the armed forces or police officers, who are extremely brave, or the Environment Agency or the water board. The clause would put an unnecessary straitjacket on the response to floods in Lancashire. Although I support much of what it seeks to achieve, putting that in primary legislation is probably a step too far.

As an update, I can tell the House that the people of Rossendale are well served. We have the impending visit of the Minister with responsibility for floods, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is coming to Irwell Vale on 13 May. I do not think he knows what is going to greet him. I will make sure that there is an angry mob to talk to him about the response of the Environment Agency, but no one should tell him that. I hope it can remain our secret. I hope that in future the Environment Agency may be in a position to take a lead in the Rossendale valley, looking at a full catchment solution.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** The hon. Gentleman mentions the Minister with responsibility for floods. In the 1970s we had a Minister with responsibility for drought. He was expected to bring the rain when necessary.

**Jake Berry:** There is no drought in Lancashire, but if the hon. Gentleman wants me to come to Coventry to do the rain dance, I am more than happy to do so if it is required.

Amendment 2, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), has been signed by right hon. and hon. Members across the House. Having been involved in the Bill since Second Reading, it is clear to me and probably to everyone who has spoken on the Bill or served on the Committee that the recognition accorded to police and crime commissioners is at an all-time high. We first went to the polls on a wet November evening in my constituency to elect a police and crime commissioner. When I went knocking on people’s doors saying, “This is an important national election. You must come out and vote”, I was met with blank faces. People did not know what the office had been created for and they did not understand what police and crime commissioners would do.

Everyone who heard the evidence session on the Bill, with some excellent contributions from police and crime commissioners all over the country, would say that that has now changed. I may fundamentally disagree with much of the evidence given by Vera Baird to the Committee, but I have heard of her. I listen to Radio 4 in the morning and I often hear her, usually beating up the Government. She is raising the profile of police and crime commissioners, as are police and crime commissioners across the country.

The general public like the idea of having one individual whom they can hold accountable for the performance of their local police service. The old police panel was remote. It was appointed and was therefore unaccountable. I compare that to the situation today with my local PCC. He has taken road shows all around Lancashire, going out there and talking to people about what they would like policing priorities to be over the next four years. I am slightly sceptical about his new-found fondness for going out and meeting the public. It seems like a last-ditch attempt to be re-elected. I hope that Andy Pratt, the Conservative candidate, who has 30 years’ service as a police officer, will win in Lancashire so that, like many other areas of the country, including Cheshire and Staffordshire, we can have our PCC all year round, not just every four years at elections.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): If a member of the public has a problem, are they no longer allowed to go to the police chief? Do they have to go to the police and crime commissioner, or are there two centres? Can people write to the chief of police and say, “I’m really worried about this”, or are they expected to go to the police and crime commissioner?

**Jake Berry:** There is nothing precluding people from writing to their local chief constable. As chief constables are primarily responsible for the operational work of their local police force, if the query related to an operational matter, I would recommend that people wrote to their chief constable. People like to raise matters with the police and crime commissioner as well, but that is one democratically accountable, known individual who can put pressure on the chief constable on their behalf. I am sure the chief constable would be happy to hear from someone living somewhere in Lancashire, but he might be quicker to reply to their letter if the police and crime commissioner had his foot on the chief constable’s throat about the issue—[Interruption.] Indeed, or the MP. Many people do come and see me.
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I have a couple of observations. First, I was not happy with the politicisation of the police force. It was wrong that we should have Labour or anyone else as PCCs. That worries me. Secondly, does my hon. Friend agree that there is potential for conflict between the PCC and the chief constable? In some cases the PCC is a former policeman, but PCCs may have no experience of the police, yet have the power to appoint and sack someone who may have 35 years’ experience. I am not happy with that, either.

Jake Berry: On the politicisation of the police force, that may have been driven by low turn out. Even though the Labour party opposed the office of police and crime commissioner in its last manifesto, I note that it is standing a candidate in every division. At the last election there were many independent candidates standing as police and crime commissioners. At the evidence session of the Bill, we had the independent police and crime commissioner for north Wales, Mr Roddick, come to give evidence. He was excellent. If I lived in North Wales, I would probably vote for such an excellent individual with a fantastic vision for policing. If he were a Conservative, I would definitely vote for him. Many independents have been successful.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says that we need the highest possible turnout. Of course, historically turnout at police and crime commissioner elections has been low. Does he therefore share our surprise that the Home Office has committed to spend the grand total of £2,700 on advertising for this year’s PCC elections?

Jake Berry: I have a lot of respect for the shadow Minister, but I think it is slightly disingenuous to say that the turnout was low, because it was the first ever such election, it was held in November and it was not coterminal with other elections. Given the interest in the local elections in all our constituencies, I think that the turnout will be slightly higher. With regard to the £2,700, I am surprised that the Home Office has spent so much. I do not think there should be any state funding for political parties or elections, so he will not find me lobbying the Home Office to spend more.

Let me return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) about politicisation of the police. Support for our police and crime commissioners has grown, including for excellent independent police and crime commissioners. In Lancashire we have a police and crime commissioner who I think is very much at the beck and call of the police. That is why I believe amendment 2 is absolutely necessary to improve an otherwise excellent Bill.

Amanda Milling: Does my hon. Friend agree that that is absolutely the point of a police and crime commissioner: to represent the public? In doing so, they can look at things differently. For instance, the police and crime commissioner in Staffordshire has demonstrated innovation and is looking at ways in which the police can use technology to do the admin while out and about on our streets, rather than having to sit behind a desk.

Jake Berry: I agree with my hon. Friend. Let me mention one of the best examples I know of a police and crime commissioner taking a different approach. I met the police and crime commissioner for Cumbria shortly after he was elected. He had previously been headmaster of a Lancashire school. He said, “Do you know that there is no rape crisis centre in Cumbria? That is absolutely disgraceful for a police area of this size.” He took some of his PCC budget that was meant to be spent on administration and set up a rape crisis centre. I think that shows just how police and crime commissioners who really care about their areas—it is nothing to do with politics—can make a huge different to policing. When he was elected he said, “This is one of the things that I am going to change, because it is a disgrace that Cumbria does not have one.” In fact, he changed that within 18 months of the election. As a result of such actions, the recognition and popularity of police and crime commissioners has grown, and I believe that the same will happen with police and fire commissioners.

We all have immense respect for police officers and fire officers, but we accept that they do very different jobs. The public often see them working together and co-operating—for example, at the scene of an accident—but the idea of those two separate services having a common leadership will take longer for the public to understand. That is why I believe amendment 2 is absolutely necessary to improve an otherwise excellent Bill.

3.15 pm

Everyone will have their own idea about the name that the Secretary of State should give to a police and crime commissioner who takes on responsibility for fire, should this amendment be made—whether fire and crime, or policing and crime and fire—but we probably all agree that it is imperative that we preserve a nationally recognised brand for the office. One of the successes of the police and crime commissioners is that this time, second time around, it is a national election with a recognised office. It might not be discussed in the Dog and Duck in Erdington or in Rossendale and Darwen, but people will talk about PCCs and the work they do, especially as they take on new responsibilities. It is quite centrist to say, “The Secretary of State shall direct a PCC about what he or she may be called in future,” but I think that a nationally recognised label will reflect the national nature of the legislation.

I also note that the Secretary of State would have the power at some point in the future to come up with the name of a police and crime commissioner who had
also taken on responsibility for fire. I hope that the Secretary of State and her officials would have a detailed consultation with the fire service to find out what would be an acceptable name, because I share the concern, which has been expressed across the House, about police services and fire services having a different nature. The fire service does not want to be brought into police work, and I am sure that the police do not want to be brought into the fire service. I think that they are needlessly nervous, but having a long consultation period with the fire service would give them comfort.

I think that our fire services probably perceive the Bill as bringing the biggest change and the biggest risk. I think that the change and the risk are minimal, but that is how they perceive it. As with all change, I think it is in fact the fear of change, rather than the change itself, that is concerning them. If the proposal is accepted, it is absolutely essential that the new name for a police and crime commissioner with the added responsibility of a fire commissioner keeps front and centre the operational independence of both our fire services and our police services. Nobody is suggesting that the day after the Bill receives Royal Assent a police officer will be sent out with a bucket and told to quench a fire, or that a fire officer would ever be expected to go out and feel the collar of a local criminal; they must retain their operational independence.

In short, I think that this proposal gives the Secretary of State the power to make a clear name change to ensure that at the next national elections people will understand that they are voting for a combined role of police and crime commissioner and fire commissioner. However, that title must cement in their minds the fact that although those roles have a combined leadership, they remain absolutely separate and their operational independence is protected under the Bill.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): It is surprising what inspiration one can get when sitting in this place. I am delighted to speak to this group of amendments, and I do so in the very good hope that I can curry favour with my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen in my area is looking at an ever-increasing number of mergers of fire and rescue authorities, which do a fantastic job. In my area of Gloucestershire, the authority is under the control of the county council, and—this is why I am pleased the clause is enabling not prescriptive—I would not want it to be transferred to the PCC, who is an independent authority and who is not doing a particularly good job. That is why the clause is excellent: it deals with everything on a case-by-case basis.

Having said that, I must mention my experience of having the Fire Service College in my constituency. The college provides major training for the fire service and does some amazing blue-light collaborative training involving the fire, police and ambulance services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) said, it is essential that those services work collaboratively as possible in an emergency. The services in Gloucestershire are coterminous and relatively small, compared with some of the larger, urban authorities, and work incredibly well together. Each service knowing exactly what it is supposed to do in any given circumstances. It is essential, particularly with more sophisticated and frequent emergencies—which could flooding or, regrettably, things such as terrorism—that the blue-light services work closely together.

Training for such events could be improved. Resilience training for all three blue-light services, working together in emergencies, could be improved. If, God forbid, they are ever really tested in a big emergency—particularly one that takes place at multiple locations—they will need their training and collaboration to be of the highest order. That is where some of the mergers of fire and rescue authorities and PCCs could help.

Having said that, my area is looking at an ever-increasing number of mergers of fire and rescue services operating under the county council. It is not just operational efficiency that I am looking forward to from the Government’s proposals, but administrative efficiency. Let me give the example of Cirencester—the biggest town in my constituency. The fire station there was formerly operated by professional firefighters; it is now moving towards retained firefighters, and there will not be quite so many of them. The premises are vast, and it is maintained at public expense, but the police could usefully use it for their authority too.

We therefore begin to get the idea, which should be pushed more and more, that our precious public resources can be better utilised—in the case of property, if more than one public authority occupies it at once. However, that requires a different mindset from authorities. The police are used to having their police station, and the fire services are used to having their fire station, and lighthitherto, in some cases, the two have never felt it appropriate to mix. We can achieve significant efficiencies by merging the two, particularly when it comes to property.

Jake Berry: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that, when we go out and talk to our constituents, we see that they really care about the people out on the street and the frontline. We cannot measure a service by how many buildings it occupies in our town. Is my hon. Friend aware of the shared fire and rescue training and police training in Northern Ireland, which has saved tens of millions of pounds? That shows that, where co-operation is done right, and the police and the fire service maintain their independence, significant savings can be made.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because that gives me the opportunity yet again to praise what the Fire Service College is doing in Moreton-in-Marsh. It is large establishment on about 600 acres. It is on an old airfield, and it includes a runway used as a practice motorway on which motorway pile-ups can be simulated using real scrapped cars, so that the police, fire and ambulance services can then train in a big joint exercise. The college has offices they set on fire, and the police, fire and ambulance services can use that to train. It also has a ship it can set on fire. It has all sorts of huge facilities.

Bob Stewart: On a runway?
and sadly lost their lives to fire.

Many people survived the RTC, got out of their vehicles, vividly remember, as roads Minister, going to the terrible moment. We should not take one year as an example, the shadow Minister said, there is an increase at the figures, and I have asked my officials to look at that. As concerned about the correlation between those two changed enormously fast, but some have not changed semantics and language have not. Some things have years ago. The job has changed, although some of the steep learning curve from when I was a fireman all those so that I could take on this portfolio. The work has

Mike Penning: May I praise, as I did in Committee, the tone of the debate and the measured way in which it has been taken forward, even though we will obviously disagree on certain issues?

Thirty years ago, I wrote a paper on better collaboration between the emergency services, covering the ambulance, fire and police services. I was wrong, because it should have included the coastguard—as a former shipping Minister, I would say that, wouldn’t I?

Let me say at the outset that I have much sympathy with some aspects of the provisions that have been tabled today. We may be able to look at some of them again and to bring back proposals in the Lords. However, I fundamentally disagree with others, because they would rip the heart out of the Bill—I am looking at the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who knows exactly what I mean.

Let me also say that I am enormously proud to be the first police and fire Minister, and that role is perhaps an indication of how seriously the Government take some of the concerns the fire service and the shadow fire Minister have. I actually gave up huge swathes of my policing portfolio, including responsibility for the National Crime Agency and organised crime, to other Ministers, so that I could take on this portfolio. The work has taken up a huge amount of my time—that is not just because of this Bill—because I have been on an enormously steep learning curve from when I was a fireman all those years ago. The job has changed, although some of the semantics and language have not. Some things have changed enormously fast, but some have not changed as fast as we would perhaps all like.

Because we have a fantastic fire service, there has been a decrease of 17% in fire-related fatalities and of 50% in reported fires over the past 10 years. I am concerned about the correlation between those two figures, and I have asked my officials to look at that. As the shadow Minister said, there is an increase at the moment. We should not take one year as an example, and there may be, very sadly, some one-off events. I vividly remember as roads Minister going to the terrible fire on the M5 following a road traffic collision where many people survived the RTC, got out of their vehicles, and sadly lost their lives to fire.

3.30 pm

Members of the fire service, the police and the ambulance service are amazing creatures. We often send them in one direction while we go in the other direction. The group of people who work in the fire service and in our other emergency services are a special breed. Many of them are ex-armed forces due to some of the training that we give in our armed forces. Sadly, not as many are coming through as there were in my time: I left the Army and went straight into Essex fire and rescue services. I applied to the Metropolitan police and the London fire service. I got accepted into both, but Essex offered me a flat. If the Met had offered me a flat, I probably would not be standing here now and would have retired a couple of years ago.

Bob Stewart: Friends of mine who are serving in the armed forces are finding it increasingly difficult to move into the police or the fire service. Could the Minister help in any way, because the training that the armed forces give to my friends is so important and should be utilised to make our police and fire services even better than they already are?

Mike Penning: This issue has been very close to my heart for some time. For instance, we have a real issue coming down the line with a shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers, and yet some 40% of the armed forces leave with an HGV licence, as I did.

Many fire services around the country have not been recruiting recently, although I understand that some have started to recruit now, but the police are most certainly recruiting. The Metropolitan police have brought in the right policy of making sure that people serving in the police force in London can represent their community, so they come from the community they live in. When the commissioner first proposed this and said that it was the right thing to do, I said, “Be very careful, because you would have excluded me from joining the Met. Although I grew up in Edmonton, you would have said that I’d been away for five years and so would not be allowed to join the police force.”

The rule has been changed, and, quite rightly, the police force in London will now allow someone to join even if they have been in the armed forces for some time. This is a very important area, especially as the police are now recruiting extensively. Only the other day, I took the passing out parade at Hendon, with over 200 officers. I think that in excess of 2,000 officers are coming through training in London imminently.

Perhaps because of my background in the military and in the fire service, I understand that neither organisation likes change. I listened to the arguments made earlier about why there was opposition to PCCs possibly taking control of the fire service in a managerial way, in the same way as they took over from the police authorities. It is almost an identical argument that says, “What experience do they have? Surely it’s better that we let the councillors who have sat on the committee for 20 years, with all that experience, do it.”

The introduction of PCCs was fundamentally opposed by Her Majesty’s Opposition— I understand why—who had it in their manifesto to abolish them. They did not win the election for many reasons, not least because people such as Vera Baird and Paddy Tipping are excellent PCCs in their parts of the world. Vera Baird
has absolutely transformed victim support in her part of the world, as have many others. I know the candidates up there will say, “You shouldn’t name names”, but actually we should give praise where it is due. There have been good independents. I want Conservative PCCs to win in every single seat, but we have to be pragmatic, and if others are elected, then let us make sure that we can work together.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) touched on the concerns about whether PCCs have the necessary experience. Some PCCs do have lots of experience within the police force, but that is not necessarily relevant. When the Prime Minister appointed me as shipping Minister, I said, “You do realise, Prime Minister, that my constituency is the furthest away from the sea in the whole country?” He said, “Yes, but you should question whether the way things have always been done is the right way.”

I use the example of armed guards on ships. When I arrived at the Department for Transport, we were having massive problems with Somali pirates. I simply said, “Why hasn’t the Royal Navy been able to do that job with the Marines—no navy in the whole world is more capable—and so allow people to protect their property?” So we convinced other countries and the International Maritime Organisation that we should allow that. I did not look at that from the perspective of a shipping person; I looked at it as an outside individual who was trying to say, “Let these people have an opportunity to do that.” That idea had been looked at by people who were much more experienced than I was in shipping, and it had been rejected on more than one occasion because it was not possible. I came in from the outside and said that it was possible.

Richard Drax: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. I think that he misunderstood me: I was not saying that a PCC should or should not be a police officer. Some are, and some are not. I was saying that I had concerns about the powers that they have to appoint and sack police officers, who may have had 25 or 30 years’ experience. I think that that role should be left to the Home Office and the Home Secretary.

Mike Penning: I understand where my hon. Friend is coming from. That is a bit of a different issue, and not part of what we are talking about. There is a disciplinary process to go through, which is now, quite rightly, transparent as a result of other measures in the Bill.

Amendments 3 to 6, tabled by Her Majesty’s Opposition, would decimate the PCCs’ role. I know exactly why the shadow Minister has tabled them, because we had a very similar debate in Committee. The shadow Minister knows full well that I will not accept them, and if she presses them to a Division, we will attempt to vote them down.

In principle, we completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) on amendment 2. We need to do some work around it to ensure that it encapsulates titles other than the PCC, and we can work together on it before the Bill goes to the Lords, where we will introduce a Government amendment that will be very similar to amendment 2 but will be drafted in such a way as to make sure that no consequential issues arise.

Amanda Milling: May I press my right hon. Friend on that point? Is it the Government’s intention to table amendment 2, or an equivalent amendment, when the Bill goes to the other place? If I get that assurance, I will not press the amendment to a vote.

Mike Penning: If I had had the clearance today, I would have supported amendment 2, but there are issues on which I need to get clarification. We will introduce in the Lords basically what my hon. Friend is asking for, because it is important that the public understand exactly what they have got. Of course, the Bill will receive Royal Assent long after the elections. Some PCCs have, quite rightly, put in their manifestos now what they would like to see, but there is an issue about whether the title should include police, fire and rescue.

Jake Berry: I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to deal with a point that I raised about the clause. Will he confirm that, before the Secretary of State makes a direction under secondary legislation, as envisaged by the clause, there will be wide consultation? Will he confirm that the Government will consult widely with the fire and rescue service, in particular, given the concerns that it has raised about maintaining not only its operational independence, but an element of independence in the eyes of the public?

Mike Penning: That is exactly what will be proposed. This is not one size fits all, and it will not be imposed, in that we would like an agreement locally. Clearly, that may not be possible in some parts of the country. Then it will be for the PCC to put a business case to the Home Secretary, and then we will go out to independent review when the consultation takes place. Fundamentally, we are not trying to interfere with operational firefighting and the operational police; this is more to do with dealing with administrative costs to save the moneys that we all know could be saved.

In Lancashire, for example, I met the chief constable and the PCC, and they told me that they were going to use some of the reserves to build a new police station in Blackpool. I said, “Fantastic news. I wondered what you were going to use the allocated reserves for.” But you have had a conversation with the fire service as well, haven’t you? You cannot put a fire station into a police station, because the big red trucks do not fit in the foyer, but you most certainly can put a police station in a fire station.”

Jake Berry: To come back to my specific point about the clause, my question is: if this or a similar clause comes forward in the Lords, will there be wide consultation, especially with the fire service, before the Secretary of State gives direction about the national title to be used by police and crime commissioners? I would be grateful if the Minister could answer that question.

Mike Penning: It is vital that we get the title right and that there is a national title for those taking on those responsibilities. At the same time, there will be consultation not only with the FBU and the other unions and with the chief fire officers and their association, but with the chief constables and the Police Federation. The title will be with us for a long time. When I first joined the fire service—I think it was the fire service, not the fire and rescue service, at the time—I was, sadly, a fireman; I say
that because in my time we did not have fire ladies. We were not called firefighters then. I think it is sad that that change did not happen many years earlier.

I want to touch on the issue of flooding. I was so impressed by our firefighters and ambulance crews, and by the local communities, volunteers, local authorities and police in areas where flooding took place. Flooding is becoming more and more a part of the fire and rescue service’s work. However, that is not new. There is a lovely place on the edge of Epping forest called Theydon Bois—it is in Essex, but quite close to east London, where the shadow Minister resides—where flash floods were a regular occurrence, and we used to go there. As a full-time firefighter, I regularly used to go there.

In Committee, I said that I would keep an open mind about the need to change the title to reflect areas of responsibility. In my opinion, this has nothing to do with money. Normally, I agree with nearly everything that the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) says, but on this occasion, I do not. Her constituency is only partially affected by the Bill, because the Mayor has now taken over direct responsibility for the fire service in London—that had been called for for some considerable time—so I am not surprised that PCCs are not at the forefront of conversations when she knocks on constituents’ doors in her part of the world.

There are real benefits to come from the collaboration that can take place. I am not saying that no collaboration is now taking place, but much more can be done. In particular, there is more work to do with ambulance services, especially with the triage units on blue light vehicles. I will soon have the honour and the privilege to go to America to pay my respects at the site of 9/11 in New York. No policing and fire Minister has yet done that, which I think is a sad indictment. One of the main reasons why I want to go to New York is to look at its firehouses, as they are called. Another reason is the fact that paramedics are carried in the back of fire appliances, which we need to consider very carefully in this country.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I have enormous sympathy with what my right hon. Friend is saying. It is absolutely clear that we need closer collaboration. However, in Gloucestershire we do not at the moment want the fire and rescue service to be put under the control of the PCC, so will he give us an assurance that it will not be forced to do so against its wishes?

Mike Penning: I cannot do so because that is not part of the Bill. The Bill provides for agreements where they can be made. Where no agreement can be reached, as will happen in many areas, the PCC can make a business case to the Home Secretary, if the PCC decides to do so; frankly, if there is so much opposition in Gloucestershire, the PCC might see the writing on the wall and decide not to do so. The business case will then go out to independent review, and only then will the Home Secretary make a decision.

I am enormously keen not to make this a one-size-fits-all provision. However, there has to be a backstop provision in case no one can reach an agreement and no one can move forward. In a perfect world, we would not be in a situation where we had to make it a statutory requirement to collaborate, but, frankly, collaboration in some parts of the country is not of the standard we would expect in the 21st century. We therefore need measures to take forward such collaboration.

Finally, amendment 21 is about the concordat. I have talked about that, and other bits and bobs, particularly with the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I do not think it would be good to put that on a statutory footing—in other words, to make that law. The concordat seems to be working really well, so let us see how that evolves with these agreements. The shadow Minister did not refer to that, but it is relevant. We spoke about it in Committee and I will keep a really close eye on how the concordat works, but I do not think that at this early stage putting that into law is the answer.

I hope that I have alleviated the concerns of my hon. Friends. I hope, although I do not expect, that the Opposition have listened to the assurances that I have given, not only here but in Committee.

Mike Wood: Clearly, close collaboration is important not only for efficiency, but for the delivery of effective prevention work. Can my right hon. Friend give additional assurances that the revenue streams of fire services such as that in the west midlands will be protected, including for commercial activities?

Mike Penning: I have given categorical assurances in Committee and here that there will be two funding streams and that they will not be combined. Even so, whether it is a mayoral system or a PCC system, I would expect there to be better collaboration on how that money is spent. With that in mind, I hope that none of the amendments, none of which were tabled by the Government, will be pressed.

3.46 pm

Two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day.)

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E), That the clause be read a Second time.

Question negatived.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Clause 6

Provision for Police and Crime Commissioner to be Fire and Rescue Authority

Amendment proposed: 3, page 6, line 3, leave out clause 6.—(Lyn Brown.)

This amendment, along with amendment 4, would prevent Police and Crime Commissioners from taking over the functions of Fire and Rescue Authorities.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 200, Noes 308.

Division No. 251] [3.46 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie

Alexander, Debbie

Ali, Rushanara

Allen, Mr Graham

Anderson, Mr David

Ashworth, Jonathan
Austen, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brashaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clywd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crusay, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwyne, Andrew
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keiley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McManus, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Theresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Quershi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joanne
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheerrtt, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Connor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilson, Phil
Wrint, Mr David
Winter, Mr Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Judith Cummins

NOES

Cartilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleaverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Down, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh Mr David
Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 1

PROVISION FOR POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER TO BE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Amendment proposed: 20, page 145, line 16, at end insert—

'(7) No order can be made under this section until the Secretary of State has conducted a review assessing the funding required by the fire and rescue service to secure the minimum level of cover needed to secure public safety and maintain fire resilience.

(8) The review carried out under section (7) must assess the impact of the level of cover on

(a) fire related fatalities;
(b) non-fatal fire related casualties;
(c) the number of dwelling fires and other fires;
(d) the number of incidents responded to, and
(e) the strength and speed of response to incidents.'

This amendment would require the Home Secretary to conduct a review on the level of funding the FRS requires in order to secure public safety before she may make allows police and crime commissioner to a fire and rescue authority.

Question put, That the amendment be made.
### The House divided: Ayes 209, Noes 303.

**Division No. 252**

<table>
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<th>[4.03 pm]</th>
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### Tellers for the Ayes: Judith Cummins and Vicky Foxcroft

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(4) An order under section 4A, whether modified or not by this Act, may only be made with either: consent of the Secretary of State, or a majority vote by local people through a referendum. “—(Lyn Brown.)

This amendment would ensure that a PCC can only take over a Fire and Rescue Service with the approval of local people or their local representatives.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 1

PROVISION FOR POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER TO BE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Amendment proposed: 6, page 157, line 33, at end insert—

‘(4) An order under section 4A, whether modified or not by the Secretary of State, may only be made with either: consent of all of the relevant local authorities and relevant fire and rescue authority, or a majority vote by local people through referendum.”—(Lyn Brown.)

This amendment would ensure that a PCC can only take over a Fire and Rescue Service with the approval of local people or their local representatives.

Question put, That the amendment be made.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 200, Noes 307.

Division No. 253  

AYES  

Abbott, Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allen, Mr Graham  
Anderson, Mr David  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Kevin  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blenkinsop, Tom  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brashaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Clwyd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cox, Jo  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Mr David  
Creasy, Stella  
Craddock, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
De Piero, Gloria  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Jim  
Dowd, Peter  
Dromey, Jack  
Durkan, Mark  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Elliott, Tom  
Elman, Mrs Louise  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Felloo, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Flynn, Paul  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Gapes, Mike  
Glass, Pat  
Glinnond, Mary  
Godsiff, rh Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Hanson, rh Mr David  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, rh Mr Mark  
Hepburn, rh Mr Stephen  
Hillier, Meg  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Holllern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kate  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, Mr Kevan  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald  
Keely, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Kinnahan, Danny  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Lamy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Leslie, Chris  
Lewis, Clive  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, rh Mr David  
Lucas, rh Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
Macagggart, rh Fiona  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmod, Mr Khaliid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marris, Rob  
Marsden, Mr Gordon  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Jerry  
McDonnell, Andy  
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair  
McDonnell, John  
McFaddan, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
Meaile, Sir Alan  
Mearns, Ian  
Morden, Jessica  
Morris, Grahame M.  
Mulholland, Greg  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
Onn, Melanie  
O'Murrough, Chi  
Owen, Albert  
Pearce, Teresa  
Pennycook, Matthew  
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Pound, Stephen  
Pugh, John  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Jamie  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Marie  
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey

NOES  

Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bradley, Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Bridge, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, rh Sir Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Burton, rh Alistair  
Carmichael, Neil  
Cartidge, James  
Cash, Sir William  
Caulfield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Chope, Mr Christopher  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Clevery, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
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Collins, Damian  
Colvile, Oliver

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Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
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Beresford, Sir Paul  
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Blackwood, Nicola  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
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Borwick, Victoria

Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
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Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sherriff, Paula  
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Skinner, Mr Dennis  
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Smyth, Karin  
Starmer, Keir  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Tami, Mark  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Truly, Anna  
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West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Williams, Hywel  
Wilson, Phil  
Winnick, Mr David  
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
Woodcock, John  
Wright, Mr Iain  
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Judith Cummins and  
Vicky Foxcroft

Tellers for the Noes:  
Polly Toynbee and  
Mr Jack Dromey.
In section 54 of that Act (Application of Parts 1 and 2 to England and Wales), after paragraph (b) insert—

"(ba) a community support volunteer or a policing support volunteer designated under section 38 of the Police Reform Act 2002 by the chief constable of a police force in England and Wales;"

Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:

Sarah Newton
Guy Opperman and
new clause 1—Sale of knives and certain articles with blade or point to persons under eighteen: due diligence checks—

(1) The Criminal Justice Act 1988 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 141A, after subsection (4) insert—

“(4A) Due diligence serving to confirm the material facts in relation to a sale over the internet of with respect to the age of a purchaser must include, but is not limited to—

(a) age verification on delivery,

(b) online age verification, and

(c) offline follow up checks.

(4B) The Secretary of State must publish guidance, which the Secretary of State may revise from time to time, on how due diligence verification and checks under section (4A) are to be carried out.’.

This new clause provides a triple lock to ensure that knives are not illegally sold over the Internet to under-18s.

New clause 7—Amendments to the Firearms Act 1968—

(1) The Firearms Act 1968 is amended as follows.

(2) Omit section 5(1A)(f).

(3) Omit sections 5A(4), (5), (6), (7) and (8).

(4) Omit section 7(1) and insert—

“(1) A person who has obtained from the chief officer of police for the area in which he resides a permit for the purpose in the prescribed form may, without holding a certificate or authority under this Act, have in his possession a firearm and ammunition in accordance with the terms of the permit.”

(5) At the end of section 28A add—

“(8) Where an individual has applied for the renewal of a certificate before its expiry but the chief constable has not, as at the date of its expiry, determined whether or not to grant the renewal, the certificate is to continue to have effect until the application is determined.”.

The new clause seeks to make a number of technical changes to the 1968 Firearms Act covering expanding ammunition, section 7 temporary permits and the renewal of firearms certificates in order to clarify the law and reduce the administrative burden on the police and shooting community.

New clause 8—Amendments to the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988—

(1) The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 15(1) (Approved rifle clubs and muzzle-loading pistol clubs) omit the first “rifle” and for the second “rifle” substitute “firearm”.

(3) Omit section 15(2) and insert—

“(2) Any club may apply for approval, whether or not it is intended that any club members will, by virtue of subsection (1) above, have firearms subject to section 1 or ammunition in their possession without holding firearm certificates.”

(4) Omit section 15(4) and insert—

“(4) The application of subsection (1) above to members of an approved club may—

(a) be excluded in relation to the club, or

(b) be restricted to target shooting with specified types of firearm, by limitations contained in the approval.”

(5) In section 15(7) omit “rifle”.

(6) In section 15(10) omit the first “rifle”.

(7) Omit sections 15(11) and (12).”.

The new clause allows a club to be approved for any type of Section 1 firearm so that if a person using a shotgun or long-barrelled pistol is taken ill, or the firearm malfunctions, another authorised person can legally ’possess’ (handle) that firearm to assist and/or make it safe.
New clause 9—Authorised persons permitted to lend firearms—

‘(1) In the Firearms Act 1968, omit section 1(5) and insert—

“(5) A person may, without holding a shot gun certificate, borrow a shot gun from the owner or occupier of private premises or a person authorised by the owner or occupier and use it on those premises in the presence of the owner, occupier or authorised person.”

(2) In the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988, omit section 16(1) and insert—

(a) the owner, occupier or authorised person in whose presence it is used holds a firearms certificate in respect of that rifle; and

(b) the borrower’s possession and use of it complies with any conditions as to those matters specified in the certificate; and

(c) where the borrower is of the age of 17, the owner, occupier or authorised person in whose presence the rifle is used is of or over the age of 18.”.

The new clause would clarify the law as regards who can lend a shotgun or rifle to another person. This addresses the uncertainty currently caused by the term ‘occupier’ in relation to the borrowing of a shotgun or rifle by a person without a certificate.

New clause 19—Events, festivals and gatherings: control of flares and fireworks etc.—

‘(1) A person is guilty of an offence if he has an article or substance to which this section applies in his possession—

(a) at any time during the period of a qualifying event, festival or gathering when he is within the venue or in any area from which the event, festival or gathering may be directly viewed or physically accessed, or

(b) while entering or trying to enter a venue or area defined in paragraph (1)(a) at any time during the period of the qualifying event, festival or gathering, or

(c) while travelling by any means towards a qualifying event, festival or gathering with the intent to enter a venue or area as defined under paragraph (1)(a).

(2) It is a defence for the accused to prove that possession is with lawful authority.

(3) This section applies to any article or substance whose main purpose is the emission of a flare whether for entertaining, illuminating or signalling (as opposed to igniting or heating) or the emission of smoke or a visible gas or a noise intended to simulate an explosion; and in particular it applies to fireworks, distress flares, fog signals, and pellets and capsules intended to be used as fumigators or for testing pipes, but not to matches, cigarette lighters or heaters.

(4) The Secretary of State may be regulations define or amend—

(a) a “qualifying event, festival or gathering”,

(b) a “period of an event, festival or gathering”,

(c) a “venue or area from which the event, festival or gathering may be directly viewed or physically accessed”, and

(d) articles and substances falling under subsection (3).

(5) The power to make regulations under subsection (4) shall be exercisable by statutory instrument but such an instrument may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(6) A person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable on summary conviction—

(a) in the case of an offence under subsection 1(a) or (b) to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months; and

(b) in the case of an offence under subsection 1(c) to a fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale.

(7) Nothing in this section shall apply to persons, articles or substances that are lawfully present at, entering, travelling to, or being transported towards, a qualifying event, festival or gathering by virtue of being a planned part of the event, festival or gathering under the responsibility, regulation and control of the organisers.’

New clause 21—Firearms: Full recovery of the licence costs—

‘(1) The Firearms Act 1968 is amended as follows.

(2) At the end of section 53 insert—

“(4) The Secretary of State must set the sum payable at the full cost to the tax payer of issuing a licence.”.

This new clause would help to ensure full costs recovery of the licencing of guns.

Amendment 7, in clause 106, page 115, line 22, leave out “the amount of any fee that may be charged” and insert

“that the fee charged must be equal to the full cost to the tax payer of issuing a licence.”.

This amendment would help to ensure full costs recovery of the licencing of guns.

Amendment 8, page 115, line 41, leave out “the amount of any fee that may be charged” and insert

“that the fee charged must be equal to the full cost to the tax payer of issuing a licence.”.

This amendment would help to ensure full costs recovery of the licencing of guns.

Amendment 9, page 116, line 19, leave out “the amount of any fee that may be charged” and insert

“that the fee charged must be equal to the full cost to the tax payer of issuing a licence.”.

This amendment would help to ensure full costs recovery of the licencing of guns.

Amendment 1, in clause 107, page 117, line 14, at end insert

“and

(c) other relevant stakeholders.”.

This amendment would require other relevant stakeholders to be consulted in drawing up statutory guidance to the police. The current non-statutory guidance involves consultation between the Home Office, police, shooting organisations and others and all existing parties, not just the police, should be accommodated within the new statutory framework.

Government amendment 62.

New clause 17—Alcohol abstinence and monitoring: cost recovery—

’(1) The Criminal Justice Act 2003 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 212A, insert at the end of subsection 7(b)—

“(c) arrangements for recovering the cost of testing from the offender by the police.”.

This would allow the Secretary of State to include to make provision for the police to charge an offender subject to an alcohol abstinence and monitoring requirement for the costs of testing their compliance with such a requirement.

Karen Bradley: At this stage I will speak to the Government new clauses and amendment, and I will respond later to the points that are made about other amendments.

Chapter 1 of part 3 will enable chief officers to designate police staff with a wider range of police powers. They will also be able to confer police powers, other than the core powers reserved for warranted officers, on volunteers. The intention is that the powers
that can be conferred on employed staff and designated
volunteers are the same. This includes the power to
carry and use defensive sprays, such as CS gas and
PAVA spray, where the chief officer considers that there
is an operational case for this. It is already the case that
chief officers can equip police community support officers
with defensive sprays, and to that extent the Bill codifies
the existing position.

New clause 31 makes necessary consequential
amendments to the Firearms Act 1968 to ensure that
police volunteers are civilian officers for the purposes of
that Act. The effect is that they do not then need a
certificate or authorisation under section 1 or 5 of the
1968 Act in order to carry a defensive spray.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I
understand perfectly what the Minister is trying to do
here, but I am not sure that there is a consensus out
there for volunteers to be equipped with CS gas, for
example. Does she understand the concern that the
public have about that?

Karen Bradley: If the hon. Gentleman had been part
of the Committee, he would have heard the extensive
deliberations and debate that we had about that issue.
In my response to the amendments later, I will come to
the specific point about volunteers. I would like to hear
the arguments before I respond, but I am aware that
there are concerns, although I may not agree with them.

The new clause puts community support volunteers
and policing support volunteers in the same position as
police officers and police civilian staff. We are also
taking the opportunity to make it explicit on the face of
the 1968 Act that special constables are members of a
police force for the purpose of that Act and therefore
similarly do not require a certificate or authorisation
under the 1968 Act when equipped with a defensive
spray. This will avoid any doubt being created by the
insertion of a specific reference to policing support and
community support volunteers within the meaning of

Bob Stewart: I am sure the Minister will give an
affirmative answer to my question. Can she confirm to
people listening that anyone issued with such sprays will
just be handed out?

Karen Bradley: My hon. and gallant Friend makes an
important point and I can assure him that appropriate
training will be given.

Government new clause 32 clarifies that designated
community support volunteers or police support volunteers
may be subject to inspection, just like any other member of
a police force, and can be served with a notice
requiring information or access to premises. As with
other members of a police force, they would have no
right of appeal against such a notice.

As I said, I will respond to the other amendments in
this group when winding up the debate.

Jack Dromey: May I start by giving the apologies of
the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the
Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), as to why he
cannot be here today? He is at the Hillsborough inquest.
Twenty-seven years ago a terrible wrong was done.

Ninety-six husbands, wives, fiancés, brothers, sisters,
sons and daughters died. The fact that today justice was
done is due both to the remarkable persistence of the
families to ensure justice for those who died, and to the
outstanding leadership of my right hon. Friend who, in
his courage, persistence and championing of a noble
cause, has served the people not just of Liverpool, but
of this country well.

We welcome many of the proposals before the House
today, which follow our exchanges in Committee. I do
not intend to speak to them all in detail. We welcome
the move on pre-charge bail to prevent terrorists, such
as Dhar, from ever fleeing the country before charge.
We welcome the protection of police whistleblowers.
We welcome moves to improve the way that the police
deal with people suffering a mental health crisis, such as
no longer considering a police cell to be a place of
safety. We welcome moves to ensure that 17-year-olds
detained in police custody are treated as children, which
is something my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham
(Sarah Champion) has fought very hard for.

We support changes to the Fire Arms Act 1968 that
will tighten our gun laws in line with recommendations
made by the Law Commission. We support the duty on
emergency services to collaborate. We will deal with
many of these issues in some detail on the second day
on Report. We also welcome moves made by the
Government on other issues that emerged during our
consideration of the Bill. For example, agreement has
been reached following the excellent campaign run by
David Jamieson, the police and crime commissioner for
the west midlands, on the banning of those hideous
zombie knives, whose only purpose can be to kill or
maim.

However, given that the Bill purports to complete
police reform, I am bound to say that there are a
number of issues that should have been in the Bill but
are not. The Bill does not help the police to adapt to a
world in which crime is changing and moving increasingly
online. There is a gaping hole in the Government’s
crime policy on the failure to tackle—or even to
acknowledge in the Bill—cybercrime, or to help the
police deal with the consequences of the Government’s
emergency spending reductions. On child sexual exploitation
and abuse, although one clause is a welcome step,
for a Bill that purports to be focused seriously on this
grotesque manifestation of all that is worst in our
country, one clause alone is not enough. The Bill does
not go far enough on some of the issues it seeks to
address, such as police accountability, but we will return
to some of those on day 2.

Having spelled out those areas of the Bill that we
agree with, I am bound to say that there are critical
areas with which we fundamentally disagree. We have
just had a debate, led by my formidable hon. Friend the
Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), opposing the
compulsory takeover of fire authorities by PCCs. Our
strong view, as she indicated, is this: yes to greater
collaboration; no to hostile takeovers that take place
without regard to what local elected representatives and
local people think.

The other highly controversial proposal that we are
debating today is about giving police powers to volunteers.
I want to make it absolutely clear that there is a long and
honourable tradition going back 150 years of special
constables. There is a more recent tradition, but one
that is profound within the communities we serve, of
volunteer engagement in neighbourhood watch. For example, the admirable Maureen Meehan, chair of the Stockland Green neighbourhood watch in my constituency, does outstanding work to ensure that the community is safe, working with the police. Indeed, in this House we have the police parliamentary scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) has had a fascinating insight into policing in the Met and in south Wales, and subsequently he has waxed lyrical about the work he has seen, for example on mental health, but also working with volunteers.

We are strongly in favour of enhancing citizen engagement and voluntary efforts. As the great Robert Peel said, “the police are the public and the public are the police”. Therefore, the role of the citizen in policing is key. But the public demand that police functions are discharged by police offices, which is essential. We are extremely concerned that the proposals contained in the Bill are an attempt by the Home Secretary to provide policing on the cheap.

Andrew Gwyne: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. Most people outside Parliament will see through this, because they are seeing the number of police officer and PCSOs in their own neighbourhood policing teams cut, and the Government are proposing to hand those powers to civilians.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. In all the surveys of public opinion about the visibility of the police over the past couple of years, the public have complained more and more that they no longer see their police officers or PCSOs, that they no longer have contact with them, that the police no longer have roots in the community and that neighbourhood policing is being progressively hollowed out. People want neighbourhood policing—the bedrock of British policing—to be rebuilt, but not using volunteers.

4.45 pm

The specials’ support of the police force has been a success because it has been accompanied by mandatory training and appropriate support and because specials are sworn officers and Crown servants. However, the Government have done nothing to reassure us that the use of their brand-new police volunteers will be accompanied by appropriate training, scrutiny and accountability. Indeed, the Opposition tabled an amendment in Committee explicitly to guarantee that there would be a duty on the College of Policing to issue guidance to chief police officers on the training of volunteers, but the Government did not support it.

On that point, let me pray in aid the outstanding police and crime commissioner for Northumbria, Vera Baird, about whom the Police Minister also asked waxed lyrical. She said:

“Volunteers have a very important role to play in supporting policing, but not to place themselves in potentially dangerous situations. When the Home Secretary consulted on her proposals to increase volunteers’ powers, I said at the time she was trying to provide policing on the cheap.”

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making, although I do not agree with him. Does he accept that there are circumstances in which we all have police powers? If I witness somebody committing what I consider to be an indictable offence, I am able, as a citizen, to arrest them without a warrant. Does he agree, therefore, that if we are going to have volunteers among the police—unless he wants to do away with them completely—they should at least be trained? If they then find themselves in a situation of danger where they may have to act as a police officer, they can do so, perhaps using purely that power of citizen’s arrest?

Jack Dromey: The problem is that the Government have failed to spell out how they will ensure that these volunteers are properly trained and properly accountable, or how there will be clarity about their role—as I will say later, the Government have ruled out nothing in terms of the role volunteers might play in the next stages. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt want to come back on that issue, but on the particular point he raised, perhaps he will wait until I get to the relevant part of my speech.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Labour-run Welsh Government have funded community support officers, who perform a very similar role to the one proposed. What is the distinction? Would the hon. Gentleman’s proposals not prevent the use of such community support officers?

Jack Dromey: I am very familiar with what has happened in Wales. All credit to the Labour Government in the Welsh Assembly for funding 500 PCSOs. I was in south Wales but two weeks ago, and I met some of the PCSOs concerned—in south Wales alone, there are 200 PCSOs on the beat, which is very popular with the public. However, they are employed by the police service; what is being proposed here is a new generation of volunteer PCSOs. As I will say later, the issue is not just training and accountability, but that volunteers will be able to use certain powers—I am thinking particularly of the issue of CS gas, and I think the public will be incredulous when it becomes clear exactly what the Government propose.

Vera was right, and no wonder. In the last five years, Government funding to police forces has seen the biggest cuts to any police service on the entire continent of Europe—a staggering 25% cut. For that five-year period, the Government’s alibi was, “Yes, we cut the police, but we also cut crime.” It is not true that they have cut crime. The statistics on police recorded crime, increasingly cleaned up over the past couple of years following criticism from this House, among others, show violent crime up by 27%, homicides up by 11%, a 9% rise in knife crime, and overall police recorded crime up by 7%. The Government continue to rely on the crime survey for England and Wales, but that does not include a whole number of areas of crime. In two months’ time, when cybercrime and online fraud is included in the crime statistics in the crime survey for England and Wales, it will show crime nearly doubling.

Karen Bradley: I hope that the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a great deal of respect, is not confusing reported crime with the prevalence of crime. The independent crime survey for England and Wales is very clear that prevalence of crime is down but the reporting of crime is up. I hope that he would welcome
the fact that we have more reported crime, because it is only by getting those reports of crimes that the police are able to solve them.

**Jack Dromey**: I agree that proper reporting and recording have been absolutely key—for example, in relation to sexual offences. However, in saying, “We cut the police but we have cut crime”, the Government have relied on the crime survey for England and Wales, where the projections, including those from the Office for National Statistics, are that when online fraud and cybercrime are included, there will be a potential increase of 5 million offences, nearly doubling crime. Therefore, with the greatest respect to the Minister, for whom I have great respect, the alibi of five years will be blown apart.

**Karen Bradley**: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such crime was happening before but was not included in the crime survey under the previous Labour Government, that this Government are making sure that it is included, and that we need to be honest about prevalence so that we can tackle the problem?

**Jack Dromey**: If I agree that it should have been included in the past, I hope the Minister will agree that in future never again will I hear the Government say, “We’ve cut crime.” Crime is not falling; crime is changing.

**Sir Edward Garnier** (Harborough) (Con): This is all very interesting, but surely the central point of the hon. Gentleman’s argument is that clause 35 should be deleted, full stop. All these pussy-footing little amendments that he has tabled are really designed to undermine the concept of the volunteer. He disagrees with the concept of volunteers; the Government clearly think they are a good thing. Why does he not just speak to that argument rather than wasting our time with amendments 11, 12 and 13, which are actually designed to make it difficult for someone to perform the function of a police volunteer?

**Jack Dromey**: With the greatest respect, I would not downplay the significance of this, including to the public out there whom we serve. We will come specifically to amendment 10, on volunteer PCSOs being able to carry CS gas and PAVA spray.

It is simply not true that crime is falling. Nor is it true that the Government have protected the frontline. The Policing Minister has been good enough to acknowledge that he inadvertently misled Parliament by suggesting that he is walking into a cul-de-sac, which may not be of his own making. Independent custody visitors are essentially the case, rather than the phoney police promise that we heard from the Chancellor of the Exchequer last November.

**Antoinette Sandbach**: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s experience of south Wales and his knowledge of the cuts made to South Wales police by the police and crime commissioner. If he comes to Cheshire, he will see that there have been increases on the frontline in my constituency, where there is a Conservative police and crime commissioner. If he goes to mid-Wales, he will see that there have been increases on the frontline in Dyfed-Powys, where there is a Conservative police and crime commissioner. Surely, the two are not linked.

**Jack Dromey**: The interesting thing about what the hon. Lady says is that the current police funding formula skews funding away from metropolitan areas towards leafy Tory shires. Why is the west midlands hit twice as hard as Surrey? If we ask the police and crime commissioner for Surrey, we find that he agrees. To add insult to injury, the Government finally said, “We admit that the formula is unfair. We will change the formula,” which led to the omnishambles before Christmas when they had to abandon the proposed changes to the formula.

**Sir Edward Garnier**: I have been listening with deep fascination to the hon. Gentleman for the last 15 minutes or so, but he is yet to come to amendments 11, 12 or 13. Are there any arguments in support of those?

**Jack Dromey**: Absolutely. Under the current arrangements in the police service, there is an agreement between the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs Council, the College of Policing and the police staff unions that police support volunteers should bring additionality to the workforce but should under no circumstances replace or be a substitute for paid police staff. The Government claim that they have protected police funding and that they are not using the provisions to plug holes left in the workforce from funding reductions. If plugging gaps in our hollowed-out police service is not the Government’s aim in these ill-though-out proposals, there should be no reason whatsoever for them not to support amendment 10.

**Kit Malthouse**: The hon. Gentleman needs to realise that he is walking into a cul-de-sac, which may not be of his own making. Independent custody visitors are essentially police volunteers who visit custody suites, and a case could probably be made by a smart lawyer that they substitute for custody officers in their supervisory role. Are they the kind of people that he wants to get rid of?

I urge the hon. Gentleman to listen to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier). We have a duty in this House not to create Heath Robinson legislation. Amendments 11, 12, 13 and 10 seem to me to be an extraordinarily roundabout way to disagree with what the Government are trying to do through the previous amendments. Surely the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) should simply vote against those amendments, rather than creating this Byzantine structure to negate what the Government are trying to do.
Jack Dromey: It is quite right, for reasons that I will come to, that those amendments have been tabled, but the amendment that we will press to a vote is amendment 10. As I have just said, the Government should not plug gaping gaps in the police service with volunteers; the police service should be properly funded in real terms. Not until that happens should the Government proceed with their proposals for a new generation of volunteers—for whom, as I will come on to say, there are no constraints thus far on what they might be able to do.

I turn to exactly that point: the proposal that there should be no limits in law on where the chief constable can place volunteers—no limits on the operational role that volunteers might play, including in some of the most vital, sensitive and demanding areas. The public will be rightly dismayed by the Government’s refusal to rule out the use of volunteers in tackling child sexual exploitation, terrorism and serious crime. There has been no clarity in the Government’s proposals thus far about the role that volunteers should play in those areas. We have asked for clarity, but none has been forthcoming.

I now turn to accountability in relation to volunteers. Under the Bill’s provisions, when police officers and special constables have been dismissed following disciplinary proceedings, their details will be added to the barred list held by the College of Policing, and chief officers will not be able to appoint anyone on the list as an officer, a member of police staff or a special constable. However, the Bill does not provide for volunteers dismissed for misconduct to be added to the barred list, which is why we sought to amend the Bill in Committee. Will the Minister explain what mechanisms are in place to ensure that volunteers who abuse their powers cannot serve again?

5 pm

We still have not been given clarification about the accountability mechanisms that will be put in place for new warranted volunteers. This issue of accountability is absolutely key. Deborah Glass, the deputy chair of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, said:

“We believe it is vital for public confidence that all those who perform police-like functions and powers are subject to independent oversight.”

We wholeheartedly agree, but the Government do not seem to take that view in respect of this new breed of volunteer.

In Committee, we also tabled an amendment to provide for centralised guidance concerning disciplinary proceedings against volunteers, as well as against officers, specials and staff. Again, the Government did not support it, and we are no clearer about how exactly they hope to ensure that the necessary professional standards, quality of service and proper accountability are upheld for volunteers.

I now turn to one of the most extraordinary proposals in the Bill. The other day, a colleague of mine nicknamed it the John McEnroe or the “You cannot be serious” proposal. I was in Brighton with my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) only yesterday to talk to PCSOs and members of the public. They just could not believe that volunteers will be allowed to use CS gas and PAVA spray. “What fool came up with that idea?” asked one. That is a good question. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us. It is our very strong view that CS gas and PAVA spray should be used only by officers who are regularly trained in their use and, importantly, in the law concerning their use.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Does he not also suspect that, perhaps as an unintended consequence, this might place volunteers in very risky situations?

Jack Dromey: That is absolutely right. I will mention something similar in a moment. If we have volunteers—I again stress that there is a long and honourable tradition of volunteers working in and with our police service—we must, to be frank, go the extra mile to ensure that they are not subject to risk or harm. If they are ill-trained and there is no framework of accountability, issuing them with CS gas and leaving them to get on with it might lead to very serious consequences indeed, not just for members of the public but for the volunteers themselves.

Bob Stewart: Forgive me; my experience is not with the police. I know very well that the police service, just like the armed services, would not issue CS gas or the like without very strict controls and very strict training. I am quite sure that volunteers would not be given any less training in the use of such chemicals in pursuit of their duty.

Jack Dromey: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I used to be chairman of the defence unions. I am proud of my long association with members of our armed forces, of which he was an admirable example. It is extraordinary—I have given some reasons for this, and I will come on to others—that there is no clarity about training and accountability. A proposal has simply been inserted in the Bill for volunteer PCSOs to be issued with CS gas and PAVA spray, which raises fundamental issues of concern. I suspect that if this was raised with members of the public in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, they would say, as was the case in Hove and in my constituency at the weekend, “What planet are they living on?”

Sir Edward Garnier: If I can just bring the discussion back to this planet, I accept that the Labour party does not want volunteers to be able to enter our police system in the way proposed by the Bill, but where on earth does the hon. Gentleman get that idea? I hope he is just making it up as he goes along, because if he has thought about his arguments I am even more worried than I was a moment ago. Where in the Bill does it say that anybody is going to be handed a noxious substance such as CS gas or the other spray without adequate training? It defies belief that anyone with common sense would advance that argument, and it is even less likely that a consequence of the measure would be that they would not get that sort of training. It is just bananas.

Jack Dromey: The right hon. and learned Gentleman should put that question to his Front-Bench colleagues so that the concerns he has just expressed can be allayed. The concerns raised during detailed scrutiny of the Bill in Committee were heard but not acted on, and that is precisely why we are having this debate today.

On the principle of volunteers in the police service, I went out of my way to say at the beginning of this debate that there is a long and honourable tradition of
excellent men and women serving as special constables and in neighbourhood watch teams. Had we won the election in May 2015, we had plans to enhance the role played by local people in having a local say over the policing of their local communities, including greater volunteering and co-operation with the police. The question is where we draw the line on what is and what is not appropriate. Perhaps I could visit the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s constituency and we could ask the first 100 people we meet, “What do you think of volunteer PCSOs being able to carry CS gas?” I suspect that I know the answer we would get.

Sir Edward Garnier: That, I respectfully suggest, is not a very clever question, because it is loaded to produce the answer that the hon. Gentleman wishes to receive. He is very fond of other volunteers, but he does not like clause 35 volunteers. If I asked anybody in his constituency or in mine, “What do you think about untrained people carrying shotguns, police weapons or CS gas?”, of course they would say that that was not very sensible, but the question removes reality from the practical application of the Bill. No volunteer within the ambit of clause 35 is going to be walking around Market Harborough, still less the hon. Gentleman’s own constituency, without having been properly trained in the use of the materials, weapons or instruments to which they will be given access. That is just plain silly, and I wish he would move on to something rather better.

Antoinette Sandbach: Traditionally, matters such as training are not put in legislation, but that does not mean that they do not happen. There is no requirement to include training in the Bill, but it still goes on.

Jack Dromey: I agree it is plain silly that the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s Front-Bench colleagues have not answered those questions. When they speak today and during the Bill’s subsequent stages, I have no doubt that he will pose those questions and say, quite rightly, that it would indeed be silly for something to happen without proper training or accountability. At the moment, for the reasons I have spelled out, that just is not in the Bill.

Bob Stewart: The hon. Gentleman—he is actually a friend of mine—and I both know that we arm members of the public in our reserve forces. With training, they do exactly the same on operations as any normal regular soldier, and they are sent on operations into really dangerous positions.

Jack Dromey: I am very familiar with what the hon. Gentleman has said. I am proud to have many friends who are reserves; they play a very important role in the armed forces. Crucially, they are properly trained and equipped, and work within a framework of accountability. That is exactly what has not been proposed—or at least spelled out—by the Government for volunteer PCSOs. That is precisely what we are seeking to draw out, and for that reason we will be voting against the Government’s proposals.

I will say one final thing on volunteering before I move on briefly to other provisions in the Bill. I return to what the NCVO has said; to be frank, it has captured our concern:

“The proposed approach to volunteering, through the creation of volunteer positions that are ‘equivalent’ to or ‘mirror’ paid roles, risks misunderstanding the nature of volunteering and the full contribution it can make. Rather than the language of equivalence...”
we hope the government will recognise this and start to reflect a language of distinctiveness and complementarity. This will help ensure a more successful police volunteering programme.”

The NCVO is absolutely right that the Government have, in this respect, simply got it wrong.

I turn now briefly to other issues dealt with in Committee by my formidable colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham. Our new clause 21 and amendments 7, 8 and 9 would help to ensure full cost recovery of the licensing of guns. That is a crucial objective of the Gun Control Network. It is also a goal that the Government profess that they wish to achieve. In Committee, the Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims told us:

“We are as one on the fact that the taxpayer should not subsidise licensing.”—[Official Report, Policing and Crime Public Bill Committee, 12 April 2016; e 259.]

We will hold him to his words, and so look for an assurance on when the Government will move to full cost recovery. We note that some forces are already moving in that direction. It cannot be right that an overstretched police service that has lost 18,000 police officers and 5,000 PCSOs should have to subsidise gun licences, and we look forward to the Minister’s response on that. He says that the e-commerce scheme will deliver full cost recovery, but we will see. Are we moving to full cost recovery, and when will that be achieved?

5.15 pm

New clauses 7, 8 and 9 have been tabled by the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). New clause 7 would allow a gun licence to remain valid while the decision to renew a licence is undertaken, new clause 8 would allow rifle and pistol clubs to use more guns than they are currently allowed to use, and new clause 9 would increase the number of people who are able to lend shotguns. Those new clauses are in line with recommendations published by the Countryside Alliance in March 2016, but we are not in favour of them. We believe that tough laws on gun control are necessary, and that they work.

New clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), seeks to ensure that knives are not illegally sold over the internet to under-18s, and it has our full support. Indeed, we have strongly argued for precisely such a measure for some months, and we warmly welcome the hon. Gentleman’s new clause. Age verification for online sales poses great difficulties. We were all truly horrified—this was mentioned in a helpful way by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) on manfully—or indeed womanfully—arguing what seems to be a lost cause; Conservative Members eloquently made the case that the proposals are nonsense.

Fundamentally, the hon. Gentleman is saying through his amendments that he does not trust a chief police officer to get right the architecture around volunteers used in their organisation. He is saying that a chief constable cannot be trusted to organise and train volunteers correctly—but if they cannot be trusted to do that relatively simple task, how can they be trusted to handle some of the risks that they face on a daily basis, even with their warranted force? As he considers these matters over the next couple of hours, I urge him to think about withdrawing his amendments and simply to vote against the Government’s amendments if he believes that to be right. His would be Heath Robinson legislation, as I said, and the House has a duty to keep things simple.

I am extremely supportive of new clause 1. As the hon. Gentleman said, the proliferation of knives, particularly those unpleasant zombie knives, has caused a huge problem, particularly in urban areas and especially in London. We have seen some tragic cases over the last two or three years. A while ago, as people will remember, there was some alarm about air rifles and air-powered weapons; as a result, the legislation on purchasing air rifles was changed so that they could not be bought other than face to face. Now, when someone buys an air rifle online, it has to be delivered by the firearms dealer, who has to verify, face to face on the doorstep, that the person is who they say they are and of the correct age, and that the weapon can be sold to them lawfully. Alternatively, there is a mutual network of firearms dealers operating in such a way that someone can buy from one and pick up from another, who will verify that person’s identity and age.

I am 6 feet 2 inches—nearly—and quite a big chap. I am much more frightened of zombie knives than of air rifles, so I urge the Government to look carefully at new clause 1. It would be a valuable addition to our armoury as we try to keep these weapons out of the hands of people who should not have them. Having said that, I do not think it would be a silver bullet—not much we do in the House is; many of these knives are bought on the dark web, where things are a little more amorphous, identities more difficult to find and things are often
posted illegally. Many firearms are bought on the dark web and sent to the UK through the normal post, but the police are becoming quite sophisticated at picking them up, and the same could be true of knives. I therefore urge the Government to adopt the new clause.

I am similarly supportive of new clause 19, on flares at public events. They are not allowed at football matches any more, but elsewhere they often cause injury and terror—people, particularly children, are frightened of them—so it would be sensible to outlaw their use in those circumstances.

Finally, I will speak briefly—we are pressed for time—to new clause 17, which stands in my name. This is a probing amendment, as they say, and I have no intention, at this stage, of putting it to a vote, but I will give Members the back story because it might well appear in the other place.

Members might remember that three or four years ago City Hall ran a big campaign to get a disposal on to the books called “compulsory sobriety”, which manifested itself as alcohol abstinence monitoring orders made against people who have committed a crime where alcohol was a contributory factor. Essentially, an offender, rather than going to prison, which would mean losing their job and contact with their family, is sentenced to wear an alcohol-testing tag or bracelet that, for three, four or six months, tests their skin every 30 seconds to make sure they are not drinking. If they drink and the tag detects it, a signal is sent, the police apprehend them and they go back into the criminal justice system and might well get a custodial sentence. Effectively, the offender is in charge of their own custody.

These orders have been hugely successful in the United States. In South Dakota, where they started, there has been massive compliance and a drop in the number of people arrested for drink-driving and dying on the roads. I learned this morning that there has also been a massive reduction in life span because there is less drinking. South Dakota is a big, flat state; there is not much to do other than drink, and they have had an increase in life span because there is less drinking.

We managed to get the orders on the statute book here, and a pilot in Croydon over the last couple of years has resulted in a 93% compliance rate among offenders fitted with a tag and an extremely good reoffending rate—one person has had three to six months off the booze, they do not tend to go back but instead learn the error of their ways. However, there is one aspect of the scheme in the states that we did not adopt but which they think is critical to its success: the ability to charge offenders for their own testing.

In the United States, when somebody is put on this disposal and they go to be tested, more often than not they appear twice a day at the police station, blow into a breathalyser and pay a buck, or a dollar, a test. Effectively, that is money that they would otherwise have spent on alcohol. From the point of view of the criminal justice system, that makes the scheme self-financing.

Sir Edward Garnier: I can see that my hon. Friend is on to a good thing here. As someone who has not sentenced anyone to this type of order but has sentenced people to the drug testing orders under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, I would like to ask whether this should be a compulsory requirement. Is it that the police “must” or “may” charge? If it is the former, I think my hon. Friend will find that many people who fall into this sentencing remit will be so chaotic, at least to start with, that they will not have the finances to be able to reimburse the state for the charge.

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a valid point. However, these people are somehow financing an alcohol habit, so they are paying for alcohol. I think my right hon. and learned Friend would be surprised at the demographic of offenders. In the US, this was more often used for repeat drink-driving than anything else. In this country, repeat drink-driving is predominantly a crime of white, middle-aged, professional men; it is they who get done most for this offence. One hopes that they would indeed be able to afford to pay the cost.

My right hon. and learned Friend is, however, right that the proposal is that the police “may” charge. They do not have to. If a PCC believes it would be useful, they could apply to the Home Secretary to run a scheme on a charging basis and then decide on the charge. It might be 50p a day, a pound or £3—who knows? It will depend on the area and the level of offences committed.

Having this particular power adds two critical things to the scheme. First, one of the successes in the US is that the scheme gives offenders the notion that they are in control of their destiny. Every time they reach for a drink, they have to think about the consequences. That is why there is such high compliance—because people feel they are in control. At the same time, having to pay provides an even greater sense of ownership of the disposal. Offenders understand that this is a punishment; they understand that they have to take responsibility and finance the scheme themselves. It is essentially “the polluter pays”.

Secondly, although this disposal has been wildly successful in London and has spread to the rest of the capital, it took a lot of up-front Government funding to get the scheme out there. The Ministry of Justice had to put in £500,000 and the Mayor has done the same to get the facilities out and around town. If we want the disposal to spread so that other PCCs take it up, there needs to be a business case. Bluntly, I am a Conservative, and if there is a flow of income from this disposal to a PCC in a way no other disposal will allow, I believe PCCs would be more likely to use it and invest the money up front; they would know that the income would come in to finance it.

I realise that offenders paying for their own punishment would be a new departure for the British criminal justice system, but I think it could be useful given that alcohol abstinence monitoring orders are themselves a new departure. There may be some cultural difficulties. When I first proposed the disposal, I went to see my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who was then Lord Chancellor. His first response was to say, “Good grief, you can’t stop people from having a pint!” I explained that if these people break somebody’s jaw or cause a crash because they have been driving drunk, of course we can. If we put them in prison, we stop them drinking. This was just a way of doing that, I explained, without incarcerating people. It is much cheaper, much quicker and, if the
Government are kind enough to think about this new clause—perhaps following it up in the other place—the disposal could be self-financing and help to save a huge amount of money.

Andrew Gwynne: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). I start by saying that I have always been supportive of the police; I was brought up to be. I can remember my mum telling me as a very young child that if I ever got lost the police were my friends and that I should always seek out a police officer, who would always try to find where my mum and dad were. That is hopefully an ethic that I have passed on to my own children. That, I think, is where we must start.

In this country, there is a degree of consensus about the nature of policing, because we have developed, over a long period, the concept of policing by consent. I think that Parliament, when passing legislation both here and in the other place, must do everything in its power to ensure that we do not move away from that important concept. A number of measures in the Bill deserve to be scrutinised properly before Parliament decides whether it is appropriate to extend the powers in the way that the Minister proposes.

5.30 pm

There are some very good proposals in the Bill, and I broadly support them. I would not like the Minister to think that that was not the case. I support, for instance, the proposal for improvements in the police complaints system, which has long been a bone of contention for Members in all parts of the House, and certainly for our constituents. I also support the proposed changes in the firearms laws and alcohol licensing. I know from experience in my constituency that there are some real shortfalls in the ability of the police to deal with certain aspects of the licensing regime, and I think it is right for us to tighten up some of the existing legislation.

Nevertheless, I have some serious concerns about, in particular, the way in which the Government expect the role of volunteers to develop. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), I support the inclusion of volunteers in the work of our police service, which is important and long-standing, particularly when it comes to the role of special constables. Indeed, I think everyone supports that. I hope, however, that the Minister will be able to allay some of my fears about the powers that she wants to extend to volunteers.

It should be borne in mind that special constables are precisely that: they are police constables. There is a big difference between them and other volunteers, which brings us back to the issue of policing with consent. Although special constables are volunteers, they are also fully fledged police constables, and one would expect them to have the powers that police constables have, because they wear the uniform of a police constable. That, I believe, is quite an important differentiation.

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the role that special constables play in our police force. They are vital to policing throughout the United Kingdom. Will he join me in calling on the Government, when the Bill goes to the other place, to consider extending the protection of the Police Federation to special constables, who cannot join the federation unless there is a change in primary legislation? I think that that would be a good way of ensuring that when special constables go out there and take risks, they benefit from the protection of a proper trade union.

Andrew Gwynne: I entirely agree. I am very proud that the headquarters of the Greater Manchester Police Federation are in the Reddish part of my constituency, in Stockport. The work that the federation does in supporting police officers is absolutely brilliant, and, as the hon. Gentleman says, it is crucial that we extend that support and protection to special constables. After all, they are doing the job of a police constable. When we talk about the role of volunteers, it is important for us to do so in the context of what we expect volunteers operating in the police service to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who spoke passionately about these issues, was right to draw attention to the important role of the home watch. In all our constituencies there will be home watch schemes led by dedicated members of the public and police volunteers, working alongside the police and police community support officers. They provide a vital connectivity between the community and the police service, which, even following the introduction of community support officers, is still considered by too many of our constituents to be fairly remote from public concerns. So I support volunteers being the eyes and ears of the police on the ground and in schemes such as home watch.

Also, in my constituency, we have some very dedicated volunteers manning the front desks at the few police stations that are still open. They are playing an important role in ensuring that continuity of service is provided to members of the public. We often hear Ministers talking about protecting the police frontline, but to a number of my constituents who have experienced police station closures and front desk closures, that actually was their frontline. That was where they could get face-to-face access to the police service when they needed it. Were it not for police volunteers in Dukinfield in my constituency, for example, that police front desk would have closed in the same way that ones at the Denton and Reddish police stations have done. Those closures are a retrograde step for the communities that I represent.

Bob Stewart: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, when the public see a police officer, they simply see a police officer? They do not look at them and wonder whether they are volunteer police officers or not. Volunteers who man desks do not wear the uniform, but wearing the uniform immediately tells the public that someone is a police officer. They do not think, “Is that a reserve officer?” They think, “That is a police officer”, and that is great.

Andrew Gwynne: It is great, and I think that the hon. Gentleman is inadvertently making my case for me that we should not be giving CS gas to volunteers who are not wearing the police uniform. My point is that we already have volunteer police officers. They are called special constables and they have the full power of a police constable and wear the uniform of a police constable. They wear the uniform with pride and they volunteer with pride, and we should be supporting the extension of the special constable programme rather
than extending powers to other volunteers, which I do not think is appropriate. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point that, when people see someone in a police uniform, they do not care whether they are a special constable or a paid member of the police force. They just see them as a police officer. There is an important distinction that we must consider in examining some of the powers that Ministers are proposing. That is why we need clarity from the Minister before we decide whether to support the extension of these powers. I sincerely urge Members to exercise caution before we extend them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington also mentioned the parliamentary police service scheme. I was pleased to be able to take part in that scheme back in 2007, when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith. That seems a long time ago now. Taking part in the scheme provided an invaluable insight into the work of the police. I was posted with my own police force, Greater Manchester police, although I was a bit gutted that I was unable to go out on the beat in my own constituency. I was told that that was in case the police ended up nicking any of my constituents. I was gutted because I had a long list of people I would have liked to call on. Leaving that aside, it really was an invaluable experience. I had not appreciated just how complex the police service in an area such as Greater Manchester is. Indeed, it was not really until the end of my experience on the police service scheme that I began to appreciate not only the complexity of the organisation but how it all fitted together.

I want to talk about one experience that really changed my view of the police. Before coming to this House as a Member of Parliament, when I was a local councillor in Tameside, and following my election to this place, I took the view that the police were a pretty remote service, because when my constituents needed them, they never seemed to call on them when they were expected to arrive. On one day, I called in at Oldham police station, where I was posted on the parliamentary scheme, and was to go out on response calls with a very dedicated police officer. We looked at the computer screen and 14 jobs were waiting for the police officer. We took the job at the top of the list, but just as we were about to set off, he received a call on the radio to go to the local hospital, because a girl—a teenager of a similar age to my eldest son—had been picked up by the police at the time, but an officer did not come round. Indeed, the police officer did not come round until two days later. I had to gently remind that lady that she might have been job No. 1, No. 2 or No. 3 on the computer screen—it was in a different borough, but it is just an example—and that we might have been going to head out to her when the police officer got called off on Nightingale duty. I asked her, “If that was your granddaughter, what would you think was the most important job for that police officer to go to?” She conceded that it was to go and look after the girl in hospital rather than to come and see her. That is where the public’s perception of the police’s work is out of kilter with the real pressures on the police service, not just in Greater Manchester, but across the country, and that is why we must tread carefully when considering how we move away from the traditional policing models. The development of neighbourhood policing has been invaluable, and a move away from it would be a retrograde step.

I suspect that part of the reason that the Minister has come to the House to try to extend the powers of police volunteers is to fill the gap that the Government have created. I will provide an example from my constituency. Greater Manchester lost the equivalent of five officers every week over the course of 2015 and has lost 1,445 officers since the Government came to office, which has an impact on what the police service can provide. I appreciate that this is where the Government are trying to fill the gap with volunteers, but I ask them to think carefully about how they approach the matter. If their approach—it is not clear in the Bill—is that volunteers will be trained to become special constables, that is different from a member of the public, with good intentions no doubt, being taken on by a police force and trained to a certain level, but not actually becoming a police officer. That is what most people outside Parliament will be concerned about.

I will use another local example. Back in 1998, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council—a Labour local authority—decided to complement the Labour Government’s neighbourhood policing team policy with a team of council officers called the Tameside patrollers. They were to be trained in a similar way to PCSOs, and were to wear a uniform that, although in Tameside council’s corporate colours, rather than the police colours, looked similar to a police uniform. They were also to work as part of the neighbourhood policing team.

The police officer had received Nightingale training to deal with such cases, so we did not go to job No. 1 on the computer screen; we went to the hospital. It was inspirational to see the officer’s work. He was able to get the girl to open up and to get the necessary information out of her. The father in me wanted to bash the girl around the head and say, “What on earth were you doing at that house party instead of being at school where you should have been?” That is the paternal instinct, but the police officer was so caring, gentle and professional that he was able to get the information.

That story is relevant because I was back in my constituency that afternoon at a public meeting in Reddish and one of my constituents started complaining about a neighbourhood nuisance issue in the field at the back of her house. She had called the police at the time, but an officer did not come round. Indeed, the police officer did not come round until two days later. I had to gently remind that lady that she might have been job No. 1, No. 2 or No. 3 on the computer screen. That all worked pretty successfully, but the council then asked the Labour Government of the day whether they could extend certain police powers to the Tameside patrollers. The Government rightly said no. The Tameside patrollers had certain powers, and there were certain powers the PCSOs were able to use in conjunction with the Tameside patrollers, but the Government said there was a real distinction between a paid employee of the police service and a paid employee of the local authority. Although the two could work in a very complementary way together, there was an important distinction to be made. That is very relevant when we discuss extending police powers to people who are not warranted police officers, who have not sworn the oath of allegiance to the Queen and who have not taken on warranted office. That is why I support amendments 10 and 11.
All that leads on to the issue of police funding, because Greater Manchester has struggled with the settlement. I do not think it is acceptable to say that, as some police areas are doing okay, everywhere should be the same, because the metropolitan areas have taken a real hit in police funding and it is having an impact on what services the police can deliver.

I wish briefly to discuss amendment 12. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington is right to say that we should not be putting volunteers who are not special constables in roles that may require the use of force or restraint—there is a distinction to be made there. That is not to say that those people are not perfectly capable of using force and restraining people, but this raises an issue about damaging policing by consent. If we have people who are not police officers doing this, whether they are voluntary or paid, that starts to damage the public perception of where the police are in communities, particularly in certain communities. Although this approach might work in parts of the country, we have to be very careful and honest about the fact that in other parts of the country there is mistrust of the police service. If we have people who are not warranted police officers using undue restraint, without the checks and balances that ordinary warranted police officers have, through the police complaints system and so on, that leads to further distrust of the police service. I believe the Minister wants to increase, rather than deteriorate, trust in the police service, which is why I urge caution on some of these measures. It is also why I very much support my hon. Friend on them. We need to be very careful here; we need to have proper, responsible, which is exactly what this Bill does.

Amendment 13 rightly seeks the removal of what I can describe only as a barmy proposal by the Government to provide for police volunteers to be issued with CS spray and PAVA spray—I do not support that proposal. We need to be very careful here; we need to have proper, appropriate checks and balances, ensuring that the people who patrol our streets with CS spray and PAVA spray are warranted police officers. I do not think it appropriate for volunteers to have that facility. Perhaps the Minister can convince me about what the real intentions are here, and who would be expected to have the facility, but as the Bill stands it appears that that provision is available for any volunteer that a chief constable deems fit. That is too ambiguous. If we are to extend that power to volunteers, Parliament needs to be very clear about the circumstances, the conditions and the appropriate checks and balances.

Jake Berry: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that Parliament is not seeking to extend the power to volunteers? Is it seeking to extend the power to chief constables to make the decision on whether volunteers should have CS or PAVA spray? How long does he think that a chief constable would be in office if someone—perhaps an accountant—came in to volunteer on a complicated fraud case and he said, “While you’re in here, take this CS gas spray.”? I think the hon. Gentleman is being unduly alarmist.

Andrew Gwynne: I would sooner be unduly alarmist than face a situation in the future where somebody may have been approved inappropriately to have this facility. It is the duty of Parliament to legislate well. We need to be much clearer in the Bill about what we intend so that there can be no ambiguity in respect of a chief constable in future. It should be perfectly clear what Ministers intend with regard to the use and the extent of this power.

All it would take is for the Minister slightly to amend and to clarify those points, and we might then have a different view. Unless the legislation that we pass is completely clear, and the intention is completely clear, we run the risk at some stage in the future of somebody who is inappropriate having that power extended to them.

Jake Berry: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that Parliament should sit until the recess and come up with an exhaustive list of circumstances in which chief constables could use this power? Surely the appropriate thing to do is to trust our chief officers to use the power responsibly, which is exactly what this Bill does.

Andrew Gwynne: I hope that we would not have to face a situation in which chief constables inappropriately use the powers that the Government are seeking to extend to them, but it is our duty to legislate for a situation where that might be the case. I do not want, at some stage in the future, a chief constable to be all over the headlines of the national press because they have done something that they should not have done but to get out of that because the intention of the Act was not clear. All I am asking for is some clarity from the Minister. If we have to wait to get this right, the Government have the power to carry over legislation. Bills do not fall at prorogation if the Government want to carry them over. Actually, the Government could easily amend the Bill and clarify the point during the remaining stages.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is making a peculiar point. If he is saying that, essentially, we should not give chief constables a particular power because, at some point in the future, they may well fall foul of it or misuse it, then there are lots of other powers that we give chief constables to which he may wish to apply that rule. For instance, a chief constable is able to license a police officer to handle a firearm. If that firearm is used incorrectly, as we have tragically seen in the past, then the chief constable faces the consequences—whether that be legal consequences or otherwise. Does he think therefore that this principle that we cannot trust these highly trained and highly experienced chief constables to use their discretion should be applied to other perhaps more critical areas of their operation?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman has, inadvertently, made my case for me. He talks about extending firearms powers to police officers. That is the difference—he is talking about police officers. Chief constables are accountable for police officers. What we are talking about here is extending the use of CS gas to volunteers. We need to be very clear in the Bill about what Parliament intends and how Parliament expects that power to be used. If the power is abused or misused, it is Parliament that will be at fault because it has not been clear about the fact that these are volunteers, not police officers.

I appreciate that other Members want to contribute to the debate. I return to the fundamental point about policing by consent. If we extend to volunteers, who are not warranted police officers in the form of special constables, powers that we would expect warranted
policing officers to be given. Parliament must be very careful and clear about the intention and the use of those powers, so that there are appropriate checks and balances if those powers are misused or abused, which we hope they will not be.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deasy (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have seven more speakers, plus the Minister, so I am a little concerned that we will not get everyone in.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I shall try to rattle through my contribution. I shall speak to my new clause 1, but first let me mention new clause 17. I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and pay tribute to his work as deputy mayor on championing alcohol abstinence and monitoring requirements. I did my bit in the Commons and in the Lords to ensure that the new clause eventually got on to the statute book and we need to make it have meaningful effect.

The evidence from what is happening in London, which is spreading, and the impact on the offender, not least as a result of the inconvenience of having to pay, is significant and supports the South Dakota model. That needs to be taken into account when the measure goes to the other place. There are those in the other place—Baroness Finlay and others—who champion the cause and who will look carefully at the evidence and give further impetus to cost-effective efforts to help those caught up in the cycle of alcohol-related offending.

I welcome the cross-party support for new clause 1 and the support from my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Colchester (Will Quince), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), for North West Hampshire, for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady). Some more recent supporters such as my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Byron Davies), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) did not quite make the cut last night to get their names on the amendment paper.

Over a number of years there has been support to ensure that knife crime legislation was fit for purpose and that it dealt properly with the issues of enforcement, recognising as do all of us who represent constituencies that have, sadly, been affected by knife crime, that much work is needed on prevention. I welcome the Government’s work over a number of years to ensure that we tackle knife crime both at its source and when it comes to court. I and a former Member, Nick de Bois, championed mandatory sentencing for repeat knife offending and I welcome the fact that that has now reached the statute book and is being implemented. We will continue to monitor that to ensure that it is implemented properly.

More needs to be done. No one can be complacent about the need to review legislation and to use the opportunities presented by the Bill to deal with knife crime. At 11 pm last night there was another incident of stabbing in the borough of Enfield, where a 28-year-old was stabbed twice in the abdomen and twice in the head in what was probably a gang-related incident. An off-duty police officer found the victim opposite Edmonton police station. The case reminds us of the impact of knife crime.

New clause 1 focuses on the sale of knives, particularly online sales, to those who are under age. I recognise that in some ways that is of marginal relevance. When I talk with police officers about gang crime, they explain that the easiest way for a youngster to obtain a knife is by getting one from the kitchen, or from someone else, or an adult might purchase it for them, so we have to recognise that there are other areas where we can tackle the prevalence of knives that would not be tackled by new clause 1.

6 pm

Nevertheless, the Government have been on this case as well, in relation to how we deal with appalling cases such as that of Bailey Gwynne, which was mentioned by the shadow Minister. During the trial we got a reminder of what we are talking about when knives get into the hands of young people and are used, tragically and fatally, on other young people. When the police asked the offender how he bought the knife, he said, “I ordered it over the internet, because they don’t check your age.” I appreciate that the Scottish legislation relating to such cases is very different from ours and not totally applicable, but we want to ensure that our legislation on the sale of knives is fit for modern-day purposes, not least in relation to online sales.

I want to pay tribute to others who have campaigned on this issue, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, who has helped lead the charge to tackle knife crime, particularly in relation to zombie killer knives. He and others have worked hard, in London and elsewhere, to encourage the Government, who have effectively indicated that they will be banning the sale of those knives and that secondary legislation will give effect to that. That is very welcome.

I also welcome the fact that in March the Home Secretary announced the agreement of principles between major retailers and the Government to tackle knife crime. That voluntary agreement is very welcome. It has been signed by the British Retail Consortium and others. It is important to recognise that commitment by retailers to raise public awareness of age restrictions and robust age verification checks for knife sales.

However, in this legislation I am looking not so much at the prevention end, but at the prosecution end, because when these cases get to court there is a concern that we need to cement and support the Government’s action and the voluntary agreement by seeing what read-over there is through to the time when it reaches the courts. Under this legislation—section 141A of the Criminal Justice Act 1998—since 2009 there has been a drop in the number of prosecutions. Back in 2009 there were 232 prosecutions, and 190 convictions were secured, but the number of prosecutions and convictions has reduced to a handful, despite the increased access to knives online. I admit that the evidence base is thin, but because the police do not know the exact prevalence of online sales, and there is not much evidence for tracking those sales. Particular attention is quite properly given to guns and other illicit material that is obtained on the internet. I appreciate the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) about knives also being obtained on the dark web. We need to see what we can do.

I have looked at the Chartered Trading Standards Institute website to see what it says. The situation we are
facing is this: when a matter goes to court and someone is quite properly prosecuted for selling a knife to someone underage, they then need to provide the defence of due diligence. The issue is that they have taken all reasonable precautions to avoid the conviction for the offence. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute says that what would certainly not reach the threshold of due diligence is simply relying on the purchaser to confirm that they are over the minimum age, for example by asking them to provide their date of birth, or using tick-boxes to ask purchasers their age, or using a general disclaimer, such as, “Anyone ordering this product will be deemed to be at least 18.” That is not sufficient.

The Chartered Trading Standards Institute also says that using an accept statement for the purchaser to confirm that they have read the terms and conditions and that they are over the minimum age is not due diligence, and neither is using e-payment services, such as PayPal, Nochex or Worldpay. Those services might require customers to be over 18, but they might not verify a user’s age. The issue is the verification of age that may not be properly adhered to. There is a suggestion on the Chartered Trading Standards Institute website that not all retailers are following basic trading standard requirements.

We need what has now been agreed voluntarily by the major retailers to be applied by other online retailers and places where knives are available, such as small fishing shops. We need to ensure that this legislation has bite. We need to do that because young people can sadly evade the more stringent proof of age checks that are required for face-to-face purchases on the high street. That is why new clause 1 seeks effectively to tighten the defence that a seller took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to avoid the commission of the offence. The triple-lock check in the new clause uses three minimum requirements recommended by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute for online sales of age-restricted products.

The first check is age verification on delivery. Retailers would be required to carry out age verification checks at the point of delivery by ensuring that their delivery drivers request valid proof of age to confirm the purchaser is over the minimum age necessary to buy the knife. The reality is that third-party couriers do not accept responsibility for age verification, and that could be a loophole. Furthermore, although the voluntary agreement the Home Secretary got the major retailers to sign up to means there is a commitment on their delivery drivers, we are looking at all other online retailers.

The second check is online age verification. Obviously, the credit card could provide that, but easily obtainable software could also ensure that a person’s age and identity are verified during the ordering process. Checks could use a register or a credit reference agency, and that could help to provide a proper due diligence check.

The third check—a follow-up offline check—goes a step further than the voluntary agreement. In some circumstances, it may not be possible to verify a potential purchaser’s age to conclude an online order. Further checks would then be required, such as requiring the customer to provide valid proof of age, which could then be appropriately checked.

Those checks put more flesh on the bones of the due diligence check. I understand that the specificity of due diligence is not usually included in statute, and the Government may well respond that they do not want the new clause to cut across the voluntary agreement, but it does not seek to do that. In many ways, it is about cases that get to court, whereas the Government’s voluntary agreement is about trying to prevent online sales to under-18s and encouraging responsible retailers.

We want the prosecution and the court to be properly appraised of what is the very least in terms of reasonable precautions. New clause 1 would give them a clear understanding of the minimum requirement and of what is not a good trading standard, going beyond just the good voluntary agreement the Government helped to agree. It would make clear where the read-across is when cases reach court, so that the court has a clear understanding of due diligence.

I have tried to find other legislation where due diligence is specified, and it is hard to find. Nevertheless, there is an example of guidance relating to money laundering. Following a meeting that gave rise to something not dissimilar to the voluntary agreement with online retailers, the Government published guidance on customer due diligence on their website on 5 August 2013, and that guidance can be read across into court.

The new clause has cross-party support, and the Government will have seen how many Members—not least Conservatives—have signed up to it, and others no doubt support it as well. It is therefore important that the Government respond constructively and look at how we ensure that publication of their voluntary agreement leads to guidance so that the courts recognise what a due diligence defence to such crimes is.

In conclusion, it is important that the offence we are talking about is fit for the modern-day purposes of online sales. Often, we are talking about not just the sale of a knife but the supply of a knife. I would therefore welcome the Government considering whether a tweak needs to happen so that the sale of knives also encompasses the supply of knives. A wider understanding of sale and supply would ensure that we allow for the purchase of a knife by an adult who then passes it on to a youngster. We would then have full coverage. We should make the most of the opportunity provided by the Bill, whether that is today or later, when we come back to it here or in another place.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): According to the National Audit Office, police forces saw their funding from central Government fall by 25% in the previous Parliament. The Chancellor and the Home Secretary have been rebuked by the statistics watchdog for claiming in the November spending review that police funding would be protected in this Parliament. As my hon. Friend the shadow Police Minister said, Sir Andrew Dilnot, chair of the UK Statistics Authority, noted that the budgets would be cut by £160 million in real terms between 2015-16 and 2016-17. The result is that 18,000 officers have been cut by this Government, 12,000 from the frontline. This has led to police forces being over stretched and struggling with the challenges that they face. In many areas, specialist teams are stretched, and sometimes being merged, leading to even more pressure on the frontline.

I oppose the Government’s attempts in this Bill to plug the holes that they have created in the workforce with volunteers. I recognise the excellent work done by special constables, as highlighted by many right hon.
and hon. Members. Some weeks ago, I had the privilege of spending some night shifts with the Lambeth division as part of the police service parliamentary scheme. I was absolutely impressed by the dedication, commitment, and professionalism of all the specials I met in having to deal with fighting, robbery, assault and a range of all sorts of offences during those shifts. For many years, my own father was a special constable in south Wales, so I absolutely appreciate the role played within the policing family by special constables, as well as the other volunteers who work to support the police through neighbourhood watch, police and crime panels, and a range of other roles. However, there is a big difference between volunteers bringing additionality to the police workforce and volunteers acting as replacements for paid police staff. One of the most concerning results of police cuts has been the reduction of in number of neighbourhood policing teams. Under the Labour Government, we saw significant investment in local policing teams. That had a really positive impact in reducing crime, building rapport with local communities, and raising awareness and visibility. Sadly, we are witnessing the loss of local rapport with local communities, and raising awareness significant investment in local policing teams. That had been the reduction of in the number of neighbourhood paid police staff. workforce and volunteers acting as replacements for between volunteers bringing additionality to the police range of other roles. However, there is a big difference neighbourhood watch, police and crime panels, and a other volunteers who work to support the police through policing family by special constables, as well as the so I absolutely appreciate the role played within the my own father was a special constable in south Wales, was absolutely impressed by the dedication, commitment and professionalism of all the specials I met in having to deal with fighting, robbery, assault and a range of all early stage. Local neighbourhood policing is essential to resolve community tensions, bring communities together and act as that visible part of policing that, unfortunately, we came to take for granted but that is no longer there in the way it once was. The Government should fund police forces properly and allow police and crime commissioners and chief constables to recruit more police officers to be visible on our streets, and to have the positive impact on crime that we became used to under the previous Labour Government.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lib): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful point about the importance of neighbourhood and community policing. Does he agree that the other important aspect is stability for our economy? Increasingly, particularly in constituencies such as mine in the far south of England, high numbers of self-employed people are working at home and therefore need stability in order to boost our economy and retain economic growth within the community where a lot of our economic activity now takes place. It is not just about personal harm; it is about economic stability as well. Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point that I fully agree with. Unfortunately, across the country we are seeing the loss of the neighbourhood policing that has grown over the past 10 or 15 years or so. That is a very retrograde step. Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Failsworth in the borough of Oldham had one of the borough’s reassurance projects, which were the forerunners of the model of neighbourhood policing that we all see and respect today. The police station in that area is now closed. There is not a single custody cell in the whole borough of Oldham, and there are only two PCSOs left in the township, one of whom is likely not to be there if the cuts continue. The seven neighbourhoods that were in the borough of Oldham have now changed so that they stretch from Manchester’s city boundaries all the way through to Saddleworth and towards Huddersfield. That is not a neighbourhood, by anybody’s standards. Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As a local councillor, I spent many years working with the neighbourhood policing team in my communities, organising monthly advice surgeries and working with the team to resolve issues that were brought up. Cases that we as local councillors come across often have a two-pronged effect: are they a policing issue or a council issue? Very often, issues cut across both. The ability of elected local councillors to work with local neighbourhood policing teams has had a positive impact on solving crime that was, in some cases, low level, but that often led to bigger issues brewing if it was not resolved at an early stage. Local neighbourhood policing is essential to resolve community tensions, bring communities together and act as that visible part of policing that, unfortunately, we came to take for granted but that is no longer there in the way it once was. The Government should fund police forces properly and allow police and crime commissioners and chief constables to recruit more police officers to be visible on our streets, and to have the positive impact on crime that we became used to under the previous Labour Government.

Antoinette Sandbach: In fact, those people are community support officers, not police community support officers. Policing is not devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government, so the position is that they are community support officers. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is speaking from a sedentary position, might want to check that. The Welsh Assembly Government do not have devolved powers over policing or justice.

Gerald Jones: I accept that the Welsh Assembly Government do not have power over policing, but there is no difference between the 500 PCSOs that the Welsh Government fund—they are part of the policing family—and other PCSOs. They are certainly not what is being proposed in the Bill; they are paid police community support officers who work in communities across Wales. Sadly, because of the Conservative cuts, the number of PCSOs has been drastically reduced elsewhere. Wales is the only area where PCSO numbers have increased, and I am thankful that I represent a Welsh constituency where support for PCSOs has been provided by the Welsh Labour Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You have caught me out of my place, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am sure that what I have to say will still be perfectly valid.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think you left your place.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I probably did. I start by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am the chairman of the all-party group on shooting and conservation, and I am a shotgun and firearms certificate holder. I have tabled several amendments that are technical, so I will take them slowly. They have the support of the British Shooting Sports Council, the Countryside Alliance and
[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. Those associations cover very large numbers of lawful certificate holders.

I rise to speak to new clauses 7, 8 and 9 and amendment 1. New clause 7 has three purposes. First, subsections (2) and (3) relate to expanding ammunition. Expanding ammunition is required under the Deer Act 1991 and the Deer (Firearms etc.) (Scotland) Order 1985 to shoot deer, and it is the humane option for pest control and humane dispatch. It is therefore widely possessed. Certificates are rendered more complex by the inclusion of the additional authority to acquire and possess it. Expanding ammunition is also safer than fully jacketed ammunition, being less prone to ricochet.

It is my understanding that the National Police Chiefs Council has asked for a revision of this provision. Currently, special authority has to be given on a firearms certificate for the possession of expanding ammunition, which requires additional administration for the police. The new clause would simplify the licensing process, save resources for the police and facilitate the movement of such ammunition for the trade. Moving expanding ammunition back to section 1 of the Firearms Act would reduce the administrative burden. It is also illogical to have a type of ammunition that is banned by one Act, but required to be used by another.

Secondly, subsection (4) of my new clause 7 would replace the existing section 7(1) of the 1968 Act to address an anomaly in the Act as regards section 7 permits. The insertion of words “or authority” would extend section 7 temporary permits to cover section 5 items held on a firearms or shotgun certificate. That would help in a variety of circumstances when temporary possession has to be authorised—for example, when there are firearms or ammunition among a deceased person’s effects that have to be disposed of by the executors.

Thirdly, subsection (5) of my new clause 7 would clarify the law with regard to certificate renewals, and replicate the provision in Scottish legislation that ensures that the possession of firearms remains lawful when there is a delay in renewal. This has happened to me. An application may be made to the police in good time, but because of the number of certificates that the police have to inspect and then decide whether to grant, they do not actually renew the certificate on time. Unless they issue a section 7 temporary permit, the person holding the firearms or shotguns is doing so illegally because the certificate has not been renewed. I therefore suggest the adoption of the Scottish solution.

A recent freedom of information request to all police forces in England and Wales has shown that there has been a substantial increase in the number of section 7 temporary permits issued during the past five years. For example, the number of permits issued in Hampshire has increased by over 15 times, from 79 in 2010 to 1,205 in 2015. It should also be noted that some of the police forces inspected by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary have failed to issue a section 7 temporary permit to individuals whose certificates have expired, placing those individuals in an illegal situation through no fault of their own. Of the 11 police forces inspected by HMIC, between one and 168 firearms holders were currently in that category in each police force area.

Simply by deeming the existing certificate to be in force until it is renewed by the police would reduce the administrative burden on them, and not place the individual certificate holder in the invidious position of holding illegal firearms.

New clause 8 would extend Home Office club approval to cover section 1 shotguns and long-barrelled pistols used for target shooting at clubs approved by the Home Office. These clubs are very strictly vetted. They may possess firearms for the use of their members, who may temporarily possess one another’s firearms. This allows the club to instruct new members in safety and shooting skills, as it is required to do under its licence, and for a range officer to take possession of a firearm on the range in the event of a problem.

At present, the Home Office may approve target shooting clubs to use only rifles or muzzle-loading pistols. Long-barrelled pistols and section 1 shotguns are increasingly popular for target shooting, but because of the limitations placed on firearms for which Home Office approval may be given, only the person—this is the critical bit in relation to new clause 8—on whose firearms certificate the long-barrelled pistol or shotgun is entered may use it at the club. This has adverse consequences in that clubs may not possess such arms for the use of members, and may find that the possession stricture makes safety instruction difficult and, critically, prevents range officers from taking control of such firearms should there be a problem. For example, if the weapon jams or, even worse, if something serious, such as a heart attack, strikes the user of the firearm, the range officer in the club cannot lawfully take possession of the firearm. New clause 8 seeks to amend that provision.

New clause 9 addresses the problem caused by the term “occupier” in relation to the borrowing of a shotgun without a shotgun certificate under section 11(5) of the Firearms Act 1968, and the borrowing of a rifle without a firearm certificate under section 16(1) of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988. It would reduce the administrative burden. It is my understanding that the National Police Chiefs Council has asked for a revision of this provision.

At present, the Home Office may approve target shooting clubs to use only rifles or muzzle-loading pistols. Long-barrelled pistols and section 1 shotguns are increasingly popular for target shooting, but because of the limitations placed on firearms for which Home Office approval may be given, only the person—this is the critical bit in relation to new clause 8—on whose firearms certificate the long-barrelled pistol or shotgun is entered may use it at the club. This has adverse consequences in that clubs may not possess such arms for the use of members, and may find that the possession stricture makes safety instruction difficult and, critically, prevents range officers from taking control of such firearms should there be a problem. For example, if the weapon jams or, even worse, if something serious, such as a heart attack, strikes the user of the firearm, the range officer in the club cannot lawfully take possession of the firearm. New clause 8 seeks to amend that provision.

Recent inquiries made to police forces suggest a lack of clarity as to how the term “occupier” is understood, but it is construed narrowly. The organisations that I have mentioned carried out a survey. When asked under a freedom of information request for their definition of “occupier”, the majority of police forces relied on guidance. Sussex police force replied that “occupier” meant “either the owner of the land or the person possessing the sporting (shooting) rights over the land”.

The Durham police force, however, defined “occupier” as “an owner, lessee or authorised person over the age of 18 years who holds a firearm certificate and who owns or is responsible for land that has rights of hunting, shooting, fishing or taking game”.

Those two examples make it crystal clear how different police forces construe the meaning of the word “occupier”.
The Law Commission’s scoping consultation concluded the following on the lack of definition:

“It has been reported to us by a number of stakeholders that this provision poses real problems in practice for shooting enthusiasts. This is because it inconsistently limits this very temporary, restricted loan of shotguns, with the result that some novices wishing to

By simply replacing the word “occupier” with “the owner, occupier or authorised person”, anyone granted a lawful certificate by the local constabulary would become the authorised person. The new clause deals with the anomaly.

Moving rapidly on to my amendment 1, this Bill will give the Home Office the right to produce statutory guidance by which the police will have to abide, but the shooting organisations fear that they will not be consulted as part of that process. That would be monstrously wrong, because the thousands of lawful certificate holders would not have a say in that guidance. My amendment simply states that other organisations must be consulted on that statutory guidance.

I would like to spend 30 seconds on the Opposition’s amendments on full cost recovery. If they look carefully at the work of the fees working group, they will see that all the organisations, including the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Home Office and the shooting organisations, agreed that the system allows for full cost recovery. Put simply, the police must adopt the new, computerised efficiency systems to give them those reductions in costs. Unfortunately, not all constabularies are complying with that new e-commerce system. I ask the Minister to encourage all 42 constabularies to adopt the system so that they can get the maximum efficiencies and keep their costs to the lowest possible level. That would benefit all certificate holders. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I want to speak to new clause 19, which appears in my name and those of many right hon. and hon. Members from

To entirely clear, the new clause would not affect the ability of artists and their production teams to use pyrotechnics on stage. Dig if you will, Mr Deputy Speaker, a picture of you and me at a concert where the only fireworks on display are part of a show and are deployed by pyro experts rather than by someone ill-equipped to handle such dangerous objects.

Flares are not covered by existing fireworks regulations at all, because they are not designed for entertainment. Under-18s are prohibited from carrying or using fireworks in public places, but most concerts and festivals occur on private property and so are not covered—therein lies the anomaly. Adults can be convicted of an offence of using or carrying the items only if it can be proved that that was done with an intent to cause harm. That is not usually the case when someone takes the stupid decision to set off a flare or throw a firework at a concert.

I have tabled new clause 19 in the hope of making the law consistent and offering music fans the same protection as football fans—protection that they deserve. To be

Since I raised this issue a couple of weeks ago, I have been contacted by many people who have been affected by such incidents; in fact, I had a call this morning from a young woman who had been hit in the head, very close to her eye, by a firework at the Brixton Academy. It is little comfort to those wounded or scarred by fireworks and flares to be told, “I never meant to cause you any pain.” Their use should be outlawed.

There is wide support for making this change from the music industry, artists, venue owners and operators, and fans. The industry representative body UK Music, the Association of Independent Festivals and many others have all asked the Government to back up all those in the industry who already strive to put on safe and enjoyable performances. The founder of Bestival, Mr Rob da Bank, has said:

“Mr da Bank goes on to say—this is sadly a “Sign ‘O’ the Times”, Mr Deputy Speaker:

I finish by asking the Minister to give serious consideration to new clause 19. I am incredibly grateful to colleagues across the House, and the members of the all-party parliamentary group on music in particular, who, as sponsors of the ten-minute rule Bill and now by adding their names to the new clause, have helped to demonstrate that there is cross-party support for these changes.
I thank the Home Secretary for meeting me to discuss this matter, as well as the Ministers of State responsible for policing and for culture for taking time to discuss my proposals. I am pleased that the Government are willing to listen to such cross-party proposals and are ready to work with us. I do not intend to test the will of the House at this stage, but I look forward to some assurance from the Minister that this provision will form part of the Bill by the time it receives Royal Assent.

Antoinette Sandbach: I rise to add my support to new clauses 7, 8 and 9. In particular, it is important that people who are not seen as a risk when holding firearms—I declare that I hold a shotgun certificate—do not suddenly become a risk overnight because their certificate has expired. New clause 7, and particularly subsection (5), is a sensible amendment to firearms legislation.

If an application to renew a certificate has been received by the local firearms team but it has been unable to deal with it in time, it seems wrong that members of the public who have exercised their responsibilities appropriately and within the terms of their licence should be criminalised overnight by the failure of the police force to deal with that application in time. I urge the Minister to take that into account. New clause 7 would make matters administratively simpler for the police, and avoid unnecessarily criminalising people who have otherwise done nothing wrong.

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in that situation, one way forward that the shotgun licence holder is given is to apply for a temporary permit? Yet that application is made to the same firearms department, which is already overburdened with work, and it requires the same amount of work as issuing a permanent permit. We need some mechanism such as that proposed in the new clause.

Antoinette Sandbach: I totally agree. The new clause would remove that unnecessary duplication of effort and allow the police to concentrate on getting through a backlog of licence renewals, or processing them quickly and effectively.

Let me highlight some of the anomalies behind new clause 9. As a landowner I could lend somebody a gun that is lawfully in my possession and that I am authorised to hold. Many children are taught to walk around with unloaded guns for many years, so that they learn how to use shotguns safely. Those guns are never loaded, but children are taught how to carry one, how to keep other people safe, and how to cross fences. That is a valuable part of training, and it makes a nonsense of the current unclear legislation on the term “occupier”—my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) spoke about how different police forces interpret that term, which indicates that there is something of a postcode lottery regarding where someone lives and how the law is applied.

The new clause brings much needed clarity to the process, and I urge the Minister to consider taking the matter further. If he cannot accept the new clause today, perhaps he will commit to it being considered in the other place. It is clear that these new clauses do not involve further risk—or indeed any risk—to the public.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) mentioned the police funding formula. In many areas, rural policing is like rural schooling and delivery of services. The policing formula does not support delivery of policing in rural areas—indeed, it tends to favour metropolitan areas. I have many examples of that. I know from previous experience that North Wales police were underfunded by £25 a head. It would be quite wrong, therefore, to give the impression that the leafy shires are better funded than metropolitan areas; that simply is not the case. The difference, particularly in Dyfed–Powys or indeed Cheshire, has been the way the PCC has allocated resources to frontline policing.

Jack Dromey: With the greatest respect, I have to correct the hon. Lady. If we compare metropolitan forces with areas such as Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, we will see that the evidence is stark. In addition, after the debacle over the police funding formula, proposals were made for transition arrangements, but all the emphasis has been on helping Conservative areas, which cannot be right.

Antoinette Sandbach: I simply do not accept that. The “damping” provisions have ensured that metropolitan areas have had substantially more funding, and rurality is not adequately accounted for in the funding formula to reflect the difficulty of policing often very large areas. After all, communities in rural areas deserve to be policed in exactly the same way and to have the same support and cover as those in metropolitan areas. I want to correct the impression that that is not the case.

In Cheshire, the PCC’s approach to services has led to a substantial increase on the frontline in the number of warranted officers. PCCs are making choices about where to allocate resources, but the examples from Cheshire and elsewhere, such as Dyfed–Powys, show that we can protect frontline services and even increase frontline policing using the funding settlements made over the last few years. The examples are out there, and I invite members of the public to check them out.

Karen Bradley: I start by joining the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) in paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and his work to expose the tragedy at Hillsborough. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who instigated the coroner’s inquiry and made sure we had the inquest. Had it not been for her work, and her commitment and her willingness to listen to such cross-party proposals and to work with us, I do not intend to test the will of the House at this stage, but I look forward to some assurance from the Minister that this provision will form part of the Bill by the time it receives Royal Assent.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Committee was good natured. There was a great deal of agreement and consensus, and where there was agreement—and even where there was not—the debate was good natured. I must, however, take issue with some of his points. We had a bit of a debate during his contribution about the funding formula, and he was right, however, that reported crime is up, and that is good news. We want victims to come forward and we want the police to believe them. We want to ensure that when a crime has been committed, it is reported and recorded, so that we have the best possible chance of catching the criminal and bringing them to justice.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the changing face of crime and seemed to imply that the Bill had failed. I hope he will acknowledge that the Investigatory Powers Bill, currently in Committee, deals with many of his
points about the changing face of crime. He is right that there are new ways criminals can attack us and get to us.

Before the internet, a criminal simply could not get to somebody sitting in Leek, in my constituency of Staffordshire Moorlands, or to Joe and Josephine Soap in The Dog and Duck in Erdington, who we have heard much about in our debates. They could simply not get to those people from places such as the far east, eastern Europe and so forth. Now, thanks to the internet, they can. The internet has provided a great opportunity, but it also means that criminals have access to that opportunity. I believe that the Investigatory Powers Bill being debated upstairs addresses many of the points that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington raised.

6.45 pm

I would like to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) about police and crime commissioners. I was in Cheshire last week with John Dwyer, who has done fantastic work in that county. Likewise, my own PCC, Matthew Ellis in Staffordshire, has maintained front-line warranted officers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) mentioned in the earlier debate, he has also introduced new ways of policing, including using electronic communication, to address precisely the points that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington made about the changing face of crime. Good Conservative PCCs absolutely deliver and make sure that policing is exactly as their communities need.

I am conscious of the time, so I am going to ensure that I comment first on the newly tabled amendments. We have already debated many amendments on similar themes at length in Committee, and I will touch on them if I have the time, but I hope Members will understand why I shall focus my initial comments on the new amendments tabled today.

New clause 1 was proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes). It goes without saying that I share his concerns about inappropriate knife sales, and we absolutely need to make sure that the law—it is very clear that it is illegal to sell knives to under-18s—is upheld and enforced, and that retailers and others understand that law. My hon. Friend knows that we have had extensive discussions of the matter and that we are taking steps to make sure that the law is known, that retailers are made aware of it and that we strengthen our response to knife crime. In February this year, for example, we supported 13 police forces in co-ordinated action against knife crime. This involved targeting habitual knife carriers, weapon sweeps, test purchases of knives from identified retailers and the use of surrender bins.

On 23 March this year, we published the modern crime prevention strategy, which sets out a range of measures to strengthen our response to knife crime, including working with the police and industry to ensure there are effective controls on the sale of knives and other offensive weapons; identifying and spreading best practice; delivering measures designed to deter young people from carrying knives; and introducing secondary legislation to ban the sale and importation of “zombie-killer knives” that glamorise violence. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington mentioned the PCC, David Jamieson in that context, and I pay tribute to this Labour PCC for the work he has done.

We have also agreed a set of principles with major retailers, including with Amazon and eBay, to prevent under-age sales of knives in stores and, very importantly, online. The agreement builds on the round table with major retailers, which was chaired by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary last month to encourage them to sell knives more responsibly.

It is crucial to realise that the current law is very clear: a retailer commits an offence if they sell knives to a person under 18. Retailers are required to take “reasonable precautions” and exercise “due diligence” to prevent such sales. That is why we worked with retailers to ensure that an appropriate code of practice looks not just for age verification at the point of sale. It is right that age verification is not just ticking a box for someone to say that they are aged 18. We mean proper and appropriate age verification, very much like that on which we have been consulting in respect of access to pornography for under-18s. We expect appropriate, online age verification there, too, and not merely a tick box for somebody to say that they are 18. We need to know that appropriate software or other age-verification techniques are being used. These are used by the gambling industry and across the world.

We have that agreement from the retailers, but also crucial is verification at the point of delivery. It is not good enough simply to verify that the purchaser is aged over 18; there must be confirmation and verification at the point of delivery. That means that many retailers—Tesco and Argos, for example—will not deliver a knife to anybody. They insist that the person must go and collect the knife from the store so that they can determine that he or she is over 18, and has appropriate verification.

The law is clear, and the new code of practice is clear. I want to give an agreement that is not even a month old a chance to work, but I also think that we should bear in mind what my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate said about prosecutions. We need to know that, if a prosecution is brought, the courts will have the weapons that they need to secure a successful conviction. I shall be happy to work with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, including my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims, who is sitting next to me. We also need to bear in mind what my hon. Friend said about whether we need to take any action on the supply and delivery of knives.

Jack Dromey: May I briefly intervene in support of new clause 1? There is no doubt that welcome steps have been taken, but what the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and others have proposed, with cross-party support, is the imposition of clear obligations and responsibilities, in law, to which those engaged in the selling and provision of knives must be held. Are the Government rejecting that approach?

Karen Bradley: The law is clear. Selling a knife to anyone under 18 is against the law, and anyone who does so is breaking the law. What we are seeking is the best way in which to ensure that that responsibility is upheld and there is appropriate enforcement of the law, and that means ensuring that retailers adhere to the code of practice. It is a voluntary code of practice, but we want the onus to be on the retailer rather than on the Government. The key issue is effective implementation and enforcement of the law as it exists.
My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate pointed out that such matters are not generally covered by primary legislation, and tend to be dealt with in, for instance, codes of practice. I shall be happy to look into whether there are suitable ways of enabling the code to be implemented by prosecution services or others, and I will keep my hon. Friend apprised of developments.

Let me now deal with the new clauses relating to firearms which were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury. I think that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) has left the Chamber, but I sensed that he was about to support them as well.

The purpose of the firearms provisions in the Bill is to close the most pressing loopholes in the current legislation, which are open to exploitation by criminals. The Government accept that firearms legislation needs a general overhaul, but our priority must be to address the issues that pose the greatest risk to public safety. The Law Commission recommended that firearms legislation be codified, and we are giving careful thought to the case for that. We may be able to consider some of the proposals in new clauses 7, 8 and 9 as part of such an exercise. The provisions in the Bill have been subject to detailed consideration and consultation by the Law Commission, unlike the proposals presented by the British Shooting Sports Council. We need to think carefully about the impact on public safety before legislating on any of these matters, and I assure my hon. Friend that we will do just that.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: With great respect to my hon. Friend, it sounds as though she is shunting my new clauses into the very long grass, which would simply not be acceptable to the millions of lawful holders of firearms and shotguns. There will be a great deal of pressure on my hon. Friend. Will she please assure us that she is not shifting this into the very, very long grass?

Karen Bradley: I can assure my hon. Friend. Friend that that is not the case. I understand that he had a productive meeting with officials yesterday to discuss his new clauses. As I have said, our No. 1 priority must be to promote public safety, but I accept that we also need an efficient licensing regime that minimises bureaucracy and inconvenience both to the police and to legitimate holders of firearms certificates. We will study my hon. Friend’s new clauses further, and if there are elements that can sensibly be taken forward without our compromising public safety, I shall be happy to look into whether it might be possible to do that in the Bill. I will keep my hon. Friend informed of progress in advance of the Committee stage in the other place.

I recognise that amendment 1 is intended to enable those with practical expertise to contribute to the development of the guidance to the police. We will consult widely on the first edition of the new statutory guidance, and that consultation will consider the views of shooting organisations as well as of the police. However, this is not a matter for legislation.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has tabled amendments relating to firearms fees. Currently, combined, the authorisation and licensing of prohibited weapons, shooting clubs and museums cost the taxpayer an estimated £700,000 a year. It is our intention that licence holders, not the taxpayer, should pay for the cost of the service. The proposed fees will be set out in a public consultation and the Government must consider any evidence put forward about the impact of the fees on particular categories of licence holders. I cannot pre-empt the consultation but, for example, organisations in the voluntary or civil society sector might put forward a case.

Fees for firearms and shotgun certificates issued by the police are separate and were increased in April 2015. Those were the first increases since 2001. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds talked about the police’s new online e-commerce system. Once that has been introduced across all 43 forces, fees will recover the full cost of licensing.

Jack Dromey: I have a very quick question for the Minister. Is she therefore giving us an assurance that we are moving to full cost recovery, and that never again will the police have to subsidise the cost of issuing gun licences?

Karen Bradley: Yes. I understand that the Minister for Policing, Fire, Criminal Justice and Victims will write to Opposition Front Benchers with further information when we have further details of the consultation.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) has tabled new clause 17 on the question of sobriety orders. He and I had a good discussion on this yesterday, and I am keen to explore the areas that he has talked about. He has rightly made the point that it is currently not possible to make offenders pay for the cost of their tags, and to do so would represent a departure from what we are doing in other parts of the criminal justice system. So, if he will allow me, I would like to explore the matter further, check for any unintended consequences and other points, and perhaps continue to discuss the issue with him so that we can ensure that we get this measure right if it is appropriate to introduce it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) tabled new clause 19, and I want to start by praising him. He should take great pride in having identified a real gap in the law. He is quite right to say that we do not want to see hundreds of young people—and perhaps not-so-young people—at festivals being maimed by flares. The Government fully support the intention behind the new clause but we need to be sure that there would be no unintended consequences.

It is for that reason that the Home Secretary and I have agreed with my hon. Friend to work together to table a Government amendment on this issue in the other place. I can assure him that when the Bill is enacted, such an amendment will be on the face of the legislation. I can also assure him that we will work to ensure the timely implementation of the amendment so that the law is in force by the time of next year’s festival season. I think I picked up some references in his contribution to a great artist who passed away last week. I can assure him that, at next season’s festivals, people will be able to party like it’s 1999.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 31 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.
New Clause 32

POLICE VOLUNTEERS: INSPECTION

(1) In section 54 of the Police Act 1996 (appointment and functions of inspectors of constabulary), in subsection (7) (as inserted by section 34), after paragraph (a) insert—

“(aa) persons designated as community support volunteers or policing support volunteers under section 38 of the Police Reform Act 2002;”.

(2) In Schedule 4A to the Police Act 1996 (further provision about Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Constabulary), in paragraph 6D (as inserted by section 33), after sub-paragraph (1A)(c) insert—

“(ca) a person designated as a community support volunteer or a policing support volunteer under section 38 of the Police Reform Act 2002;”.

This new clause makes provision about how the law relating to police inspections under the Police Act 1996 applies to those designated as community support volunteers or policing support volunteers under section 38 of the Police Reform Act 2002. The amendment of section 54 clarifies that inspections of police forces may include inspections of designated volunteers. The amendment of Schedule 4A is related to amendment 48 and means that designated volunteers served with a notice under paragraph 6A of that Schedule requiring the provision of information have no right of appeal against the notice (and, hence, are in the same position as constables serving with a police force and civilian staff designated under section 38 of the 2002 Act).

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

7 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Clause 35

POWERS OF POLICE CIVILIAN STAFF AND POLICE VOLUNTEERS

Amendment proposed: 13, page 59, line 1, leave out subsection (9B).—(Jack Dromey.)

This amendment removes the provision for volunteer PCSOs to be issued with CS spray and PAVA spray.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 182, Noes 306.

Division No. 254

AYES

De Piero, Gloria
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiellio, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holterm, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmoord, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mann, John
Marrs, Rob
Marshed, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGill, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Means, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Tigg, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Judith Cummins and Vicky Foxcroft
be brought forward.

before proposals to grant additional police powers to volunteers can be brought forward.

This amendment would guarantee that police funding would be protected in a police grant settlement approved by Parliament.

Act 1996 which guarantees no annual reduction in funding in real terms to local policing bodies in each financial year until 2020.” -- (Jack Dromey.)

This amendment would guarantee that police funding would be protected in a police grant settlement approved by Parliament before proposals to grant additional police powers to volunteers can be brought forward.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 182, Noes 305.

Division No. 255] [7.14 pm

Ayes

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Braze, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lym
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
Wiggin, Bill
Wiggin, Craig
Willamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellors for the Noes:
Simon Kirby and Sarah Newton

Hunt, Tristram
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevin
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeter, Nick
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twig, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellors for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Judith Cummins

Noes

Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Policing and Crime Bill

26 APRIL 2016

Policing and Crime Bill

Question accordingly negatived.
Clause 136

EXTENT

Amendment made: 62, page 142, line 17, at end insert—
“(section (Application of Firearms Act 1968 to the police: special constables and volunteers);”—(Karen Bradley.)

The Firearms Act 1968 forms part of the law of England and Wales and Scotland. This amendment provides for the amendments to that Act made by new clause NC31 to form part of the law of England and Wales and Scotland.

Bill to be further considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

GOVERNMENT TRADING FUNDS

That the draft Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency Trading Fund (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 9 March, be approved.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Order, 13 April, and Standing Order No. 118(6)).

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Ruth Evans to the office of Chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of 5 years with effect from 1 June 2016.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)).

EU STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN 2014-16

That this House takes note of European Union Documents No. 9467/14, a Joint Communication: Elements for an EU Strategy in Afghanistan 2014–16, No. 15503/15 and Addendum, a Joint Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and No. 15504/15 and Addendum, a Joint Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; also notes that the strategy was adopted by the Council in June 2014, during a period of considerable uncertainty for Afghanistan; further notes that the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development is intended as a signal of political commitment that indicates areas for future cooperation under the next EU strategy for Afghanistan beyond 2016; welcomes the UK’s success in directing the EU’s strategy in Afghanistan; supports the Government’s view that now is an appropriate point to focus on the EU strategy’s progress and delivery, as well as the EU’s role in Afghanistan beyond 2016; and agrees that the UK is well placed to lead this work.—(George Hollingbery.)

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, on Tuesday 10 May, the House shall sit at 9.30 am and references to specific times in the Standing Orders of this House shall apply as if that day were a Thursday.—(George Hollingbery.)

PETITION

Ealing Hospital and the Shaping a Healthier Future programme

7.27 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I rise to present a petition relating to Ealing Hospital and the Shaping a Healthier Future programme.

The petition states:

“since 2013 there has been a programme of rationalisation and downgrading of health services across North West London as part of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme”. This means that “the Accident and Emergency department at Ealing Hospital has been earmarked for closure”. We have already lost our maternity unit, and we will lose the paediatric unit in June. It is now reported “that Ealing will not now receive the new ‘Local Hospital’ promised under the programme, as the costs of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme have spiralled”. Over 100,000 people across the country signed the petition to oppose this betrayal of the local area.

“The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to reconsider the impact of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme on Ealing Hospital, Ealing and the surrounding boroughs that rely on Ealing Hospital to deliver high quality emergency care 24 hours a day.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK, Declares that since 2013 there has been a programme of rationalisation and downgrading of health services across North West London as part of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme; further that this has led to the loss of a number of important local services; further that the programme is often depriving communities of some of their most important resources; further that the Accident and Emergency department at Ealing Hospital has been earmarked for closure; further that Ealing Hospital has already lost its maternity unit; further that Ealing Hospital is also due to close its paediatric unit in June; further that there are hugely concerning reports that Ealing will not now receive the new ‘Local Hospital’ promised under the programme, as the costs of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme have spiralled; and further that an online petition on a similar matter has been signed by 100,229 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to reconsider the impact of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme on Ealing Hospital, Ealing and the surrounding boroughs that rely on Ealing Hospital to deliver high quality emergency care 24 hours a day.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[Petition 62: Ealing Hospital and the Shaping a Healthier Future programme. 26 April 2016]
All Saints National Academy, Walsall

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

7.29 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate about the school in my constituency that is now called All Saints National Academy. On 1 February, I took a deputation to see the Schools Minister, who will reply to this debate, at the House of Commons regarding the condition of the school. In August last year, the Secretary of State wrote to me stating that what was known as Bloxwich Church of England Primary School, run by the local authority, was immediately to become an academy.

When the deputation met the Minister on the date that I mentioned, he was informed that a bid had already been made, in time, to the Education Funding Agency, under the condition improvement fund, for essential work to be undertaken. The deputation, which included the new management of the school from the diocese of Lichfield—Church of England, of course—and the head of the primary school, explained, as I did, the dilapidated state of much of the building, and how necessary it was for the work to be carried out at quickly as possible.

During the meeting with the Minister, as he will no doubt recall, a video was played where the pupils explained that they were happy to be at the school but urged that the work should be done. I was very impressed, to say the least, as I think he was, by the way in which the pupils participated. The disappointing news, hence this debate, is that the bid—that is, the bid for the financial year 2016-17—has been unsuccessful. One can imagine—at least, I hope he can imagine—the effect on the staff, parents, and of course the children. The current number at the school is just under 300—298.

The school was originally built in Bloxwich in 1862, and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. 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Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. 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Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, mainly in the 1920s. Anyone who saw it would not be surprised and further sections were added on over time, main...
It is simply wrong that such a building can be allowed to continue in such a dilapidated state. Despite all the documentation—the photographs, the quote that I have read out and everything else—the bid, which was certainly in on time, was unsuccessful. I therefore hope that the Minister can provide some reasons to be optimistic about the possibility that the essential work will be undertaken. I should explain that the bid, which is for only half the work, was for some £1.3 million. All the details will of course be known to the Minister who is replying. We shall hear what he has to say, but as far as I am concerned, I shall continue to raise this subject at every opportunity until the work is undertaken. I consider that I have a duty and a responsibility to the children, the parents—my constituents—and the staff involved.

7.41 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) on securing this debate on the building condition of All Saints National Academy in Bloxwich in Walsall. His dedication to the schools in his constituency is well known. We met and spoke about this school earlier in the year, as he has mentioned. He spoke today with the same clarity and passion about the condition of the school as he did during our meeting in February. I recall watching the video that he and teachers from the school presented at the meeting.

The condition of school buildings is vital for our education system. It is not enough for buildings just to be safe; pupils should be educated in smart, well-furbished environments that reflect the value that we, as a society, place on their education. By 2021, the Government will have invested some £23 billion in school buildings, targeting funds where they are needed most.

Our priority is to ensure that the capital maintaining the school estate is delivered with the best value for money possible. To this end, the property data survey completed in 2014 has given us an improved understanding of the condition of school buildings in this country. The survey, the most comprehensive of its type ever undertaken, has provided us with consistent, independently assessed information on the comparative condition of 18,830 schools and colleges. This information can now rigorously inform our allocation of condition funding, ensuring that funding is much better aligned with maintenance needs across the school estate. We are now looking at options for gathering and maintaining usable data about the condition of the school estate over the long term, building on the successes of the property data survey.

Five academies in Walsall have successfully secured funding for their maintenance projects from the condition improvement fund, including Goldsmith Primary Academy in Walsall North, which secured funding for a roof replacement. In addition, Walsall local authority has been allocated over £2.2 million in 2016-17 to improve the condition of its own maintained schools, and almost £700,000 has been allocated to voluntary-aided schools in Walsall.

In 2015-16, we funded a number of projects in the west midlands that have now been successfully completed, such as the Aldridge school, a science college in Aldridge in Walsall. At this school, we funded a project to replace approximately 1,400 square metres of roofing on an existing building to improve the roof coverings, which were failing. That included making roof areas watertight to prevent water ingress into teaching areas, and providing additional roof insulation to improve the thermal efficiency of the building.

At Hamstead Hall Academy in Handsworth Wood in Birmingham, we funded the refurbishment of an existing block, re-roofing the building, replacing existing windows and repairing concrete elements in the façade. The project has enhanced the thermal performance and watertightness of the structure, and it will reduce energy costs and maintenance costs and create an environment conducive to teaching the schoolchildren.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the condition of the All Saints National Academy school building. I was pleased to meet him and school representatives on 1 February, and I would be delighted to accept his invitation to visit the school in the near future so that I can see at first hand what I saw on the video in February.

In December 2015, the school applied to the condition improvement fund. Following an assessment against the published criteria, the application was unsuccessful because there was, as I understand it from officials, insufficient supporting evidence to demonstrate significant condition need.

Mr Winnick: Did the officials actually visit the school? As I understand it, they did not: it was done on the basis of paperwork. If I am right—if not, the Minister will correct me—would it not have been appropriate to have visited the school, bearing in mind the condition outlined in the documentation?

Mr Gibb: My understanding is that many hundreds of applications have to be processed. Data from the property data survey inform the decision, and officials look at the information supplied as part of the bid.

Mr Winnick: Or they visit.

Mr Gibb: Yes, they do visit schools. When I come to that issue in my remarks, I will make some recommendations about what can be done in the future.

The total sum of national funding is, of course, limited—that is the issue we are debating—so the Department has to employ a rigorous prioritisation of funding projects to ensure that all schools are safe and in good working order. For that reason, applications are expected to include independent condition surveys and detailed photographic evidence to demonstrate the urgency and extent of the need for their proposed project, as set out in the guidance to applicants. I recall discussing that at our meeting.

In this instance, the supporting case for investment did not provide enough evidence to allow the bid to be funded, including suitable evidence that a well-developed and deliverable solution is in place, which represents good value for money. Of course, that is disappointing for everyone involved with All Saints National Academy—I understand that it is disappointing for the parents, children and staff—but we need to ensure that all bids are assessed against the same standards. I hope that the feedback will be helpful to the school in preparing a future bid. We expect the bidding round for the next condition improvement fund to open this autumn, for the following financial year.
Mr Gibb: All applicants from the last round have been provided with feedback on their applications. If All Saints National Academy feels that it would be helpful, an Education Funding Agency adviser can visit the school to provide additional feedback and advice on submitting a bid next time. If the academy considers that due process has not been followed, there is, of course, an appeals process, which will close at 12 noon on 10 May.

Mr Winnick: First, I am pleased that the Minister has accepted the invitation to visit the school. I hope he will be able to do so in the very near future; perhaps he will indicate whether that will be the case. We are now at the end of April, so will he be able to do so by June? Secondly, do I take it that, between now and the submission of bids for the financial year 2017-18, there is no possibility whatever of finance of any kind being given to try to improve the situation?

Mr Gibb: That is my understanding. The funding available for the last bid round has been allocated. It is allocated in a very strict order and in accordance with all the criteria—the hon. Gentleman is aware of those criteria. Failing an appeal over process, that will be the position.

As I said, I am very happy to visit the school. I think I can give the hon. Gentleman a commitment to do so before the end of the summer term, so before the school rises for the summer break.

Mr Winnick: I said June, actually.

Mr Gibb: I know the hon. Gentleman said June, and he drives a hard bargain, but I am meeting him halfway. I will commit to visiting the school before it breaks for the summer holidays.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to air this debate. He is certainly fulfilling his duty as a conscientious Member in bringing this issue to the House. I am happy to visit the school and to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) will pursue this matter over and over again, until his school building is refurbished to his satisfaction. This much I think we know.

Question put and agreed to.

7.50 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 27 April 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Democratic Participation

1. Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to increase democratic participation. [904712]

John Penrose: Some elements of participation, such as polling day turnout, lie far beyond the powers of mere Government and depend on the importance of the poll and the brilliance or otherwise of the campaigns. However, Governments can help things such as voter registration, where we are about to begin canvassing pilots to make the registration process quicker, cheaper, and more digital. We are also working with groups such as the British Youth Council, Operation Black Vote and Universities UK to encourage under-registered groups to sign up, and partnering with our embassies abroad and the Electoral Commission to run registration drives in the run-up to the polls on 5 May and 23 June.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for the Minister’s answer. Nevertheless, in the week before the Scottish Parliament elections and the elections to the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly, this Government have overseen the disenfranchisement of over 770,000 people by the introduction of self-assessment. Therefore, the Government hold their head up and say that they are doing a great deal, but there is probably more as well.

John Penrose: We are taking a number of different approaches. First, we are working with Universities UK and the Association of Colleges. A great deal of work is being done in universities themselves. We are also examining very closely the work that is being done in places such as Sheffield University to sign up students when they first arrive and enrol. We are doing a great deal, but there is probably more as well.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the Government on driving up democratic participation in the EU referendum by publishing their leaflet, which I understand is up for the Pulitzer prize for the best work of fiction. Does the Minister agree that that is probably more as well.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that equally important as ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are able to vote is making sure that genuine candidates are not disenfranchised by people who get on to the electoral register who ought not to be on there because they are there through fraud?

John Penrose: Absolutely. It is crucial that we have a register that is both complete and accurate. I therefore look forward with great anticipation to the report on electoral fraud by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), where I am sure he will cover this, among other things.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What specific work are the Government doing with students and young people to ensure that they are registered to vote?

John Penrose: We are taking a number of different approaches. First, we are working with Universities UK and the Association of Colleges. A great deal of work is being done in universities themselves. We are also examining very closely the work that is being done in places such as Sheffield University to sign up students when they first arrive and enrol. We are doing a great deal, but there is probably more as well.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): There is much concern about the Government’s new proposals for public appointments in that they might decrease social mobility. Sir David Normington has gone so far as to say: “Grimstone’s proposals would enable ministers to set their own rules; override those rules whenever they want; appoint their own selection panels; get preferential treatment for favoured candidates; ignore the panel’s advice if they don’t like it; and appoint someone considered by the panel as not up to the job.” Would the Minister like to answer that?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister does so, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the appointment process in the context of the drive to increase democratic participation.

Mr Watson: Indeed, Mr Speaker—yes. Social mobility in public appointments is very important for democratic participation.

John Penrose: I am not sure how I link any kind of answer to democratic participation, but I none the less point out that we adhere consistently to the Nolan principles in everything that we do in this area.

Mr Watson: I appreciate the Minister’s answer to my creative question. I do not believe everything that I read in the papers, but this week it was revealed that the
Culture Secretary had recommended five candidates for the position of trustee at the National Portrait Gallery. Three were Tory donors and one was a former Tory Minister. Is that a way of improving democratic participation for Tory cronies?

John Penrose: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is trying to raise a serious point, but this is an example of the principle of if you are in a hole, you should stop digging.

National Citizen Service

2. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What plans the Government have to increase the number of young people participating in the National Citizen Service.

Rebecca Pow: Last summer, I was invited to a highly successful lunch event for veterans and others organised by a group of young people through the NCS scheme. This year, those on that scheme are running a social action project, which involves creating a sensory garden for young adults with learning difficulties. Does the Minister agree that the skills learnt through the programme—confidence building and teamwork—are making a real difference to young people in getting them into work and closing our skills gap?

Mr Wilson: Indeed. It is absolutely true that NCS is creating a generation of more responsible and engaged young people. The skills that NCS participants in Taunton are developing are echoed widely around England and the United Kingdom. It is therefore extremely disappointing that there is currently no NCS programme in Scotland or Wales, despite the generous funding made available through the autumn spending review.

Rebecca Pow: I am very grateful. The Minister is right that NCS is proving invaluable for young people across the country. In Dorset, there was recently a successful scheme called “From yard to garden” about replanting trees. I would be grateful if the Minister gave advice and guidance to Members of all parties about how they can get more involved in that excellent programme.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last summer, I visited an NCS scheme in Dukinfield in my constituency and I was hugely impressed by the work with young people, but many of those young people raised with me the wider cuts to youth services. Has the Minister conducted an impact assessment on how those cuts have affected the aims, ambitions and objectives of the NCS programme?

Mr Wilson: That question gives me the opportunity to say how disappointed I am that local authorities choose to make cuts in their service provision. We are investing more than £1 billion in NCS in this Parliament and the overwhelming majority of that funding will flow through delivery organisations, most of which are public or VCSE—voluntary, community and social enterprise—organisations. Beyond that, we are also investing more widely in the youth sector through programmes such as Step Up To Serve and the British Youth Council, and supporting local authorities to reshape their youth provision.

10. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Minister gave a statistic in response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), but what steps is he taking to encourage NCS participation by young people from a black and minority ethnic background?

Mr Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for asking about the participation targets. It is really important that every young person—every 16-year-old—gets the opportunity to take part in NCS, because the programme not only creates a more cohesive society and adds to social mobility and social engagement, but delivers value for money. The statistics that I cited earlier show that it is a programme of which we, the Government and the whole country can be very proud.

Government Grant Agreements

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of an anti-lobbying clause in Government grant agreements on the ability of charities to scrutinise Government policy.
Oral Answers

6. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the compatibility of the proposed anti-lobbying clause in Government funding agreements with the terms of the Government's compact with civil society organisations relating to campaigning. [904719]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): As set out earlier this month, we are continuing to work on this issue with charities, universities and others. The principle is clear: taxpayers' money should not be wasted on Government lobbying Government.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister not admit that this policy is a mess? The Government have been forced into a U-turn by research scientists, so the clause will not apply to them. Will he undertake urgently to review the operation of the entire clause and, at the very least, commit to an ongoing review so that we can be sure that the freedom of speech of charities and other organisations is not undermined?

Matthew Hancock: As we have said, we are reviewing representations and we will take a decision on the form of the clause. We are pausing on implementation, but we are committed to ensuring that taxpayers' money is used for the good causes for which it is intended and not wasted on Government lobbying Government.

Paul Flynn: Six years after the Government promised to crack down on lobbyists, the big corporate lobbyists are free to lobby, in secret and anonymously, but the worthy charities are having their lives made a misery by new bureaucracy. Why do the Government consistently dabble in the shallows, worrying the minnows, while the big, fat salmon swim unhindered?

Matthew Hancock: I am an enormous supporter of the work of charities, but I find it extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman seems to be a supporter of lobbyists and lobbying?

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when our constituents give money to charity, as it is by many of us, possibly everyone, in this House and many people around the country—it is spent on the good causes for which it is intended.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Government have succeeded in uniting the entire British voluntary sector against them, including household names such as the girl guides, Mencap and Oxfam. Indeed, their actions in trying to suppress debate and discussion are reminiscent of a totalitarian political culture. If voluntary organisations come across systemic child abuse or practices such as female genital mutilation, are you really saying that they should remain silent and not seek to influence Government, when a change in the law could outlaw such practices?

Mr Speaker: I am not saying anything of the kind, but I will leave it to the Minister.

Matthew Hancock: And nor are we. It is an absurd suggestion. The principle that taxpayers' money should not be used to lobby Government is perfectly reasonable and one that most people support.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): A leading board member of the Charity Commission has written an essay calling for the UK to leave the EU. That comes after the Charity Commission tried to clamp down on charities engaging in the EU debate. Is the Minister able to explain why the Charity Commission rule on campaigning appears to be, “Do as I say, not as I do”? I welcomed his clarification that charity voices should be able to speak out, but only if they agree with him?

Matthew Hancock: No.

Electoral Reform

5. Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the case for electoral reform. [904718]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): My hon. Friend will remember that in the last Parliament we held the alternative vote referendum, in which this country resoundingly rejected a proposal to abandon our tried and tested first-past-the-post system. I believe that we should respect that result and the clear democratic decision that it represents, and therefore we have no plans to change the voting system.

Alec Shelbrooke: Given that the British people voted overwhelmingly for first past the post, does my hon. Friend agree that, as with all referendums, the vote is final and settled, and that the Government are absolutely right to push ahead with delivering their vital manifesto commitments?

John Penrose: As in many things, I could not have put it better myself.
Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): When it comes to electoral reform, in Northern Ireland we are closing all our electoral offices. Surely, part of electoral reform is trying to get more people involved, and closing electoral offices is the wrong way to do it.

John Penrose: I will not trample on the purviews of the devolved Administrations and the Northern Ireland Office, but if the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with more details, I would be happy to respond.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Are the Government looking seriously at how the understandable security challenges of online voting might be overcome so that future generations of young people can vote online in this country safely and securely, thereby increasing voter registration and participation?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that online activity is an increasing part of our everyday lives, whether it be shopping or anything else. As technology improves and online voting becomes steadily more secure, it is something that we will need to continue to revisit. At the moment, the prospect of potentially stealing the Government of a country is too grave to allow online voting to happen.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we must do everything possible to bring power closer to people in every part of the country, and that a good start would be to make it easier for people to engage in politics?

John Penrose: I absolutely agree. As I said in response to an earlier set of questions, there is a great deal that Governments can do, but there is also a great deal that political parties and others need to do, to engage the interest of the voters.

Social Mobility

7. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What discussions he has had with industry leaders on increasing social mobility in the public and private sectors.

The Minister without Portfolio (Robert Halfon): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for his work in the House on social mobility. In our mission to increase social mobility, we are working with a number of leading businesses and organisations on our plans to improve life chances across the nations. That includes the civil service pushing ahead with the delivery of more than 30,000 of the overall 3 million apprenticeship places that we will need to continue to revisit. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the independent inquiry, which has set out a timetable.

Jeremy Lefroy: As it is vital that the civil service reflects the society that it serves, will my right hon. Friend explain how the Government are acting on the recommendations made in the report of the Bridge group?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we are accepting every part of the recommendations of the Bridge report. He will know that we are the party of the ladder, the party of social mobility, the party of the living wage, the party of lower taxes for low earners and the party of millions of apprenticeships and millions of jobs.

Topical Questions

T1. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): The Cabinet Office is responsible for efficiency in reforming Government, transparency, civil society, digital technology, cyber-security and delivering the Government’s agenda.

Bob Blackman: I commend my right hon. Friend for releasing vast amounts of Government data, which will improve transparency across Government. What further action can he take to ensure that performance improves, transparency is available to the general public and data are in a manageable form so that people can analyse them?

Matthew Hancock: My hon. Friend is right that this is not only about releasing more information, but about releasing it in a way that is usable. I can announce to the House that since 2010 the Government have released 27,000 open datasets—a new high—which goes to show that we are the most transparent Government ever.

T3. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): If he will publish the Chilcot report. Will the Minister make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

Matthew Hancock: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern and the concern of his constituents. He will know that the timing of the publication is a matter for the independent inquiry, which has set out a timetable. Checking for national security issues is very important, and will take place appropriately. Thankfully, we will get to the conclusion of this process soon.

T2. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that cyber-security is increasingly important not just for communications between citizen and Government, but in a wide range of businesses. That is why we have laid aside £1.9 billion to improve our cyber-security during this Parliament, and why we are creating a new national cyber-security centre.
Mr Speaker: I appeal to Ministers to face the House because much of the right hon. Gentleman’s answer was lost on the rest of us, which is to our grave disadvantage.

Matthew Hancock: Of course charities will be able to contribute to debate. They will be able to advise and researchers will be able to bring forward their world-beating ideas, but as for the idea, supported by the Labour party, that taxpayers’ money should be used for paid lobbyists, we are going to put a stop to that.

Mr Letwin: In short, yes. That is of course part of the global development goals, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister led the world in establishing. One of the targets within those goals is precisely to reduce that kind of corruption, and we will emphasise that in our work to fulfil our part of those targets.

Matthew Hancock: The Trade Union Bill, which is currently before Parliament, takes important steps to modernise the relationship between trade unions and their members. Although trade unions play a very important part in our national life and represent the interests of many, they do not represent the interests of all, and we must make sure that that relationship is modern and appropriate. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise in the Chamber. The Minister must be very disappointed to hear the words.

Matthew Hancock: We brought in the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 and made progress on this issue during the last Parliament. The crucial point about tackling lobbying through grants is that taxpayers’ money should be spent on the things it is intended for, not on Government lobbying Government.

Mr Letwin: Yes, indeed. We are determined to reach out to a new set of potential electors who have failed to register, as the Minister for constitutional reform, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), made clear earlier in our proceedings. I should tell my hon. Friend that every single person whose name appeared in the old register but who has been discounted under individual electoral registration would have been approached at least nine times before their name was removed.

Mr Speaker: That probably makes two of us, then.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to improving social mobility in the civil service. Will the Minister join me in encouraging more private sector employers to do the same—for example, through schemes such as Inspiring the Future?

Mr Letwin: I strongly endorse that approach, Mr Speaker. If you or any other Member have not already got involved in an Inspiring the Future event, I would encourage you to do so. Not only is it good for the country but it is an incredibly enjoyable way to spend some time.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): From Cabinet Office figures, 67% of people in the senior civil service were based in London last year, the highest proportion in the past five years. Given that, and the decision to close the office of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in Sheffield, does the Minister not accept that his policy of moving civil servants out of London and into the regions is failing?

Matthew Hancock: We are introducing regional hubs for the civil service. Of course, many UK civil servants work in Scotland, supporting the people in Scotland. Inevitably there are a large number of civil servants in London because this is the capital of the United Kingdom, but we have to make sure that they represent the country that they serve.

Mr Speaker: I appeal to Ministers for the Cabinet Office is determined to introduce in a drive to clean up politics. The Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 covers the lobbying of MSPs. Does he have any plans to expand the scope of the register of consultant lobbyists to cover the lobbying of MPs?

Matthew Hancock: The Minister must be very disappointed to have made sure that that relationship is modern and appropriate.
**PRIME MINISTER**

_The Prime Minister was asked—_

**Engagements**

Q1. [904687] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 April.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): Yesterday marked a momentous day for the family and friends of the 96 victims of the Hillsborough disaster. Over the last 27 years their search for justice has been met with obfuscation and hostility instead of sympathy and answers. As I said to the House in 2012 about the Hillsborough independent panel's report, it is wrong that the families had to wait for so long, and to fight so hard, just to get to the truth. I know that the whole House will want to join me in praising their courage, patience and resolve. They have never faltered in the pursuit of the truth and we all owe them a great debt of gratitude.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and, in addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mims Davies: I would very much like to associate myself with the Prime Minister’s important comments on the Hillsborough tragedy, along with Members on all sides of the House, and pay tribute to the victims and their families, and to the resilience of the campaigners who continue to strive for the truth in the pursuit of justice.

In my constituency of Eastleigh, the service that GPs provide is crucial to people's daily lives, including at St Luke's surgery in Botley—I have met the people at that surgery to highlight its important local value. Does the Prime Minister agree that the recent key announcement of £2.4 billion of funding for GPs is only possible because of a strong Conservative majority Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We made a choice to put £12 billion into the NHS in the last Parliament and £19 billion into the NHS in this Parliament. We want to see strengthened primary care. Our vision is of GPs coming together and having physiotherapists, mental health practitioners and other clinics in their surgeries, so that people can get the healthcare they need and we take the pressure off hospitals. That will only happen with a Government who keep investing in our NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Yesterday, after 27 years, the 96 people who tragically lost their lives at Hillsborough, and their families, finally received the justice they were entitled to. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has apologised for the actions of previous Governments, and I join him in paying tribute to all those families who have campaigned with such dignity, steadfastness and determination, to get to the truth of what happened to their loved ones on that dreadful afternoon. I also pay a warm tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), for Halton (Derek Twigg) and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and other MPs who have relentlessly campaigned with great difficulty over many years. I hope that the whole House will be united in demanding that all those involved in the lies, smears and cover-ups that have so bedevilled this whole inquiry will now be held to account.

Last week the Prime Minister told the House that he was going to put rocket boosters on his forced academisation proposals. This weekend, in the light of widespread unease—including among his own MPs—it seems that the wheels are falling off the rocket boosters, and that the Government are considering a U-turn. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether that U-turn is being prepared for or not?

The Prime Minister: Let me join the right hon. Gentleman in praising those who campaigned so hard and for so long to get justice for the victims of Hillsborough. This whole process took far too long, and it is right that we had the Jones report—I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham)—and responded to it. I also want to mention the former Attorney General, who took the case to the High Court for the Government himself, to argue for that vital second inquest.

On academies, I have not yet met a rocket booster with a wheel on it, but rocket science is not really my subject, and apparently it is not the right hon. Gentleman’s. I repeat: academies are raising standards in our schools, and I want a system where heads and teachers run schools, not bureaucrats.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, there wasn’t much of an answer there. Will the Prime Minister tell the House—[Interruption.] If Conservative Members would be patient, they might hear the simple question that I am putting to the Prime Minister. Will he tell the House whether he will bring forward legislation to force good and outstanding schools to become academies against their wishes in the upcoming Queen’s Speech? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I cannot really pre-empt what is in the Queen’s Speech, but on this one example I can help out the right hon. Gentleman. We are going to have academies for all, and it will be in the Queen’s Speech.

Jeremy Corbyn: We look forward to that, but there is still time for the U-turn that I am sure is at the back of the Prime Minister’s mind. It has been reported that the Government are considering allowing good local authorities to form multi-academy trusts. Ironically, that would give local authorities more responsibility for running schools than they have now, although the Prime Minister has previously suggested that local authorities are holding schools back. Why is this costly reorganisation necessary for schools that are already good or outstanding? Why is he forcing it on them?

The Prime Minister: As I said last week—this is good; I like repeats on television, and I am very happy to have them in the House as well—outstanding schools have nothing to fear from becoming academies, and indeed they have a lot to gain. Just because a school is outstanding or good does not mean that it cannot have further improvement. We want outstanding schools to help other schools in their area, often by being part of an academy trust. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned...
local authorities—[Interruption.] He has asked two questions so far, with two very clear answers. Third question, and third clear answer coming—[Interruption.] Summerbottom. Perhaps if he could deal with the anti-Semitic in his party, we would all be prepared to listen to him a bit more—perhaps we will come on to that.

Of course, there are lots of ways in which schools can become academies: they can convert and become academies; they can be sponsored by an outside organisation; they can work with other schools in the area; they can look at working with the local authority. Those schools that want to go on using local authority services are free to do so. I am very clear: academies are great and academies for all is a good policy. What we are now seeing from Labour, I sense, is that it is moving in favour of academy schools. Perhaps when the right hon. Gentleman gets to his feet, he can say: does he favour academies or not?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister will be aware that repeats on television sometimes get more viewers than they did the first time round.

The chief executive of the largest academy chain in London, the Harris Academy, has warned that a far more fundamental thing that the Prime Minister should be worrying about, rather than whether schools should become academies or not, is teacher shortages. The academies do not want this; parents do not want it; teachers do not want it; governors do not want it; Conservative councils and MPs do not want it. Who actually does want this top-down reorganisation that he is imposing on our education system?

The Prime Minister: Okay. Question 4, answer 4: here it comes. The right hon. Gentleman asks who wants this. Let us start with Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of schools. I think he is someone worth listening to. He said that "academisation can lead to rapid improvements…I" firmly "believe it is right to give more autonomy to the front line". The OECD has been in the news today, so let us try that. This should not be too controversial. The OECD states: "I view the trend towards academies as a very promising development in the UK, which used to have a rather prescriptive education system".

So it supports it. What about the endless academy trusts who support it?

The right hon. Gentleman asked another question, and, very keen for full answers—[Interruption.] If you shout, you will not hear the answer. He asked about teacher shortages, but the fact is that there are more school places and more teachers under this Government than there were under Labour. Why? Because we have got a successful economy, and we are putting it into our schools and our children’s future.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are, of course, still record numbers of children in over-sized and super-sized classes, and that is getting worse. If the Prime Minister is looking for support for his academisation proposal, he might care to phone his friends, the leaders of Hampshire, West Sussex and his own Oxfordshire county council, who are deeply concerned and opposed to it. He might care to listen to Councillor Carter, the Conservative chair of the County Councils Network, who said that “the change will lead to a poorer education system”.

Why, then, is the Prime Minister pushing this through with so much opposition and concern, and when it is such a waste of money, when we should be investing in teachers and schools, not top-down reorganisation?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the right hon. Gentleman is outing Conservative council leaders, and because they keep the council tax down and provide good services, I hope we will see more of them in 10 days’ time. To be clear on teacher supply, there are 13,000 more teachers than there were in 2010.

To give a wholly accurate answer to his fourth question, the right hon. Gentleman asked who else supports academies. Let me quote Helena Mills of the Burnt Mill Academy Trust. She said: “I used to be very sceptical about, and resistant to, academy status. But during the process of developing the…Academy…I have been increasingly convinced that” this “is the way forward.” That is what more and more people are saying. That is why 1.3 million more children are in good and outstanding schools. That is why almost nine out of 10 converter academies are good or outstanding schools. On this side of the House we are very clear: we back aspiration; we back opportunity; we back investment in our schools; we want every child to get the best. It is Labour that wants to hold back opportunity and have one-size-fits-all.

Jeremy Corbyn: A pattern seems to be developing. [Interruption.] It is quite simply this: the Prime Minister has a Health Secretary who is imposing a contract on junior doctors, against the wishes of patients, the public and the rest of the medical profession; and he has an Education Secretary who is imposing yet another Tory top-down reorganisation that nobody wants. When will his Government show some respect and listen to the public, parents and patients, and indeed to professionals who have given their lives to public service in education and health? When will he change his ways, listen to them and trust other people to run services, rather than imposing things from above?

The Prime Minister: I tell right hon. Gentleman the pattern that is developing: we can see 1.9 million more people being treated in our health service; and we can see 1.3 million more children in “good” or “outstanding” schools. That is the pattern that is developing: a strong economy, investing into our public services. The other pattern that I have noticed, standing at this Dispatch Box, is that I am on my fifth Labour leader—and if he carries on like this, I will soon be on my sixth.

Q2. [904688] Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): The Government package to help potential buyers of the Tata Steel site in Port Talbot is substantial and befits the tremendous bipartisan endeavours this Government have undertaken to save the industry, and it stands in stark contrast with the distasteful, disrespectful comments of Labour’s policy adviser, who said that the steel crisis had been “good for Labour”. Is there any indication that the package could help expedite the sale of the site, which could provide the long-term viable future for
Welsh steel, which we all hope for, and for the workers who live in my constituency of Gower?

The Prime Minister: I want to thank my hon. Friend for welcoming me to the Gower yesterday. Before coming to his constituency I visited Port Talbot, where I met the management and trade unions, and had a very constructive discussion. [Interruption.] I did actually meet the Conservative leader, Andrew R. T. Davies, who does an excellent job in the Welsh Assembly. [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) wants to be Speaker, he had better stop interrupting everybody.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Following the Hillsborough inquiry, we join in all the comments made so far in relation to the families and in paying tribute to all the campaigners for justice.

Last night, the Government were defeated for the second time in the House of Lords on the issue of refugee children being given refuge in the United Kingdom. Many Members of that House, like many Members of this one, in all parties, including on the Prime Minister's own side, would wish us to do much, much more in helping provide refuge for unaccompanied children in Europe. Will the Prime Minister please reconsider his opposition and stop walking by on the other side?

The Prime Minister: I do not think anyone can accuse this country of walking on by in this refugee crisis. Let us be very clear about what we have done: first, we are taking the 20,000 refugees from outside Europe, which I think has all-party support; secondly, last week we announced the further 3,000—principally unaccompanied children and children at risk from outside Europe—whom we will be taking; and, thirdly, under our normal refugee procedures, last year we took more than 3,000 unaccompanied children. But where I disagree, respectfully, with their lordships' House is that those people who are in European countries are in safe European countries. To compare—somehow—children or adults who are in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal or Greece with their lordships' House is that those people who are in European countries are in safe European countries. I ask him: who has the moral responsibility for feeding them, clothing them, educating them and giving them refuge, if not us, and everyone in Europe?

Angus Robertson: Europol estimates that 10,000 unaccompanied children in Europe have disappeared. Apparently, there is “no comparison” between thousands of children needing refuge in the 1930s and thousands of children in Europe at the present time. [Interruption.] Yes! Yes!

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not interested in someone yelling out their opinion of the right hon. Gentleman's question. This is the home of free speech. The right hon. Gentleman, and every other Member, will be heard, however long this session takes. That is very clear.

Angus Robertson: Europol estimates that 10,000 unaccompanied children in Europe have disappeared. This is an existential question about the safety of vulnerable children. The Prime Minister thinks that it is not the responsibility of the United Kingdom to help unaccompanied children in Europe, so I ask him: who has the moral responsibility for feeding them, clothing them, educating them and giving them refuge, if not us, and everyone in Europe?

The Prime Minister: Let me answer that very directly. First, any unaccompanied child who has direct family in Britain, on claiming asylum under the Dublin regulations, can come to Britain—and quite right too. But the right hon. Gentleman asked who was responsible for refugees. The answer to that question is the country the refugees are in. I want Britain to play our part, but we have to ask ourselves whether we do better by taking a child from a refugee camp, or taking a child from Lebanon, or taking a child from Jordan, or taking a child from France, Italy or Germany. As I have said, to compare this with the 1930s is, frankly, to insult those countries, which are our neighbours and partners.

Angus Robertson: As in the 1930s, there are thousands—[Interruption.] Apparently, there is “no comparison” between thousands of children needing refuge in the 1930s and thousands of children in Europe at the present time. [Interruption.] Yes! Yes!

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not interested in someone yelling out their opinion of the right hon. Gentleman's
The Prime Minister: I will certainly have a look at that case. If the hon. Gentleman lets me know the names involved and the nature of the issues, I will make sure that the Home Office looks into it urgently.

Q4. [904690] Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As the Prime Minister will know from getting stuck on his way into Bath just before the general election last year, my constituency is plagued by high air pollution levels and by congestion. Given the Government’s commitment to investing billions of pounds in infrastructure—something that the Labour Government failed to do in 13 years—will he consider committing himself to looking at the construction of the long overdue and much-needed missing A36/A46 link road to the east of my constituency?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Some people think that if we care about air quality there is no room for any road building, but, of course, stationary traffic pollutes much more than moving traffic. We must make sure that the arteries that serve all our constituencies are open, and I will look carefully at what my hon. Friend has said. However, we should also recognise that air quality is improving. Nitrogen oxide levels have fallen by 17% over the last four years, and we want to do more by introducing the clean air programme.

Q11. [904697] Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): With the United Kingdom facing its most momentous decision for a generation in eight weeks’ time, does the Prime Minister think it makes more sense to listen to all our closest friends and allies around the world, or to a combination of French fascists, Nigel Farage and Vladimir Putin?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the right hon. Gentleman takes the English pronunciation of Farage, rather than the poncey, foreign-sounding one that he seems to prefer—a thoroughly good thing. I think we should listen to our friends and our allies. Looking around the world, it is hard to find the leader of a country who wishes us well who wants us to do other than stay inside a reformed European Union.

Q5. [904691] Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The new ISAs announced in this year’s Budget are very welcome. They will help people to save for homes and for retirement. As my right hon. Friend has said, however, we should also recognise that air quality is improving. Nitrogen oxide levels have fallen by 17% over the last four years, and we want to do more by introducing the clean air programme.

Q7. [904693] Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Hatred and ignorance lie at the heart of anti-Semitism. When those in public life express such views they denigrate not only themselves but the institutions to which they belong. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House of his commitment to fighting this vicious form of prejudice?

The Prime Minister: It is very simple: anti-Semitism is effectively racism, and we should call it out and fight it wherever we see it. Frankly, the fact that a Labour Member of Parliament, with the Labour Whip, made remarks about the “transportation” of people from Israel to America, talked about a “solution” and is still in receipt of the Labour Whip is quite extraordinary. The shadow Chancellor said about these people: “Out, out, out. If people express these views: full stop they’re out. People might be able to reform their views and the rest of it. On this? I can’t see it…I’m not having it. People might be able to reform their views and the rest of it.” Frankly, there will be too many hours in the day before that happens to the MP in question.

Q12. [904699] Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Prime Minister and his Government did next to nothing to save the Scottish steel industry; it was left to the Scottish Government to do that. The UK Government are now breaking the promises made by Tories and Labour to protect the Scottish shipbuilding industry. Why does the Prime Minister think that Scottish jobs are so expendable?

The Prime Minister: Frankly, the Scottish Government and the UK Government should work together. One thing we should work together on is procurement. It is worth asking how much Scottish steel was in the Forth road bridge—zero! None! Absolutely nothing! Yes. What a contrast with the warships we are building, which of course we would not be building if we had an independent Scotland. We back the steel industry with actions as well as words.

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is excitable, but it must simmer down. We must hear the hon. Lady.

Q13. [904700] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): My constituent Joseph Brown-Lartey was killed by dangerous driving. Does the Prime Minister agree that sentences for these crimes are too lenient? When can we expect to get a response to our petition and get justice for Joseph?

The Prime Minister: I have every sympathy with the family in question. I had an almost identical case in my constituency where a young girl was killed by a dangerous driver. The maximum sentence is 14 years, so the courts
do have the ability to sentence longer, but I know what this means to the families. I am making sure that the roads Minister is looking again at all these issues relating to dangerous driving, and I will ensure that the case that the hon. Lady mentions is taken into account as well.

Q8. [904694] Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): As the birthplace of the industrial revolution, Dudley is proud of its heritage, but we need economic stability to deliver a prosperous future. Will the Prime Minister come to launch the new enterprise zone in Brierley Hill and look at how we can attract more investment, create new jobs and develop the highly skilled workforce that our community needs?

The Prime Minister: I will look very carefully at whether I am able to do that, because we support the industrial regeneration of the black country. The truth is that enterprise zones have been a success. They have created nearly 25,000 jobs, attracted over 630 companies and secured £2.4 billion of private sector investment. The delivery of enterprise zones has involved a lot of hard work by local authorities. I pay tribute to them, and wish my hon. Friend well in the black country.

Q9. [904695] John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): In Cumbria, nuclear matters. We have the nuclear legacy at Sellafield, defence work at Barrow and the prospect of substantial investment in a new nuclear plant at Moorside. Given the apparent opposition to nuclear from the Opposition, will the Prime Minister confirm that the long-term decisions for nuclear power and defence will be made in a timely manner?

The Prime Minister: We have made commitments on the electrification of north-south lines and east-west lines. I will have to look very carefully at the hon. Lady’s proposal, but we want everywhere—Bradford included—to benefit from the northern powerhouse.

Q14. [904701] Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): As the constituency of the industrial revolution, Bradford is proud of its heritage, but we need economic stability to deliver a prosperous future. Will the Prime Minister come to launch the new enterprise zone in Brierley Hill and look at how we can attract more investment, create new jobs and develop the highly skilled workforce that our community needs?

The Prime Minister: I will look very carefully at whether I am able to do that, because we support the industrial regeneration of the black country. The truth is that enterprise zones have been a success. They have created nearly 25,000 jobs, attracted over 630 companies and secured £2.4 billion of private sector investment. The delivery of enterprise zones has involved a lot of hard work by local authorities. I pay tribute to them, and wish my hon. Friend well in the black country.

Q10. [904696] Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Several small businesses that I met in Tadcaster last week are being treated appallingly by insurance companies. Four months after the floods, claims have not been settled and renewal premiums are being hiked to astronomical levels. The Government have rightly helped to introduce the Flood Re scheme to help homeowners after flooding, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the same protection should be given to small business owners too?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the problem that my hon. Friend lays out. When my constituency was badly flooded, some insurance companies paid out quickly, but others were not so fast. When we look at what happened during the winter, we see that 82% of claims have been paid out, but if colleagues have specific examples the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be interested to see them so that we can get on top of the insurance industry. We are looking specifically at whether we need a Flood Re-style approach for small businesses to ensure that they can get the insurance they need.

Sir Edward Timpson (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): In Cumbria, nuclear matters. We have the nuclear legacy at Sellafield, defence work at Barrow and the prospect of substantial investment in a new nuclear plant at Moorside. Given the apparent opposition to nuclear from the Opposition, will the Prime Minister confirm that the long-term decisions for nuclear power and defence will be made in a timely manner?

The Prime Minister: We have made commitments on the electrification of north-south lines and east-west lines. I will have to look very carefully at the hon. Lady’s proposal, but we want everywhere—Bradford included—to benefit from the northern powerhouse.
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Whatever the outcome of the EU referendum, does the Prime Minister agree that one thing that will never diminish is the mutual affection and admiration between Britain and our great ally, France? Given that connection, will he pay tribute to the people who fought and won the Normandy campaign, such as the late Captain Paul Cash, the father of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who was killed fighting in Normandy at the age of 26 having won the Military Cross, and Sergeant Peter Carne, who, at 93, is at Westminster today, and who built the Bailey bridges that enabled the breakout from the Normandy beachhead and will receive the Légion d’honneur in a typically generous gesture from our French allies?

The Prime Minister: I certainly join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all those who served, particularly those who fell in that heroic campaign. One of the things I have been able to do as Prime Minister of which I am proudest was to go to the vigil on the 70th anniversary of our gliders preparing for the landings and to go to Gold beach to see the incredible work that was done. We should remember what they did and what it was that they gave their lives for, which was to achieve peace on our continent.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): My constituent Debra has HIV, which she contracted via a partner who had received a contaminated blood transfusion. My constituent Neil has hepatitis, again from a contaminated transfusion, and he now needs a second liver transplant. Neither of them can hold down a full-time job because of their conditions' catastrophic effects on their health, so they both absolutely rely on the support from the state that the Government now plan to slash in half. I simply ask the Prime Minister why the Government are so willing to attack people whose only mistake was to be unlucky.

The Prime Minister: What we said before the election was that we had set aside £25 million to help those who were infected with HIV because of contaminated blood. We have actually raised that since the election to over £100 million, and we are currently consulting all the groups about how best to use that money. We will actually be doing more than we said at the time of the election, which is necessary because these people have suffered through no fault of their own.
Hillsborough

12.39 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Hillsborough stadium disaster, the determinations and findings of the fresh inquests presided over by Sir John Goldring, and the steps that will now take place.

Twenty-seven years ago, the terrible events of Saturday 15 April 1989 shocked this country and devastated a community. That afternoon, as thousands of fans were preparing to watch the FA cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, a crush developed in the central pens of the Leppings Lane terrace. Ninety-six men, women and children lost their lives as a result. Hundreds more were injured, and many were left traumatised.

It was this country’s worst disaster at a sporting event. For the families and survivors, the search to get to the truth of what happened on that day has been long and arduous. They observed the judicial inquiry led by Lord Justice Taylor. They gave evidence to the original inquests, which recorded a verdict of accidental death. They have seen further scrutiny, reviews and a private prosecution. They suffered the injustice of hearing the victims— their loved ones and fellow supporters—being blamed. They have heard the shocking conclusions of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, and they have now once again given evidence to the fresh inquests presided over by Sir John Goldring.

I have met members of the Hillsborough families on a number of occasions and, in their search for truth and justice, I have never failed to be struck by their extraordinary dignity and determination. I do not think it is possible for any of us truly to understand what they have been through—not only in losing their loved ones in such horrific circumstances that day, but in hearing finding after finding over 27 years telling them something that they believed to be fundamentally untrue. Quite simply, they have never given up.

I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who has campaigned so tirelessly over the years on the families’ behalf, and also to the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Halton (Derek Twigg), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

Yesterday, the fresh inquest into the deaths at Hillsborough gave its determinations and findings. Its establishment followed the report of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, chaired by Bishop James Jones. The contents of that report were so significant that it led to the new inquests and to two major new criminal investigations: one by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which examined the actions of the police in the aftermath of Hillsborough, and a second criminal investigation, Operation Resolve, led by Jon Stoddart, the former chief constable of Durham.

Since the fresh inquests opened in Warrington on 31 March 2014, the jury has heard 296 days of evidence. They ran for more than two years and were part of the longest running inquest process in British legal history.

I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking the jury for the important task it has undertaken and the significant civic duty the jurors have performed.

I will turn now to the jury’s determinations and findings. In its deliberations, the jury was asked to answer 14 general questions covering the role of South Yorkshire police, the South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance Service, Sheffield Wednesday football club and Hillsborough stadium’s engineers, Eastwood and Partners. In addition, the jury was also required to answer two questions specific to each of the individual deceased relating to the time and medical cause of their death. I would like to put on the record the jury’s determinations in full. They are as follows.

Question 1: do you agree with the following statement, which is intended to summarise the basic facts of the disaster?

“Ninety-six people died as a result of the Disaster at Hillsborough Stadium on 15 April 1989 due to crushing in the central pens of the Leppings Lane Terrace, following the admission of a large number of supporters to the Stadium through exit gates.”

Yes.

Question 2: was there any error or omission in police planning and preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match?

Yes.

Question 3: was there any error or omission in policing on the day of the match which caused or contributed to a dangerous situation developing at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?

Yes.

Question 4: was there any error or omission by commanding officers which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace?

Yes.

Question 5: when the order was given to open the exit gates at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium, was there any error or omission by the commanding officers in the control box which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace?

Yes.

Question 6: are you satisfied, so that you are sure, that those who died in the disaster were unlawfully killed?

Yes.

Question 7: was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?

No.

Further to question 7: was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?

No.

Question 8: were there any features of the design, construction and layout of the stadium which you consider were dangerous or defective and which caused or contributed to the disaster?

Yes.
Question 9: was there any error or omission in the safety certification and oversight of Hillsborough stadium that caused or contributed to the disaster?

Yes.

Question 10: was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday Football Club and its staff on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match?

Yes.

Question 11: was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday Football Club and its staff on 15 April 1989 which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed at the Leppings Lane turnstiles and in the west terrace?

No.

Further to question 11: was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday Football Club and its staff on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the disaster?

Yes.

Question 12: should Eastwood and Partners have done more to detect and advise on any unsafe or unsatisfactory features of Hillsborough stadium which caused or contributed to the disaster?

Yes.

Question 13: after the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the police which caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster?

Yes.

Question 14: after the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the ambulance service, SYMAS, which caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster?

Yes.

Finally, the jury also recorded the cause and time of death for each of the 96 men, women and children who died at Hillsborough. In all but one case, the jury recorded a time bracket running beyond the 3.15 pm cut-off point adopted by the coroner at the original inquests. These determinations were published yesterday by the coroner, and I would urge the reading of each and every part in order to understand fully the outcome of the inquests.

The jury also heard evidence about the valiant efforts made by many of the fans to rescue those caught up in the crush. Their public spiritedness is to be commended and I am sure that the House will want to take this opportunity to recognise what they did in those terrible circumstances. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

Clearly, the jury’s determination that those who died were unlawfully killed is of great public importance. It overturns in the starkest way possible the verdict of accidental death returned at the original inquests. However, the jury’s findings do not, of course, amount to a finding of criminal liability, and no one should impute criminal liability to anyone while the ongoing investigations are still pending.

Elsewhere, the jury noted that commanding officers should have ordered the closure of the central tunnel before the opening of gate C was requested, as pens 3 and 4 were full. They should have established the number of fans still to enter the stadium after 2.30 pm, and they failed to recognise that pens 3 and 4 were at capacity before gate C was opened.

Although the inquests have concluded, this is not the end of the process. The decision about whether any criminal prosecution or prosecutions can be brought forward will be made by the Crown Prosecution Service on the basis of evidence gathered as part of the two ongoing investigations. That decision is not constrained in any way by the jury’s conclusions.

The House will understand that I cannot comment in detail on matters that may lead to a criminal investigation. I can, however, say that the offences under investigation include gross negligence manslaughter, misconduct in public office, perverting the course of justice and perjury, as well as offences under the Safety of Sports Grounds Act 1975 and the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.

I know that those responsible for the police and Independent Police Complaints Commission investigations anticipate that they will conclude the criminal investigations by the turn of the year. We must allow them to complete their work in a timely and thorough manner, and we must be mindful not to prejudice the outcome in any way.

I have always been clear that the Government will support the families in their quest for justice, so throughout the ongoing investigations we will ensure that support remains in place in three ways.

First, the family forums, which have provided the families with a regular and structured means of engaging with the investigative teams and the CPS, will continue. They will remain under Bishop James Jones’s chairmanship, in a similar format, but will reflect the fact that they will be operating after the inquests. The CPS, the IPCC and Operation Resolve will remain part of the forums.

Secondly, now that the inquests have concluded, it is the intention to reconstitute the Hillsborough article 2 reference group, whose work has been in abeyance during the course of the inquests, under revised terms of reference. The group has two members: Sir Stephen Sedley, a retired lord justice of appeal, and Dr Silvia Casale, an independent criminologist.

Thirdly, we want to ensure that the legal representation scheme for the bereaved families continues. This was put in place, with funding from the Government, following the original inquests’ verdicts being quashed. Discussions are currently taking place with the families’ legal representatives to see how best the scheme can be continued.

In addition, I am keen that we understand and learn from the families’ experiences. I have therefore asked Bishop James, who is my adviser on Hillsborough, to write a report which draws on these experiences. This report will be published in due course to ensure that the full perspective of those most affected by the Hillsborough disaster is not lost.

I would like to express my thanks to Bishop James again for his invaluable advice over the years. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] There is further work to be done, so I have asked Bishop James to remain as my adviser, and I am pleased to say that he has agreed to do so.

The conclusion of the inquests brings to an end an important step since the publication of the Hillsborough Independent Panel’s report. Thanks to that report and now the determinations of the inquests, we know the
truth of what happened on that day at Hillsborough. Naturally, the families will want to reflect on yesterday's historic outcome, which is of national significance.

I am clear that this raises significant issues for the way that the state and its agencies deal with disasters. Once the formal investigations are concluded, we should step back, reflect and act, if necessary, so that we can better respond to disasters and ensure that the suffering of families is taken into account.

But I want to end by saying this. For 27 years, the families and survivors of Hillsborough have fought for justice. They have faced hostility, opposition and obfuscation, and the authorities, which should have been trusted, have laid blame and tried to protect themselves, instead of acting in the public interest.

But the families have never faltered in their pursuit of the truth. Thanks to their actions, they have brought about a proper reinvestigation and a thorough re-evaluation of what happened at Hillsborough. That they have done so is extraordinary. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to their courage, determination and resolve. We should also remember those who have, sadly, passed away while still waiting for justice. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

No one should have to endure what the families and survivors have been through. No one should have to suffer the loss of their loved ones through such appalling circumstances, and no one should have to fight year after year, decade after decade, in search of the truth.

I hope that, for the families and survivors, who have been through such difficult times, yesterday's determinations will bring them closer towards the peace they have been so long denied. I commend this statement to the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

12.55 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her powerful statement and her kind words. At long last, justice—for the 96, for their families, for all Liverpool supporters, for an entire city. But it took too long in coming, and the struggle for it took too great a toll on too many. Now, those responsible must be held to account for 96 unlawful deaths and a 27-year cover-up.

Thankfully, the jury saw through the lies. I am sure—to repeat what the Home Secretary said—that the House will join me in thanking the jury for their devotion to this task and for giving two years of their lives to this important public duty.

When it came, their verdict was simple, clear, powerful and emphatic, but it begged the question: how could something so obvious have taken so long? There are three reasons: first, a police force that has consistently put protecting itself over and above protecting people harmed by Hillsborough; secondly, collusion between that force and a complicit print media; and thirdly, a flawed judicial system that gives the upper hand to those in authority, over and above ordinary people. Let me take each of those issues in turn, starting with South Yorkshire police.

Can the Home Secretary assure me that there will be no holding back in pursuing prosecutions? The CPS has said that files will be submitted by December. While we understand the complexity, can she urge it to do whatever it can to bring that date forward?

Of course, the behaviour of some officers, while reprehensible, was not necessarily chargeable, but, through retirement, police officers can still escape misconduct proceedings. In her Policing and Crime Bill, the Home Secretary proposes a 12-month period after retirement where proceedings can be initiated, but one of the lessons of Hillsborough is that there can be no arbitrary time limits on justice and accountability. Will the Home Secretary work with me to insert a Hillsborough clause into her Bill, ending the scandal of retirement as an escape route and of wrongdoers claiming full pensions? Will she join me in making sure that that applies retrospectively?

The much bigger question for South Yorkshire police to answer today is this: why, at this inquest, did they go back on their 2012 public apology? When the Lord Chief Justice quashed the original inquest, he requested that the new one not degenerate into an “adversarial battle”. Sadly, that is exactly what happened. Shamefully, the cover-up continued in that Warrington courtroom. Millions of pounds of public money was spent retelling discredited lies against Liverpool supporters. Lawyers for retired officers threw disgusting slurs around; those for today’s force tried to establish that others were responsible for the opening of the gate. If the police had chosen to maintain their apology, this inquest would have been much shorter. But they did not, and they put the families through hell once again. It pains me to say it, but the NHS, through the Yorkshire ambulance service, was guilty of the same.

Does the Home Secretary agree that, because of his handling of this inquest, the position of the South Yorkshire chief constable is now untenable? Does she further agree that the problems go deeper? I promised the families the full truth about Hillsborough. I do not believe they will have it until we know the truth about Orgreave. This force used the same underhand tactics against its own people in the aftermath of the miners’ strike that it would later use to more deadly effect against the people of Liverpool. There has been an IPCC report on Orgreave, but parts of it are redacted. It has been put to me that those parts contain evidence of direct links between Orgreave and Hillsborough.

This is a time for transparency, not secrecy—time for the people of South Yorkshire to know the full truth about their police force. So will the Home Secretary accept the legal submission from the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign and set up a disclosure process? This force has not learned and has not changed. Let me be clear. I do not blame the ordinary police officers—the men and women who did their very best on that day and who today are out there keeping our streets safe—but I do blame their leadership and culture, which seems rotten to the core. Orgreave, Hillsborough, Rotherham: how much more evidence do we need before we act? So will the Home Secretary now order the fundamental reform of this force and consider all potential options?

Let me turn to collusion between police and the media. The malicious briefings given in the aftermath were devastatingly efficient. They created a false version of events which lingered until yesterday. No one in the police or media has ever been held to account for the incalculable harm they caused in smearing a whole city in its moment of greatest grief. Imagine how it felt to be my constituent Lee Walls, who came through gate C just before 3 pm with his friend Carl Brown. Carl died
but Lee survived, but days later he had to read that he was to blame. Given the weakness of the press regulatory system back then, the survivors of this tragedy had no ability to correct the lies. But is it any different today? If a tragedy like Hillsborough were to happen now, victims would not be able quickly to undo the damage of a misleading front page. Leveson recommended a second-stage inquiry to look at the sometimes unhealthy relationship between police and press. I know the Hillsborough families feel strongly that this should be taken forward. So will the Government end the delay and honour the Prime Minister's promises to the victims of press intrusion?

I turn to the judicial system. I attended this inquest on many occasions. I saw how hard it was on the families: trapped for two years in a temporary courtroom; told to show no emotion as police lawyers smeared the dead and those who survived—beyond cruel. I welcome Bishop James's new role in explaining just how cruel this was to the House and to the country. The original inquest was similarly brutal, but that did not even get to the truth. Just as the first inquest muddied the waters after the clarity of the Taylor report, so this inquest, at moments, lost sight of the Hillsborough Independent Panel report. One of the reasons why it produced a different outcome, though, is that this time the families had the best lawyers in the land. If they could have afforded them back in 1990, history might have been very different. At many inquests today there is often a mismatch between the legal representation of public bodies and those of the bereaved. Why should the authorities be able to spend public money like water to protect themselves when families have no such help? So will the Government consider further reforms to the coronial system, including giving the bereaved at least equal legal funding as public bodies? This, the longest case in English legal history, must mark a watershed in how victims are treated.

The last question is for us in this House. What kind of country leaves people who did no more than wave off their loved ones to a football match still sitting in a courtroom 27 years later begging for the reputations of their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and fathers? The answer is one that needs now to do some deep soul-searching. This cover-up went right to the top. It was the last question is for us in this House. What kind of country leaves people who did no more than wave off their loved ones to a football match still sitting in a courtroom 27 years later begging for the reputations of their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and fathers? The answer is one that needs now to do some deep soul-searching. This cover-up went right to the top. It was one that could have only been done by such a system for so long shows steel and determination but also an affection for their lost loved ones and a passionate desire for justice for those who died that is, as I said, extraordinary. I think we will rarely see the like again. On the right hon. Gentleman's individual questions, he asked me about the time for the files to be prepared by the two investigations. Both Operation Resolve and the IPCC say that they expect to have those case files prepared by the end of the year—I recognise that for the families this is a further wait—and there will be then a period of time for the Crown Prosecution Service to consider them. I think everybody recognises—including those bodies, because they do of course interact with the families through the family forums—the importance of doing this in a timely fashion, but it is also important that it is done properly and thoroughly. I do not want to see anything in the way of this being done in the right way.

On the retirement of police officers, I have always felt that it is wrong that police officers should be able to avoid misconduct or gross misconduct proceedings by being able to retire or resign. That is why we have already changed the disciplinary arrangements; and, as the right hon. Gentleman said, we have a clause in the Bill to ensure that it is right that police officers should be able to retire or resign. That is why we have already changed the disciplinary arrangements; and, as the right hon. Gentleman said, we have a clause in the Bill to ensure that it is done properly and thoroughly. I do not want to see anything in the way of this being done in the right way.

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The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Orgreave. Together with the hon. Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), I met representatives from Orgreave last year. I then received a submission from Michael Mansfield QC on behalf of the relevant group, and that is being considered.
We have always said that a decision on Leveson 2 will be made when all the investigations have been completed. Some cases are still being considered, so that point has not arrived.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the availability of funding for families at inquests. That is precisely the sort of issue that can be encompassed in the work that Bishop James Jones will do in hearing from the families about their direct experience and reflecting that to Government. As I said, it is right and appropriate that we then take a clear look at what further action we need to take.

Nobody should be in any doubt about the experience that the families had to go through at the inquests in not being able to show any emotion. The right hon. Gentleman referred to that. Also, for 27 years, many people did not know what had actually happened to their loved ones. They did not know how or at what time they died. Those details have come out only through the inquest. It must have been particularly difficult to sit through that, but I hope that the families have now found some peace through the truth coming out.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am very pleased that the efforts of the families and of the independent review panel, which did such outstanding work, have contributed to the outcome that entirely vindicates the position that they both adopted. I am also pleased if the small Department that I led at the time played a role in bringing that about.

The key issue is not that people make mistakes, because in human society mistakes will always be made, sometimes with catastrophic consequences. The real issue that should concern the House is that, in a society that counts itself as civilised and subject to the rule of law, it appears that for such a long time it was impossible to get redress and a proper examination of the issues. I regret to say that this is not a unique event, as there have been other occasions in the House when we have had to consider the implications of similar events in other circumstances. Bloody Sunday springs to mind.

The lesson that the House needs to take away is that we must subject ourselves and our institutions to quite a lot of self-examination and maintain that if we are to ensure that we do not have a repetition of this deplorable episode. I am not sure about the best way to do that. I simply say to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—that she has done everything right in respect of this, and I commend her approach—that it is a question not just of the systems that we have in place but of some of the underlying attitudes. When uncomfortable truths float across the horizon, there is a temptation to try to brush them away because they confront us with difficulties that make us uncomfortable. If we tackle that, we can ensure not only that we do justice to the families in this matter, but that, in so far as is humanly possible, we do not repeat this.

Mrs May: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his remarks and for the role that he played in ensuring that fresh inquests could take place. He is right: it is a question not just of systems but of attitudes. I have seen that in other areas, for example, in the work that we are doing on deaths in custody and in hearing from families in those cases. As I said, often, the institutions that should be the ones that people can trust to get to the truth combine to protect themselves. They have a natural instinct to look inwards and protect themselves rather than doing what is right in the public interest. My right hon. and learned Friend is also right that we can change the systems all we like, but it is really about changing attitudes and saying that those institutions are there to serve the public and that they should always put the public interest first.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for her immensely dignified and thorough statement. I also welcome the jury’s determination and findings.

On behalf of the Scottish National party, I would like to acknowledge the heroic struggle for justice of the friends and relatives of the 96 dead. I also acknowledge the heroic struggle for justice of the shadow Home Secretary and others on the official Opposition Benches.

Today, we must also remember the 96 dead: decent people from all walks of life who were failed by the police and the emergency services—the very ones who should have been there to help them in their hour of need. Yesterday’s verdict follows 27 years of concealment of the truth and mudslinging at dead innocents. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) that Hillsborough must rank alongside Bloody Sunday as one of the most disgraceful establishment cover-ups of our time.

The ruling confirms that some police officers behaved abominably and I note the shadow Home Secretary’s words about their being from the same force that so brutally repressed the miners’ strike. I was very pleased to hear what the Home Secretary said about that. Will she acknowledge the impact that the behaviour of some police officers has had on public confidence in the police and assure us that such actions can never happen again?

I am sure that elements of the media will also have learned a lesson, but, as the shadow Home Secretary said, will they ever be held to account? I think that the Conservative party has learned a lesson from this because, as has been said, the Home Secretary’s actions have been exemplary when compared with the attitude of the Cabinet at the time. Will she assure us that such a miscarriage of justice will never be allowed to happen again?

Justice delayed is justice denied. Now we have the truth, but accountability must follow, so what happens next is crucial. Does the Home Secretary agree that, where there are strongly founded allegations that police officers may have perverted the course of justice, or given misleading information to the media, MPs and this Parliament, or perjured themselves, appropriate action and prosecutions must be seen to follow swiftly?

I also echo the shadow Home Secretary’s comments about concerns that 30 police officers avoided disciplinary action by retiring to enjoy a full pension. Will the Home Secretary take steps to ensure that that cannot happen again?

I welcome the Home Secretary’s intention to reconstitute the Hillsborough article 2 reference group—article 2 of the European convention on human rights. Without the Human Rights Act and the procedural obligation on
the state to investigate deaths properly under article 2 of the ECHR, the second inquest would never have happened, and the families might never have got justice. Will she and the Government please bear that in mind when they consider their attitude towards human rights and the ECHR in this Union of nations?

Mrs May: The hon. and learned Lady mentioned public confidence in the police and it is correct to say that this shattered some people’s confidence in the police. The representative from the IPPC made the point to the media yesterday that for some people in Liverpool, their trust in the police was severely damaged, if not destroyed, as a result of what they had seen. However, in talking about the actions of police officers at Hillsborough that day, we should recognise that some officers actively tried to help the fans and do the right thing.

On police responsibilities and attitudes, the College of Policing has introduced a code of ethics for police. We need to ensure that that is embedded throughout police forces, but it is an important step forward.

The hon. and learned Lady asked about ensuring that prosecutions take place where there is evidence of criminal activity. Of course, that is entirely a decision for the CPS. We must leave it to make that decision independently, as we must leave the police investigation and the IPPC investigation to prepare their cases independently.

On the hon. and learned Lady’s final point, I simply observe that we have had the coronial process in the UK for a considerable time, and the right to request an inquest and to request fresh inquests long before the ECHR was put in place.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I, too, pay tribute to all those who worked so hard to see that justice was done in this case, and to the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary for their very balanced approach?

Does the Home Secretary agree that it is important that we learn lessons? For example, although the court process is inevitably stressful for victims and witnesses, as I know, none the less in this case the coroner and the jury did their duty and have proved that the jury system can be capable of grappling with the most complex and distressing of cases. That is to the system’s credit.

Will the Home Secretary also look at ensuring that there is proper equality of arms with regard to access to justice on such matters? That is fundamental to our rule of law? The Crown Prosecution Service must now consider and deal with a considerable volume of work and material. I note, for example, that some 238 police statements are said to have been altered in one way or another. Will the Home Secretary therefore discuss with the Treasury and my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General whether some blockbuster funding could be made available to deal with the pressures of resourcing the Crown Prosecution Service in this case, and whether the approach could be similar to that taken towards the Serious Fraud Office when it has to undertake major and unexpected inquiries?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend will have noted that the Attorney General is sitting on the Treasury Bench and has therefore heard what he said about funding this sort of case. On my hon. Friend’s first point, he is absolutely right about the importance of the jury system. This shows the value of our jury system, and I repeat what I said in my statement: for people on the jury to have been prepared to take two years to ensure that justice was done in this case is absolutely commendable. They have shown considerable civic duty and our thanks go to them.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): May I say first of all that the response by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) to the statement will reverberate throughout Merseyside and all around the country? I also praise the Home Secretary for all she has done to bring about yesterday’s momentous decision: thank you from the families.

On 15 April 1989, as fans walked away from an FA cup semi-final in Sheffield, we knew then that the disaster was not our fault. Almost immediately, however, lies and smears were being peddled, and within hours an orchestrated cover-up was in full swing. It took political intervention to force the judicial process of this country to take 27 years to recognise what we knew from day one—that Hillsborough was not an accident; that fans did not open a gate; that drunken and ticketless fans did not turn up late, hellbent on getting in; and that it was not caused by a drunken, “tanked-up mob”. Instead, 96 people were unlawfully killed.

Those who doubted must now recognise the true story of the efforts of my fellow supporters and their acts of self-sacrifice and heroism as they battled to save the lives of their fellow fans, and consign to the dustbin of history the lurid tabloid headlines that vilified them.

Despite the inquest being adversarial, not inquisitorial, yesterday’s verdict was unequivocal: Liverpool supporters were totally absolved of any blame and did not contribute to the disaster in any way. As someone once said: “I cherish the hope that as time goes on you will recognise the truth of what I say.”

Will the Home Secretary join me in paying tribute to the families, survivors, campaigners and supporters who fought for truth and justice; to the solidarity of those who stood shoulder to shoulder, whether red or blue, for nearly three decades; and to the men and women of a proud city who never gave up until they got justice for the 96?

Mrs May: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute not only to the families and the way in which they kept the flame of hope for truth and justice alive over 27 years, but to the city and people of Liverpool, who have shown solidarity and will continue to do so over the coming days. As the hon. Gentleman has said, regardless of their footballing affiliations they recognised the injustice that had been done. They came together, they supported the families, and truth has now been found.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): What we can learn from the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) who raised the question of the Stephen Lawrence investigation is that people can come to Members of Parliament—either as families or as members of the professional services, including the ambulance service and the police—and if there is some kind of cover-up going on, we can hope that the leaders of any professions...
involved, including the police and the NHS, will pay attention when an MP comes along with them to say that action needs to be taken.

There was a series of three mistakes at Hillsborough. The first was allowing the game to take place in a stadium when people knew it was not right. The second was the actions that happened then, which may have been mistakes, and worst of all was the cover-up. How can more than 230 statements by the police be changed, presumably in the police service, without people being able to say to Members of Parliament, “This is wrong: there is a cover-up and it needs turning over and investigating”? Such things need to be brought out into what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health calls intelligent transparency. I think that that is the lesson from now on.

**Mrs May:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Of course, as a Member of this House he has taken forward causes that others have stood against and tried to resist, and he has been successful in that work. He is absolutely right. What came out of the independent panel report was astonishing. People were truly shocked by the fact that they had heard that statements had been altered in order to show a different picture from what had actually happened. That is appalling and it should never happen again.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab):** May I put on the record my thanks to the Home Secretary for her statement, and praise the magnificent courage and steadfastness of the families of the 96 in their campaign?

After the publication of the 2012 independent panel report, I reread my match-day programme from 15 April 1989 and was struck by this comment by the chairman of Sheffield Wednesday football club:

“As you look around Hillsborough you will appreciate why it has been regarded for so long as the perfect venue for all kinds of events.”

Such statements underline the complacency and total disregard for the safety of football supporters.

I have two brief questions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) mentioned the current chief constable of South Yorkshire police. Is the Home Secretary aware that the statement he made in 2012 apologising to fans is still on the website? He said:

“I am profoundly sorry for the way the force failed... and I am doubly sorry for the injustice that followed”,

and yet the fools representing the police at the inquest went over the same argument again, putting the families through torture.

Finally, of course we should focus on South Yorkshire police, but what about West Midlands police? It was responsible for the investigation and, as we have seen from yesterday’s result, it was a sham, complacent and a complete waste of time. What is the Home Secretary doing to make sure that it is held accountable for what it did?

**Mrs May:** As the hon. Gentleman says, the comment from the match-day programme shows the extraordinary complacency. As I indicated in my statement, there were several questions that related not just to Sheffield Wednesday football club, but to the engineers who designed the stadium. The jury was very clear that there were problems with the design of the stadium and with the certification process. There were some very real questions for those in authority of various sorts who allowed a game to take place in a ground with those particular problems.

Obviously, the IPCC is looking at the aftermath of the event. Operation Resolve is looking at the lead-up to the deaths of the 96 men, women and children. In doing so, it will, of course, look across the board at the work of police officers. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my understanding is that the evidence taken will cover的事情 done by West Midlands police as well as South Yorkshire police.

**Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con):** I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend and to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), but particularly to the families of the 96 victims, for their herculean efforts to bring about the result that we saw yesterday. Does my right hon. Friend agree that slurs were made against the families; that those were an injustice; and that it is right that they are now recognised as smears?

**Mrs May:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Of course, those slurs were not just made at the time; they continued for far too long. The families and supporters had to endure not just the terrible tragedy itself, but the further injustice that, consistently, the Liverpool fans were blamed for something that was not their fault. The verdict that came out yesterday was absolutely clear: the fans did not contribute to this disaster.

**Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op):** The inquest verdict proclaimed the truth and exposed the deceit, including the wicked lie that the fans were responsible for their own deaths. We should never, ever forget that the truth has been finally exposed only because of the commitment of the bereaved families, who were supported by the city of Liverpool—whatever the rest of the country might have thought—in their determined campaign for truth. I, too thank the Home Secretary and the former Attorney General for the decisive steps that they have taken to make sure that justice has now come out. Following the Home Secretary’s very supportive comments about the action she intends to take to support the bereaved families as we move from exposure of the truth to accountability, will the Home Secretary do all in her power to ensure that now that we have the truth, real accountability will follow?

**Mrs May:** I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and she is absolutely right. The city of Liverpool stood by the families when the rest of the country took a different view about what had happened in that terrible tragedy. I am very clear that we need to ensure that the proper processes are followed for the investigations and for the Crown Prosecution Service decisions about whether criminal charges should be brought. The truth was there with the independent panel’s report, and I hope that people feel that justice has been seen with the verdicts that came out, but accountability is the next step, and that rests with the independent investigations and the Crown Prosecution Service.

**Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con):** I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, and I think that she and the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) have been beacons of hope during this tragic period.
The strength of the families makes me proud to be a Scouser. There is a lot of talk about justice, but I do not think it is justice that it has taken 27 years for the fans to be found not guilty of something that was not their fault. It is not justice that the city, the fans and families were kicked when they were on their knees and at their lowest point. It is not justice that there was an establishment cover-up. Does the Home Secretary agree that real justice starts when the individuals responsible are personally prosecuted?

Mrs May: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and he is right. It must be very difficult for the families, who have suffered over those 27 years but have kept true to their cause and their belief in the reality of what happened at the Hillsborough stadium in 1989. They must have felt terrible when they were, as my hon. Friend said, kicked constantly over those 27 years. This is not just about finding the truth; it is about accountability. As I just indicated in response to the previous question, that process of accountability is now in the hands of the two criminal investigations and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The inquest findings were very clear that on the day of the disaster, South Yorkshire police failed completely in a number of respects. Even more alarming, in some respects, were the attempts to cover up those failings afterwards. May I reflect on the comment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) that this is no reflection on the important work done by the ordinary community officers of South Yorkshire police on a day-to-day basis for the safety and security of my constituents and the residents of South Yorkshire? Will the Home Secretary therefore offer complete support to the PCC in South Yorkshire to take the force through a very difficult time, recognising that the complete command structure of the force will change, in one way or another, during the next year, and that it will need every bit of outside support it can get from the Home Secretary and others?

Mrs May: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right to say that we should recognise the work that is done daily by South Yorkshire police officers to keep their communities safe and to cut crime. May I also take this opportunity to recognise the support that was given by people living in Sheffield to the fans and others who suffered from this tragedy on the day?

The hon. Gentleman is right that the South Yorkshire police force will not only have to deal with the outcome of the Hillsborough findings; the report on Rotherham raised a number of issues around the South Yorkshire force. The hon. Gentleman asks me to provide support to the police and crime commissioner. Next week, the people in the South Yorkshire force area will go to the polls to elect the police and crime commissioner for the next four years. We will talk thereafter to the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable about the future of the force, but it is for those two individuals, primarily, to look at the structures that they need and to ensure that the force is doing the job that it needs to do on a daily basis.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary and the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for what they have done on the matter. I also commend all the Members from Liverpool who have taken part in debates. Everyone knows my connection with football and with what happened on that day, which I have spoken about in the House. Football suffered massively on that horrible day. The family of football looked on that tragedy and changed many things, from stadium safety to how things are placed around football games.

Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), I am concerned about the culture that still exists in South Yorkshire police. From statements on its website and statements that it has made, I fear that it still has not learned all the lessons of that tragedy all that time ago. Will the Home Secretary comment on what is going on in South Yorkshire police force?

Mrs May: I think everybody will be disappointed and, indeed, concerned by some of the remarks that have been made by South Yorkshire police today. There was a very clear verdict yesterday in relation to the decisions that were taken by police officers and the action of police officers on 15 April 1989, and I urge South Yorkshire police force to recognise the verdict of the jury. Yes, it must get on with the day-to-day job of policing in its force area, but it needs to look at what happened—at what the verdicts have shown—recognise the truth and be willing to accept that.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and, in particular, for her decision when she came into office in 2010 to allow the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel to continue. That has been absolutely crucial to this outcome. When I was first elected in 1997, my constituents Phil Hammond, Doreen Jones and Jenni Hicks were some of the first people to come to see me. They were then part of the executive of the Hillsborough Family Support Group, and between them, they lost five family members. They came to see me about the disaster, and I have campaigned with them ever since to have the truth acknowledged and to have justice done.

We all knew the truth; it just seems to be the legal system in this country—I speak as a lawyer—that has been unable to get to the truth and accept the truth. For 27 years, it failed the victims at every turn. Almost everything that could go wrong in a legal case went wrong in those 27 years. Yesterday, the legal system finally did its job, but it has more to do to hold to account those who we now know for absolute certain are responsible. The Home Secretary has more to do to deal with the appalling culture and behaviour of South Yorkshire police, which persists to this day.

This disaster was filmed live and shown on television, and within months the interim report of the Taylor inquiry put the blame squarely where it actually lay—it did not get everything right, but it was substantially correct—but for 27 years the families of those who died have had to defend every day the reputations of their lost loved ones and of their friends and other people living in Liverpool who have been blamed for what happened.

It was only the panel taking this out of the legal system that has led to the truth being acknowledged more widely than it was, and to its then being fed back into the legal system. There is a deep issue about our
legal system, so will the Home Secretary now commit to supporting Lord Michael Wills’s Public Advocate Bill to ensure that the victims of public disasters—there will be more in future—are never again forced to spend decades of their lives fighting smears, lies, official denials, indifference and cover-ups from public authorities? We have to make sure this can never happen again.

Mrs May: The hon. Lady is right that we need to stand back and ask what it is about our system that actually enabled this to happen and enabled people to suffer in this way over those 27 years. One of the reasons why I have asked Bishop James Jones to work with the families, to hear from them their experiences, is obviously to try to learn from that and to see what steps we need to take in response.

One of the things that has come of this is that the panel model is one that can be used elsewhere. I have indeed used that model, with fewer members, in relation to the necessity of looking into the killing of Daniel Morgan, where again the legal system, through a number of cases, has failed to get to the truth. I think it is a method that we could use on other occasions.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the statement she has made today. It is painfully clear that, for over 20 years, hon. Members in this place did not take the opportunities available to them to bring the matter to this Chamber and therefore to spread the light of transparency on something terrible that had happened. I just want to put on the record the role played by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who is far too humble to talk about his role. When we were first elected in 2010, he very quickly took a group of us in front of the Backbench Business Committee in a Committee Room and secured a debate that made sure light was shone on what was a terrible incident, and we have arrived where we are today. I thank him for that.

Mrs May: My hon. Friend has recognised the particular role played by a single Member of this House. I might say that, over the years, a number of Members of this House have raised this issue. The fact that authority did not listen to the issue being raised is entirely separate.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): May I, too, add my thanks to the Home Secretary for the crucial role she has played in bringing this matter to a reasonable conclusion at this point? May I ask her, alongside others, to consider the extent to which the lazy, dishonest, inaccurate stereotyping of football fans, in collusion with some sections of the media, gave some credibility—wrongly—to the original failed inquest? I attended one day of the inquest. It was agony for the families to sit there and listen day after day to their loved ones who had died being denigrated in the way that the questions were put. Does she agree with me that many other failures result from the lazy assumption that football fans in general and the people of Liverpool in particular were in some way culpable in a matter that was completely beyond their control? When she asks the bishop and others to look at the implications of all this, will she ask him to look at this question: why is it that some sections of the media and some sections of the public services, including the police and the ambulance service, still feel that they can casually disregard the truth by accepting lazy stereotypes?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. He is absolutely right. There was an image of football fans that people held to regardless of what they saw going on in front of their very eyes. I was struck when I heard the commentary—I think on Radio 2—that was taking place at the time, as the tragedy unfolded. Even at that time, some of the commenting and some of the assumptions being made were about unruly fans, rather than about people who were crying out for help as they were dying. To see the police actually being lined up to form a line against public order problems when there were people whose lives were being lost at the time shocks and appals us all now. He is right that we should never allow casual stereotypes to get in the way of the truth.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I obviously do not represent Liverpool, but I was so fortunate to live there for the best part of the 1990s. It is a wonderful city, with decent people—thoroughly decent people—and I believe that the way in which the families have conducted themselves over nearly 30 years has demonstrated that to those of us who knew it and to everybody else. I was very fortunate to take over one of the student unions in Liverpool in the ’90s, and I was told in no uncertain scouse terms why we did not stock all newspapers in the student union shop. I have never forgotten that, and many shops and stores in Liverpool still do not stock the full complement of newspapers, as Liverpool Members will know.

What does the Home Secretary think is the main lesson that we should learn from the state’s failure to do justice for the 96? Does she think that some elements of the British press—they have apologised several times since, although I think that that means little to many, or probably all, of the families in Liverpool—should take a long, hard look at themselves?

Mrs May: I think that that is important. It is important when information is spread to the public through the media that the veracity of that information is an issue that must be considered. My hon. Friend asks me what the overall, abiding lesson that we need to take from this is. I think it is about the whole issue that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) referred to, which is the culture and the attitude that is taken. It is about public institutions whose job is to work in the public interest, who should be institutions that can be trusted by the public and whose job is often to protect the public not, when something happens, instinctively wanting to protect themselves instead, but always having the view that whatever has happened and whatever the answer, they must actually find the truth for the public.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope the House will forgive me, but at the risk of stating the obvious, if colleagues are concerned about being able to make their own contribution, let me say that I will of course call every colleague. This is a little different from other days, and there is therefore some latitude: Members must say what they want to say. I am sorry if people have other commitments, but if Members stay in the Chamber, they will be heard.
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I put on the record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker? You have been incredibly supportive. May I, especially as chair of the all-party group on the Hillsborough disaster, thank the Home Secretary and her staff, and all those—officials, and the staff of Members of Parliament as well—who have worked to help our group function over the past four years?

Finally to know the true verdict—that these killings were unlawful—is just a huge weight lifted, but there is one more issue. The campaign for justice has never been for Liverpool fans alone. Shirts of all different teams were worn at the memorial service. For the 25th anniversary, Members of this House from all parts of the country sent with me to Anfield the scarf of their local team. That is why, at the recent memorial service, Trevor Hicks was absolutely right to ask football fans to be “united in grief”, though rivals in the game.

I have one last thing to say: the “Murderers, murderers” chant has got to stop now. Does the Home Secretary agree that there are no excuses—we have the truth—and that those who have suffered because of the Hillsborough disaster have, frankly, now suffered enough?

Mrs May: As I indicated in my statement to the House, the question of perversion of the course of justice and perjury will be looked at, but it is for the independent Crown Prosecution Service to decide whether to bring those or any other criminal charges.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I start by paying my tribute to the families who, since before some people now in this House were even born, have had to fight the state, quite frankly. That is appalling. I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for everything she has done, and all of the Members locally who have worked for so many years. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who have been in communication with me about the support I could offer, even as a west Yorkshire MP.

To those who wonder why MPs not related to the area have found this so hard and so difficult, I say that it is because we all have families. We all have parents, uncles and aunts, and some of us have children. We all go to events to which hundreds of thousands of people go every year. If someone goes to an event, perfectly legally, we have the right to expect that the authorities will look after them. The people who died at Hillsborough on that tragic day got there early, by definition, because they were at the front of those pens. They were ticketed. It will be a stain on this society for ever more that the state said it was their fault. It was obvious from day one—from the very moment—that it could not be their fault.

I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is no longer in his place—indeed, we have debated this. He is absolutely right to say that police officers on the frontline for South Yorkshire police do an outstanding job every day and deserve our respect. But the behaviour of South Yorkshire police during this inquiry, and the subsequent comments since the verdict—a verdict that can leave no doubt in the mind of anyone in this country that those people were unlawfully killed—have been a disgrace. There is a stain on the name of South Yorkshire police that I am not sure can ever be erased.

Therefore, as controversial as this is, may I ask my right hon. Friend, working with other Members on a cross-party basis, to go away and consider—I do not expect an answer today—very seriously whether the only way of bringing back faith in policing in south...
Yorkshire, and of making sure that the officers in south Yorkshire who dedicate themselves to protecting the public can really move forward, is perhaps to merge all four Yorkshire police forces and to get rid of the name “South Yorkshire police”?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend has asked me a question that I suggest goes slightly wider than simply the issue of South Yorkshire police, as he talked about merging all four Yorkshire police forces. He is absolutely right to identify that at a football match or any other public event where arrangements have been put in place by organisers to ensure people’s safety and where there is policing, fans who have gone along expect those arrangements to keep them safe and secure. They expect arrangements to have been thought through and made properly and carefully, and the right decisions to have been taken. As he and others have said, many people who are not Liverpool fans recognise what those families went through on that day, as they themselves go to similar events, week in, week out, hoping to enjoy themselves and not expecting the sort of terrible tragedy that befell families and supporters on that terrible day.

My hon. Friend has asked me to reflect on an issue. I think he knows the Government’s position on merger of forces. As I have said, South Yorkshire police will need to look very carefully at the verdict and accept it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) on all the work they have done, along with all hon. Members of this House. It is often the role of a Member of Parliament to give a strong voice to the weak, and this has been an example of that. May I also say a word of gratitude for the kind words of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) about some of the work I have done in the past? There are comparisons between what happened to the family and friends of Stephen Lawrence and what happened to the Hillsborough families. They have certainly been strong voices and advocates for themselves, and an example to us all. They were signatories to the letter sent to the Prime Minister earlier this month asking him not to renege on his promise to implement Leveson 2. Given that it relates to the relationship between the police and the press, it would seem even more imperative that we go ahead with that part of the Leveson report. Will the Home Secretary perhaps have a word with the Prime Minister to ask him to expedite that as quickly as possible?

Mrs May: Some of the issues about the relationship between the media and the police were identified in Leveson 1, and the police have taken some actions to change some of their approaches to the media as a result. As I said earlier, we have always been very clear that any investigations taking place needed to be completed before a decision was taken about Leveson 2. Some investigations are still being undertaken, which is why at this point of time it is not appropriate to take a decision about Leveson 2.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Days like this really make us think in this place. Will my right hon. Friend commit to making sure that all the resources required to bring the criminal investigations to a speedy and thorough conclusion are brought to bear, because these families have suffered for far too long already?

Mrs May: I assure my hon. Friend that the Home Office has made funding available for Operation Resolve, and it is ensuring that the IPCC has what it needs to conduct these investigations, which will then go to the Crown Prosecution Service. Families deserve a proper, thorough process that is undertaken in a timely manner and provides them with the accountability they want.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my thanks to the Home Secretary for her statement and commitment, and thank all my colleagues for their work over so many decades on this terrible atrocity? After 27 years of pain, torment and suffering, both for the families of the 96 people who tragically lost their lives and for the survivors, at last a dark cloud is lifting. After this statement, Merseyside MPs will travel back to Liverpool to commemorate what has happened on St George’s Hall plateau, and I have no doubt that the solidarity thatprevailed in Liverpool will shine bright this evening.

I pay tribute to the campaigners who have fought tirelessly and never given up. They have endured the unendurable, and they should not have to wait any more. A moment ago the Home Secretary spoke about the work of the IPCC and the police, and the investigations that are being completed, and I echo the call from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) that the handover of files should happen as quickly as possible. Will the Home Secretary also commit to ensuring that the CPS has whatever resources it takes to expedite its work? We have the truth and we have justice; now we need accountability.

Mrs May: The Attorney General is present and has heard the hon. Lady’s comments regarding his responsibility in relation to the CPS. We want this to be done in a timely fashion, and to ensure that it is done thoroughly and properly. Having visited the work of Operation Resolve and the IPCC, I know the significant amount of material that it has had to go through. Until now, it has been supporting the coroner in the inquests, and now its focus will be on preparing those files to give to the CPS.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Although I have always lived at the other end of the country, I have always supported the coroner in the inquests, and now its focus will be on preparing those files to give to the CPS.
responsibility for this tragedy, and to smear the name of a great football club, a great city, and football fans everywhere?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is right, and as he recognised, in the rest of the country and around the globe there are not just football fans, but there are also Liverpool supporters. I cannot reiterate enough how appalling it was that it was not just organs of the state and other agencies that were involved in this. There was a general public feeling that somehow the fans must have been responsible. Question 7 of the verdict yesterday and its supplementary question were clear. The jury was asked whether there was any behaviour on the part of the football supporters which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles, or which may have caused or contributed to that situation. The answer was clear: no.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The verdicts yesterday are momentous and long overdue, and I join other Members in paying tribute to the campaigners, families, friends and survivors of what happened in Hillsborough. I warmly welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and the incredibly powerful response from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). I join him and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) in urging the Government and the Home Secretary to do everything possible to press the CPS to make its decisions as quickly as possible, commensurate with it exercising proper independent consideration of the facts.

Mrs May: It is certainly the Government’s desire, intention and hope that the CPS will make its decisions as quickly as possible, commensurate with it exercising proper independent consideration of the facts.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What hits home about this tragedy is that anyone who has been an away fan or stood on a terrace can picture themselves in that tunnel, on the way to the pen, looking forward to the match, hoping to see their team win, but it ending up in tragedy. Therefore, when those fans were smeared, all of us were smeared. It could have been our club, town or city—only the finger of fate meant that it was Liverpool. Does the Home Secretary agree that looking back, steps could have been taken to avoid this tragedy? When I spoke to Coventry City fans who attended matches at Hillsborough in 1987, they recounted some of the issues that they experienced during those games but that were not addressed, with tragic consequences. After 27 years it is time for some of the organisations involved to stop the denials, accept the verdict and the truth, and move on to ensure that those responsible are finally held to account.

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the issues relating to the stadium, and many people will think it not just surprising but incredible that a game of that size took place in a stadium which, as I understand, did not have the proper safety certification. People will question forever how the relevant authorities can have allowed that to happen, and there are issues not just about the police and ambulance service, but about the football club and the design of the stadium.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): As a Merseyside MP and a Liverpool supporter, I thank the Home Secretary for what is almost the last chapter of an unbearably sad book. She must recognise that in this world, justice does not compensate for loss and grief. Apart from the judicial process, what more needs to be done to support the families and for closure?

Mrs May: Obviously, the next stage of the investigation and the CPS is important for the families, and I hope that they will continue to work with Bishop James Jones through the family forums, and on his work to hear about their experiences. That process is important for the families, and also for us, so that we ensure that we have heard their experiences and can take away from that any lessons that need to be learned and any action that the Government need to take.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): May I add my thanks to the Home Secretary for her excellent statement, and for her work on the Orgreave truth and justice campaign? I look forward to her response on that. Having served as a special constable in the Metropolitan Police Service, I recognise the institutional defensiveness that was mentioned yesterday by the families, and I fear that that problem is not unique to South Yorkshire. As part of her review of lessons learned, will the Home Secretary consider ending the practice of officers conferring together when recording statements?

Mrs May: The hon. Lady is right, and there are issues not just for policing but for public sector institutions generally about the desire, which I described earlier, to look inwards and protect themselves. I will reflect on her comment.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and other Merseyside colleagues for their determination in pursuing this matter over many years. The Merseyside victims came from Bootle, Birkenhead, Crosby, Liverpool, Runcorn, Knowsley and other Merseyside communities, but as my right hon. Friend said, supporters also came from all over the country—Cheshire, Essex, Leigh, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, Middlesex, Wrexham and London among other places. Will the Home Secretary join me, Merseyside MPs, and the people of Merseyside in remembering those supporters and their brave families, wherever they came from on that dreadful day, because they are now part of the Merseyside family?

Mrs May: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in doing just that. He is absolutely right to draw our attention to the fact that many of the supporters came from all parts of the country. As he said, they are now part of the Merseyside family.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary accept that, although she gave us a long, miserable litany of organisations that failed—organisations whose very essence is supposed to be about securing our safety—one institution shines through gloriously? That is the family, and particularly the families of those who were killed at Hillsborough. Does she accept that whatever we try to say in this House, we say it inadequately, but
that we share in the sympathy and admiration of the whole country for those families who had to fight throughout this case? I would like to thank her, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the then Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, for making the triumph of these families possible.

Concluding her statement, the Home Secretary read out the list of possible charges that might now follow. Although this will be a chilling task in itself, it will be an even greater chill for us if—as I hope, please God—we see through the necessary reform programme for great institutions that we thought were unquestionably on our side, but which were on somebody else's side on that fateful day.

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of points. He is absolutely right that it will be necessary for us to stand back and look at how this happened and why 27 years have been allowed to pass before we have come to this point. This might mean taking a very difficult look, as he said, at some of the institutions that people expect to protect them but simply did the opposite.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): As a Doncaster and South Yorkshire MP, I want to express my disgust and that of many people in South Yorkshire at what the services that we are meant to trust did on that day in Sheffield. I also express our disgust at the manipulation and delaying tactics that have contributed to 27 years of heartfelt pursuit and grief by the families of those killed, but also the survivors, including 730 people who were injured on that day, many with life-limiting injuries that they have had to live with and face the consequences of since then.

I believe in the rule of law and I believe in justice, but it cannot take 27 years to achieve the outcome that we saw yesterday—an outcome that has not only validated the actions of the families and others who pursued justice, but has called into question the very faith we put in procedures to bring public services to account for failure.

Will the Home Secretary pick up two issues that were raised earlier? The first is about equality of access to justice. From what I have seen and heard, having money to access legal services made a big difference to the cause of these families. Secondly, we need to look at whether it continues to be right to have police forces investigating other police forces or hospitals investigating other hospitals. Perhaps this is the time to look at having a more independent body for overseeing and investigating when, sadly, our public services fail.

Mrs May: The right hon. Lady raises two specific issues. On having an independent regime in place for inspecting public authorities, one thing we are doing in respect of policing is changing the arrangements for how complaints against the police are investigated so that serious and sensitive cases are not investigated by police forces themselves, but taken to the IPCC. We will be making changes to the IPCC in the Policing and Crime Bill that is going through the House. On the fact that the procedures did not allow for the truth to come out—and in some cases stopped the truth from coming out—for 27 years is a crucial point that underpins the whole debate. I hope that when Bishop James Jones is able to publish his review of what we need to learn from the experiences, it will cover the right hon. Lady's second point and indeed other issues raised by Members today.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I echo the comments of those who have thanked and congratulated everyone, including the Home Secretary, who campaigned for yesterday's verdict. The 18 people from the borough of Sefton who died are commemorated on a memorial in Crosby. As we remember all 96 who died, as well as the 730 who were injured, it is important to remember too that in these 27 years many more people have died who wished to see yesterday's verdict but who sadly did not live long enough to do so, including Anne Williams, who campaigned so long and hard for her son Kevin, who was just 15 when he died at Hillsborough.

The Home Secretary spoke about a range of possible criminal investigations. Would she say a little about the potential for criminal investigations relating to those who reported, completely falsely, what they were fed by those in authority, which added to the cover-up, to the smear and to the downright lies told about fans and the people of Liverpool at that time? Those actions added hugely to the 27-year wait for yesterday's verdict.

Mrs May: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point about the impression given to the public of what happened. I indicated some of the offences that are included in the work that is being done. The investigation is, of course, a matter for the two bodies set up to undertake the two elements of the investigation—Operation Resolve under Jon Stoddart and the IPPC. As I said in response to other hon. Members, decisions about any prosecutions will be made by the CPS.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): As a football fan, I will never forget 15 April 1989 and hearing the unimaginable news that 96 people—men, women and children—had gone to watch a football match and would never come home. It could have been any club, but in this case it was the proud club of Liverpool. Let me say that there were many, many football fans around the country who never believed the official verdict and always believed what Liverpool fans were saying. Let me also pay tribute to all those involved in the campaign. They are not only heroes of the proud city of Liverpool; for their extraordinary fight for truth and justice, which will go down in the history of our democracy, they are British heroes too.

In addition to dealing with the cover-up, will the Home Secretary give us a clear assurance that the appalling ways in which the families of the victims were treated in the aftermath of the disaster will never happen again? We saw police officers sitting eating chicken and chips in the gymnasium as the bodies were lying there, while families were told that they could not hug their loved ones in body bags because they were the property of the coroner. Worst of all, the initial coroner forced alcohol testing on all these victims—including children such as 10-year-old Jon-Paul Gilhooley—of this unlawful disaster. That was a disgrace, and we want to know that it will never happen to a single victim again.
Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to refer to what was done and how the families were treated. How appalling it must have been to learn that one of your loved ones had died in these appalling circumstances and to be unable to touch them, and then not to know the proper details of when and how they died—the cause of death. People have had to live with that for far too long. I hope that these sorts of issues coming out of the families’ experiences will be brought to light by the work that I have asked Bishop James Jones to do.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the work she has done, but I wish to raise with her a point I raised in 2012 when she made the same statement: that the rest of the country fell for this story. The rest of the country did not fall for this story. Those of us who went to football matches expected to be treated like second-class citizens and expected the police to get their retaliation in first, even when people had done nothing wrong.

I also want to pick up on the point raised by my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary about Orgreave, as I was there in June 1984. Seven years after that, South Yorkshire police paid £425,000 in compensation to silence 39 miners who were suing them for assault, yet not one of those police officers was even disciplined for what they had done. The police used public money to bury bad news on that day.

I come back to where we are now. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) made the point that so desperate were the police to cover up that they actually tested young children who were dead, and that shows how seriously they took this. But the real responsibility for what happened from then onwards cannot just be left at the doors of South Yorkshire police. I ask the Home Secretary to do what the Prime Minister did not do today in response to a question from the leader of my party and say what specific action will be taken to expose everybody—at every level in this country, elected official and appointed official, of previous Conservative Governments and of my party’s Governments—who played any role in this cover-up, either by omission or commission.

Those individuals are as guilty of making the people suffer for 27 years; many people went to their graves vilified when they would have been vindicated had this been sorted out at least a quarter of a century ago. We need to know that this will not just be laid at the door—rightly—of Duckenfield; other people must be called to account. Even if they did not commit criminal acts, they have done things that delayed the course of justice and they should be called to account for that.

Mrs May: Importantly, the independent panel’s report showed the truth of what had happened on that occasion. That work required a number of organisations that had previously been silent about what had happened to be prepared to come forward to give their evidence to the panel.

On the criminal investigations and the potential criminal prosecutions, obviously I have answered that point. I say to the hon. Gentleman that there has been a collective recognition across this House today, from all parts of it, that there were verdicts on what happened on that day in 1989 but that subsequently the procedures and processes that should have sought out and found the truth failed. We have to ask ourselves how that happened and what we can do to make sure it does not happen again.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Yesterday’s verdict was an historic one, and I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and, in particular, the emphasis she has put on the fact that the fans were not to blame. I was a young schoolteacher working in Liverpool in 1989 and I, like everyone in the city and right across Merseyside, remember that day well. I remember how the city was affected, both at the time and in the years that followed.

Twenty-seven years is a long time, and the families of the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough have had to fight for the truth. It takes a special kind of courage to fight for 27 years, and I pay tribute to the courage and determination of the families. There is nothing more powerful than the truth, and yesterday’s verdict delivered that to us. I hope that will be some comfort for the families and the friends who lost loved ones, and I know that the 96 will not be forgotten.

Mrs May: The hon. Lady is right: the 96 will not be forgotten. She is absolutely right to pay the tribute she does to the families, who have kept alive the hope of truth and justice. As I said earlier, I hope they will take some comfort from the verdicts yesterday.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): May I pay tribute to the Home Secretary and the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), not just for the power, poignancy and import of their words here today, but for the decisive and responsive character they have both shown on this matter? Not only do I salute my fellow Members in this House who represent the families of the Hillsborough victims, but, on behalf of the Bloody Sunday families in my constituency, I want to salute the Hillsborough families. They have made that journey from victimhood, through vilification, to vindication—that tortuous journey to justice that my constituents faced. The right hon. Gentleman brought the Hillsborough families over to Derry to meet the Bloody Sunday families in advance of the panel report, for solidarity and mentoring, and I know that the Bloody Sunday families would give the biggest hugs they could possibly give to the Hillsborough families today.

We need to learn other lessons, rather than just comparing what has happened in this case and in other cases. Points have been made about what the families still had to go through even after what the panel report told us—the fact that they had to sob and seethe inside, and yet still show calm in the chamber as they listened to callous cynicism about the deaths of their loved ones, no less cruel from the paid lips of counsel.

We also need to address, once and for all, this insensitivity and arrogance of power, and this default setting of system defensiveness that the Home Secretary has rightly identified. The system tells us all when we raise these issues on behalf of families who come to us, “Move on, there is nothing more to know.” I know that that is exactly what the system was telling the right hon. Member for Leigh when he was in government and was making his decision.
On the questions about possible charges that arise, one issue occurs to me, and it arises from the Bloody Sunday experience as well. Could we get clarity soon on whether or not the law officers in this situation are applying the same rubric that they have applied to the Bloody Sunday situation: that any question of charges of perjury, perverting the course of justice or anything else cannot be considered until the issues of any possible charges relating to the events of the day have been? That rubric is deeply troubling to Bloody Sunday families.

Mrs May: I will take that point away and look into it. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the remarks he made about the importance of a justice system. We are rightly proud of our system of justice in this country, but sometimes it has failed to get to the truth, as we have sadly seen. On Hillsborough, it is once again the families who have been prepared to fight over 27 years who have got, first, to the truth from the independent panel’s report and now to the clear verdicts which have vindicated what they have said about the fans and about their loved ones all along.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As a teenager in the late ‘80s, I followed my team in that stand on many occasions, and this was a victory for all of football today. The crime was exacerbated by the cover-up, so I wish to ask the Home Secretary this: apart from going to hell, what does she see as the consequences for those who bore false testimony?

Mrs May: Obviously, the question whether people have acted in a criminal way and whether charges should be made against those individuals is a decision for the CPS, after it has seen the results of the investigations.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Let me add my congratulations and commendations to the Home Secretary on her statement and her conduct so far and in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) on his work over many years and on an outstanding contribution. May I recall his words of praise for Anne Williams, from Chester, who, sadly, did not live to see this day? I assure the Home Secretary and the House that Anne will be at the forefront of the minds of many of my constituents in Chester today.

Hillsborough was a tragedy. It might have remained that he was asked by Members.

Mrs May: [Mark Durkan]

As soon as this tragedy unfolded, the first instinct of South Yorkshire police was to protect their institution and their reputation, and to think nothing of the people who died, and their families, because they considered those people to be less than human. That instinct that they experienced instantly in April 1989 appears to be just as strong 27 years later, given the way they have conducted themselves during this latest inquiry. I commend everything that the Home Secretary has done, but may I ask her to consider whether she believes that the people of south Yorkshire should have confidence in the current leadership of South Yorkshire police, and whether, indeed, she has confidence in the chief constable of South Yorkshire police? Might she take the opportunity of the
final moments of this exchange, during which she has conducted herself so magnificently, to ask the chief constable of South Yorkshire police, from the Dispatch Box, to consider his position—not just for the sake of the families, but for the sake of all the people who rely on that police force?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman has referred to the leadership of South Yorkshire police. As I said earlier, people will vote for a police and crime commissioner next week, thus conferring that democratic accountability.

I responded earlier to questions from my hon. Friends about the wording of the statement issued by South Yorkshire police, but let me say again that I think it behoves them to recognise the import of yesterday’s verdicts. I hope that we will not see attempts to suggest that those verdicts were somehow not clear, or were in any way wrong. That jury sat through 296 days of evidence, and they were clear about the role of South Yorkshire police officers.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Home Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary, and all colleagues for what they have said, and for the manner in which the exchanges on the statement have been conducted.

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman has referred to the leadership of South Yorkshire police. As I said earlier, people will vote for a police and crime commissioner next week, thus conferring that democratic accountability.

I responded earlier to questions from my hon. Friends about the wording of the statement issued by South Yorkshire police, but let me say again that I think it behoves them to recognise the import of yesterday’s verdicts. I hope that we will not see attempts to suggest that those verdicts were somehow not clear, or were in any way wrong. That jury sat through 296 days of evidence, and they were clear about the role of South Yorkshire police officers.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Home Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary, and all colleagues for what they have said, and for the manner in which the exchanges on the statement have been conducted.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your advice on how I can express my deep sorrow about something to which the Prime Minister referred earlier?

As you know, Mr Speaker, if Ministers make a mistake, they can correct the record. I hope you will allow me to say that I fully acknowledge that I have made a mistake, and I wholeheartedly apologise to the House for the words that I used before I became a Member of Parliament. I accept and understand that the words that I used caused upset and hurt to the Jewish community, and I deeply regret that. Anti-Semitism is racism, full stop. As a Member of Parliament, I will do everything in my power to build relations between Muslims, Jews, and people of different faiths and none.

I am grateful, and very thankful, for the support and advice that I have received from many Jewish friends and colleagues, advice on which I intend to act. I truly regret what I did, and I hope—I sincerely hope—that the House will accept my profound apology.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has found an opportunity to apologise. I thank her for what she has said, and it will have been noted by the House. I think that that is all I should say on this occasion.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for the words that she has just spoken.

On a point of order, Mr Speaker—a wider point of order—would it be possible for us to develop in our procedures an opportunity for the Prime Minister rapidly to correct any misleading impressions that he inadvertently gives during Prime Minister’s Question Time? For example, I know that he would be incredibly anxious today, following his general attack on the procurement policies of the Scottish Government with specific reference to the Forth crossing, to acknowledge that, in fact, 45% of the total orders, which amounted to £540 million, were placed with Scottish companies.

I know that the Prime Minister would also want to correct the misleading impression that there was no Scottish steel in the contract by acknowledging that steel from the Dalzell plate mill was used in the girders at either end of the bridge. And I fully understand that he would want to acknowledge that the reason why there was no Scottish bidder for the main subcontract was the closure of the Ravenscraig steel mill by a previous Tory Government in the 1990s, which removed our capacity to supply such steel.

I know, Mr Speaker, that the provision of such an opportunity would swallow up the entire time of the House, given the many mistakes that this Prime Minister makes, but in view of the clarity of this particular example, perhaps you could consider my new, innovative prime ministerial correction procedure.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It has been commented upon many a time and oft in recent years that I have sometimes judged it necessary and desirable somewhat to extend Prime Minister’s questions if I have felt that
[Mr Speaker]

there has been excessive noise. I have done that because I have wanted Back-Bench Members to have their opportunity. However, there are limits. Even I would not seek to extend Question Time to absorb more than two and a half hours, notwithstanding the sedulous advocacy of the right hon. Gentleman and his obvious enthusiasm for my doing so.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your help in finding a mechanism whereby the House might be able to force a binding vote on the Government, as a matter of urgency, following the new Lord Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill. Vulnerable unaccompanied children require help now, but it would seem that the House of Commons is not likely to consider the Bill for another two weeks, the intention being, presumably, to avoid further embarrassment to the Government.

Let me also say, Mr Speaker, that I should like to avail myself of that prime ministerial correction procedure in order to enable the Prime Minister to retract his comment that other European countries are able to cope with those children. They have, of course, asked the United Kingdom to participate in a relocation scheme, and Frontex has identified the issue of vulnerable children as one of the most concerning aspects of the refugee crisis.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He is, in a sense, performing a kind of double act today with the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), two seats to his left. What I would say to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who is a very experienced denizen of the House, having previously served as its Deputy Leader, is twofold. First, as he knows, the scheduling of business is in the hands of the Government, notably in respect of Government business. Although his expectation, as things stand, as to when that matter will next be treated by the House may well be correct, it has not been announced.

Secondly, the scheduling will, in all probability, be announced at business questions tomorrow by the Leader of the House. If it is not, there will be an opportunity for that matter to be probed. I know I can say with complete confidence and with no fear of contradiction that just as the right hon. Gentleman is in his place now, so he will be at the appropriate time tomorrow, and I think there is more than a passing possibility that he will catch my eye.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure it is, but I always like hearing the hon. Gentleman, especially as he has such a beaming countenance today. So let us hear the attempted “further” from the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We have heard the suggestion that the Prime Minister said something that was wrong. We heard from the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), from the Scottish National party, that the bit between the ends of the Forth crossing, which I would call “the bridge”, was actually made with steel that was not produced in this country.

Mr Speaker: Whatever else may be said, and it may be a point of enormous interest, that is manifestly not a point of order. We will leave the matter there for now. If there are no further points of order, perhaps we can now come to the ten-minute rule motion in the name of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. Whatever he may have to say tomorrow, I assume that today he intends to address his ten-minute rule motion.
Landlord and Tenant (Reform)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.41 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the regulation of landlords and private rented accommodation; to extend tenants’ rights, particularly in relation to the sale of occupied rental property; to cap letting agents’ fees; to require the Mayor of London to establish a mandatory licensing scheme in respect of private landlords in Greater London; and for connected purposes.

It is no exaggeration to say that we have a national emergency in housing. It is unacceptable that in 2016 millions of people still suffer daily from poor housing, and live in fear and desperation without a secure, affordable place to call home. This fear is tearing communities apart and risks further dividing our country between a very well-off minority and the rest of us. We have soaring house prices, with the average cost of a two-bedroom house in London now out of the reach of more than 80% of people, and a rental sector in which too many people on low and middle incomes are spending around two-fifths of their salaries on housing—something confirmed by a report in the Evening Standard yesterday—and often suffer at the hands of rogue landlords. This problem is not going to go away soon.

Over the past decade, London’s private rented sector has more than doubled in size to become the second-largest housing tenure in the capital. There are now almost 1 million private rented sector properties in London, housing over 2 million people—about a third of the population. For many of those people, living in the private rented sector works well, with short-term tenancy agreements offering them the flexibility they need to move homes quickly for new jobs or career opportunities. Many of their private landlords are responsible, carrying out repairs in a timely manner and returning deposits promptly. However, for many others the sector has become a tenure of last resort, rather than a housing destination of choice.

There have been huge changes in the demographics of the private rented sector in recent years with an increasing number of families, low-income and vulnerable households living in the sector, but conditions remain poor: a third of homes fail to meet the Government’s decent homes standard, with over 60% of renters having experienced either damp, mould, leaking roofs or windows, electrical hazards, animal infestation or gas leaks, according to a recent survey commissioned by the housing charity Shelter.

Just last week at my surgery I met a woman who, soon after she started describing the conditions in her rented property, broke down in tears. She and her young son could no longer face waking up to live or dead rodents in their flat. In this case, her landlord is trying to help, but the quality of the housing stock makes it very difficult to stop rodents getting into the property. A few weeks previously, at another surgery, a young woman came to see me with her mother. Repairs are outstanding on their rented property. The landlord is refusing to sort them out while at the same time putting pressure on them to leave their flat. I am sure every MP will be all too familiar with these types of cases. This is why I am supporting the measures put forward by Caroline Pidgeon’s London Liberal Democrat team to overhaul the private rented sector. We believe the measures will benefit tenants and good landlords, and shut down the Rachers of this world.

The exact number of rogue landlords operating in the sector remains unknown, but there is a growing sense that the problem is getting worse as demand for housing, and the profits that can be made from renting out any accommodation in whatever condition, continues to increase. One in 20 renters say they have rented from a rogue landlord in the past 12 months. As a survey of local authority enforcement in the private rented sector carried out in March 2016 by my Liberal Democrat colleagues on the Greater London Authority shows, the enforcement of standards in the private rented sector by local authorities is highly variable, with recent cuts to local authority budgets further diminishing the resources available to councils to tackle landlords who provide poor or unsafe living conditions. The resulting patchwork of enforcement has left thousands of Londoners at the mercy of rogue landlords.

Much of the problem lies with the lack of effective regulation and enforcement in the sector. The Residential Landlords Association, which represents small private landlords, would welcome a tough licensing scheme. Unfortunately, enforcement and inspection is very weak. One third of councils in London—10 boroughs—failed to prosecute a single landlord for providing unsafe accommodation in 2014-15. On average, London boroughs inspected one in every 55 homes in the private rented sector using the housing health and safety rating system. There is significant variation in the level of enforcement activity, with some councils inspecting one in 14 private rented properties for hazards and others about one in 500.

The private rented sector may have met the needs of tenants in years gone by, but the profile of renters, and the average length of tenancy, has changed dramatically in recent years. If some landlords are to lose their reputation as the property industry’s wild west cowboys, it is clear that a proper framework of regulation and enforcement is required. That is what is set out in the plans I am about to refer to, which would reform the private rented sector. My Bill would implement them.

First, all landlords in London should be registered. This would make it easier to identify the scale of, and trends in, the private rented sector, and to ensure landlords can be traced easily.

Secondly, there should be a crackdown on rogue landlords through a licensing scheme. The Government should introduce a licensing scheme for all private landlords in London, with the aim of professionalising the sector, improving conditions and removing rogue landlords from the housing market. I accept that this proposal would not be welcomed by all landlords, but some accept a limited role, in certain circumstances, for licensing in some areas of London.

Thirdly, unfair letting agent fees for renters should be scrapped. Moving from one rented home to another can be very expensive, with high letting fees and large deposit requirements. I am told that agents try to poach landlords from each other to secure for themselves the fees that are triggered on a change of tenancy. Of course, they dangle the prospects of higher rents in front of the would-be landlord. In Sutton, a quick check suggests fees of around £400 to £500 when signing up a new tenant. When that is added to the six-week
[Tom Brake]
deposit—currently approximately £1,500 for a two-bedroom flat—a tenant would need to find a total of £2,000 upfront.

Fourthly, renters should be given extra rights when landlords sell up. There should be a requirement for tenants to be given first refusal to buy the home they are renting, should the landlord decide to sell it during a tenancy.

Finally, councils should be given the power to manage private rental property and offer longer tenancies. This would allow councils to develop, own and manage private sector rented homes, outside of housing revenue accounts, to improve the quality of homes in the sector, with the freedom to offer long-term tenancies. I call on the Government to work with private landlords, mortgage companies and freeholders to enable private landlords to offer longer tenancies. It is often the mortgage companies or the freeholders who are standing in the way of longer tenancies. This is a package that will make a real difference.

Neither I nor Caroline Pidgeon is claiming that these measures are the silver bullet that will solve London’s housing problems, because the fundamental challenge is a lack of supply, particularly of affordable homes, and that problem is no closer to a solution, given that fewer than 5,000 affordable homes were built in London last year, the lowest figure since the current Mayor was first elected in 2008. However, we believe that these proposals will improve the lot of private renters, some of whom suffer in poorly insulated, damp, mouldy properties with the threat of a retaliatory eviction hanging over the heads every time they ask for a repair. This has to stop. I urge the House to support this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Brake, Norman Lamb, Greg Mulholland, John Pugh and Stephen Timms present the Bill.

Tom Brake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 168).

TRADE UNION BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

2.51 pm

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Trade Union Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 14 September 2015 (Trade Union Bill (Programme)) and 10 November 2015 (Trade Union Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at today’s sitting.

(2) The proceedings shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

(3) The proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

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<td>90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments</td>
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<td>Nos. 1, 3 to 16 and 18 to 29</td>
<td>Three hours after the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments</td>
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Subsequent stages

(4) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(5) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Nick Boles.)
Trade Union Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

After Clause 3

PROVISION FOR ELECTRONIC BALLOTING: REVIEW AND PILOTING SCHEME

2.51 pm

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): I beg to move Government amendment (a) to Lords amendment 2.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this we will consider the following:

Government amendment (b) to Lords amendment 2.

Lords amendment 17, and Government motion to restore Lords amendment 2.

Nick Boles: The measures in the Bill aim to modernise the relationship between trade unions and their members and strike a fairer balance between the rights of trade unions and the rights of people who rely on public services, by ensuring that strikes happen only when unions have secured a clear, positive and recent democratic mandate. Consideration in the House of Lords has made important changes to the Bill, the great majority of which the Government believe will improve the Bill. However, the first group of amendments deals with those issues on which the Government do not support the proposed changes.

The first group is about electronic balloting and facility time. We have reflected carefully, in the light of the strong views expressed in debates in this House and in the other place, and I will take each issue in turn. As I have said before, the Government have no objection in principle to electronic balloting. I have also said before, and I am happy to say it again at the Dispatch Box, that it is likely to be common in 20 years’ time. We are seeking a degree of sensible caution on this matter.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will remember our many conversations about this in Committee. He says that he is not opposed to electronic balloting in principle and he accepts that it might come in. We can see the Lords amendment before us and there are moves towards a pilot scheme. Electronic balloting is used by many organisations including the Law Society, many businesses and indeed the Conservative party for the purposes of the mayoral elections. Why not just do this now?

Nick Boles: I have greatly enjoyed debating the many detailed clauses of the Bill with the hon. Gentleman over a long period when he occupied a different post on the Opposition Front Bench, and if he will give me time, I will explain why I am not quite ready to rush to approval. However, the first group of amendments deals with those issues on which the Government do not support the proposed changes.

We are seeking a degree of sensible caution to ensure that important votes—these are indeed statutory votes—are safe and secure, so I am not asking hon. Members today to reject the clause added to the Bill in the House of Lords on electronic balloting. However, I am asking for agreement to a small but important change to ensure that we proceed prudently on the basis of evidence as we take this important step.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister will no doubt have seen the evidence from the Electoral Reform Society that the incidence of fraud in electronic balloting is no different from the incidence of fraud in postal balloting. In the light of that evidence, what is his objection?

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman will have to be a little patient, because I am going to come on to talk about evidence from around the world of some of the problems that other systems have encountered when trying to embrace electronic balloting too quickly and without adequate preparation.

I appreciate from previous debates on the Bill in this House that there are differences of opinion about whether electronic balloting is sufficiently safe and secure. Lord Kerslake said that he personally was convinced that the case for it had been made, and we have heard from others in recent minutes that they too are so convinced, but Lord Kerslake was good enough to say that he appreciated that others were not. I remind the House that the Open Rights Group gave evidence to the Speaker’s Commission in which it neatly summed up the concerns over the security of online voting. It stated:

“Voting is a uniquely difficult question for computer science: the system must verify your eligibility; know whether you have already voted; and allow for audits and recounts. Yet it must always preserve your anonymity and privacy.”

That was the view of the Open Rights Group, and that is the view that we must investigate more carefully. Lord Kerslake explained that that was why his clause, added to the Bill in the other place, required that a review be commissioned.

There have already been many reviews looking into this matter, such as those carried out by Electoral Reform Services, WebRoots Democracy and, of course, the Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy. They have made encouraging comments about a move to electronic ballots, but none has been able to provide assurance on managing the risks. While there is still this doubt, I can see merit in exploring the issues further. And of course the important difference is that this review will be specifically in the context of electronic ballots for industrial action. So, in accepting that there should be a review, we accept the spirit of the clause on electronic balloting. In fact, we accept virtually the entirety of the amendment made by the Lords on electronic balloting.

Andrew Gwynne: I understand the position that the Minister is setting out, but I am struggling to understand his logic. If he is saying that electronic balloting is neither secure nor anonymous, is he implying that when Conservative party members vote for a particular candidate online in an internal Tory party election, it is neither secure nor anonymous?

Nick Boles: With the greatest respect, I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that that is an internal election within an independent organisation. We are talking here about statutory elections, which are important because the public has a deep interest in their result and it is quite right that we should hold them to a higher standard than we do others.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister sounds almost guilty of double standards on this issue. He says that he has accepted the majority of the Lords amendments, but he has neglected to adopt any of
those components that require substantial action by the Government. What possible objection could he have to piloting an e-balloting scheme? I think he realises that he just does not have a reasonable argument against it.

Nick Boles: If Opposition Members will just give me a minute, they will be able to hear my argument. Then they can decide whether they think it is reasonable or not.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Boles: No. I am now going to satisfy Opposition Members by setting out my argument, after which I will be happy to give way if they want to comment on it. There is only one element in the amendment made by the House of Lords with which we cannot agree and that is the strategy for roll-out, which prejudges the outcome of the review and irrevocably commits the Secretary of State to press ahead with a strategy for the roll-out of electronic balloting, irrespective of the review’s findings.

3 pm

The Opposition may not welcome it, but they will be interested to know that there are many examples of where electronic balloting has been tried, but found not to work, and even of where it has had to be rolled back. The Speaker’s Commission on Digital Democracy identified 14 countries that have tried internet voting for binding elections, including five countries—not only the UK, but Finland, the USA, the Netherlands and Spain—which either piloted or fully adopted electronic voting and then decided to discontinue its use.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am interested to hear what the Minister says about that. The last Labour Government piloted e-voting, and the Electoral Commission report afterwards indicated that there was no evidence of fraud or other things, but what did for it was the scandal around postal voting in certain areas. There was no evidence in the report that e-voting was any more corrupt or inefficient than any other type of voting.

Nick Boles: If the hon. Gentleman is correct and if there is no problem, the review will conclude so and will report to Parliament that there is—

Mr Jones rose—

Nick Boles: No, I am not going to give way again; I am going to carry on with my argument. The review will report accordingly to the House.

The power to permit electronic balloting already exists in section 54 of the Employment Relations Act 2004, but we have not yet exercised it because we have not been convinced, and neither have any previous Government, including a Labour Government that held office for 13 years, that the system would ensure privacy, opportunity and minimise the risk of fraud and malpractice. There has been much positive progress in the way that technology can help to address such issues, which is reflected in the reports I have cited.

We have been clear that we will be willing to use the power when we are convinced that the concerns have been adequately addressed. The legislation is framed in a way that requires us first to be satisfied on such matters, and for good reason. That is why, instead of a strategy for roll-out, I am today seeking agreement to a statutory requirement for the Government to publish their response to the review, which would be laid before Parliament, making it readily accessible to hon. Members, who could ask questions and raise matters in the House in the usual way.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Before the Trade Union Bill reached the House of Lords, the Minister wrote a letter to ministerial colleagues that was leaked to the Socialist Worker, for which the Minister may have an explanation. Will he confirm that he will use secondary legislation to put e-balloting in place should the pilot be successful?

Nick Boles: Madam Deputy Speaker, I can assure you that my relations with the Socialist Workers Party or its newspaper are probably rather less good than the hon. Gentleman’s, so it was not through my good offices that it got hold of any document—not that I accept that it did get hold of any document.

The hon. Gentleman asks a reasonable question, and I have made it clear that the Government have no objection in principle and that we expect statutory elections eventually to move towards online voting, but we will do that with trade union strike ballots when we are convinced that such voting is safe. That is why we want an independent review that will report to Parliament. I will not prejudge its outcome, because if I did, it would be slightly pointless to have the review in the first place.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab) rose—

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab) rose—

Rachael Maskell rose—

Nick Boles: I am happy to give way and will do so first to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Anderson: The Minister said before that online voting was okay for the election of the Tory candidate for Mayor of London because the Conservative party is an independent organisation. I hope that he would accept that trade unions are also independent. Did the Tory party carry out a review into how secure the system was before it set up the discussions for having electronic voting for the Tory mayoral candidate?

Nick Boles: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman heard my previous answer and he must recognise that these are statutory elections. Internal elections for candidates in any party are not statutory. They might be subject to problems, but that is a problem for the organisation, not for the public. The public have a right to expect a higher standard in the consideration of statutory elections.

Stephen Doughty rose—

Nick Boles: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman; he has had a go. I will give way to the hon. Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who have not yet had a go, but all
hon. Members are welcome to speak in this debate in their own right, so it would be right to make some progress.

Dawn Butler: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to speak. He says that it might be pointless to have a review and all the other various stages, and I agree with him. A review of the technology is pointless, because it already exists. It has already been mentioned that the Conservative party has used the technology and, as a previous programmer, I can tell the Minister that it already exists and is secure. It has been used not only in various businesses and independent organisations, such as the Conservative party, but in “The X Factor” and various other TV shows. The Minister does not need a report; he just needs to move on to the next stage.

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady is a fan of “The X Factor” and so are many of us, but she will recognise that, important though it is to the public, “The X Factor” is not a statutory election. While I am absolutely happy to acknowledge her expertise, I hope that she will acknowledge the evidence of the Open Rights Group. It is not a Tory front organisation—she can investigate it—but an independent specialist organisation that gave evidence only last year and said that there were specific issues to overcome. She will also have to explain to the review why it is that several countries have experimented with online voting and then reversed the decision because they found it to be unsafe. The review will allow us—

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Boles: Of course. I did say that I would give way to the hon. Lady.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister be specific and say how electronic voting is less secure than postal voting, which has additional risks?

Nick Boles: No, I will not be specific, because we are going to set up an independent review involving people with real expertise in the matter. The hon. Lady will be welcome to give evidence to the review, which will produce a report that will be laid before Parliament. She can then interrogate the report and the Government’s response.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): On the point being made by the Opposition about the Conservative party’s online voting, I found it impossible to get on to the site and was unable to vote for my candidate in the mayoral election. Did my hon. Friend acknowledge the same issue?

Nick Boles: I did not have that issue, but that does show that there can be issues with online voting, as there can be with postal voting. While it is not a matter of enormous public interest, because it was not a statutory election, we would be very worried if a statutory election, such as a union strike ballot, was subject to the same level of problems.

Chris Stephens rose—

Nick Boles: Have I not given way to the hon. Gentleman already? I will give way one more time and then I will get on.

Chris Stephens: Is the Minister seriously suggesting that whoever is the Conservative party candidate for London Mayor is not a matter of interest to the public? I find his argument bizarre.

Nick Boles: I am quite happy to explain again that it is not a statutory election.

The review will allow us to consider again the case for e-balloting and ensure that we have assessed the latest technology. Taken together, the review and the Government’s response will enable the Secretary of State to make a properly informed and transparent decision about the risks of achieving safe, secure electronic balloting, and therefore whether such a system should be rolled out.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Minister has invited us to contribute to the review. I wonder whether he will accept electronic submissions or do we have to get our quills and parchment out?

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady makes a good point—

[Interruption.]

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) suggests that submissions should be inscribed on vellum, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office has a particular enthusiasm for that means of communication, but I prefer the more modern kind, so I suggest that an online submission—perhaps even by WhatsApp—might be appropriate.

Turning to the reserve power to cap facility time, the Government do not agree with the Lords amendment.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I am in favour of electronic voting, but the route that he is taking is the correct one. The one real fear out there, which can be put paid to right now, is that this approach is designed simply to delay the onset of online voting. Will he tell the House that, when the Minister receives the report, it will be dealt with with appropriate dispatch?

Nick Boles: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution on this and other important matters. He has made a significant contribution to the improvement of this Bill. On his particular question, the amendment that we propose agrees with the noble Lords that this review should be commissioned within six months and then reported to Parliament. I have made it clear that we have no objection in principle to e-balloting. If the review suggests that it is safe to embrace, we will proceed with it. I think he will have noted that the amendment specifically suggests that we should be able to introduce pilots. One issue with the existing provisions is that it might not be possible to do a pilot without going for a full application. Such pilots might well be an appropriate phase after the review has been completed.

Let me return now to facility time and the facility time cap. The Government do not agree with the Lords amendment and, in consequence, I am moving amendment 17, which brings back the reserve cap, but with safeguards that respond to the concerns that were expressed in our debates and that led to the deletion of the clause in the other place and were the subject of quite forensic inquisition in both Houses.
Together with the publication requirements, it is my view that a reserve power to cap facility time to a reasonable level delivers our manifesto commitment to “tighten the rules around taxpayer-funded paid facility time for union representatives.”

I shall reiterate what I said when this House was previously considering the Bill. We are not seeking to ban facility time. That has never been our intention. Our strong preference is that transparency alone should be enough to change practices in the public sector, with employers voluntarily reducing their costs where they are found to be spending more on facility time than is reasonable.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being very generous. In the aforementioned leaked memo to which I referred earlier, there was an indication that there would be concessions and discussions with the devolved Administrations in relation to facility time. Will he confirm whether consultations have taken place with the devolved Administrations, or whether it is his intention to dictate to the devolved Administrations what the facility time should be for their own workforce?

Nick Boles: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I never comment on articles in the Socialist Worker. He will also understand that we have regular conversations with Ministers in the devolved Administrations, but all of the matters addressed in this Bill are reserved matters. It is a matter not of dictating, but of this Government fulfilling their duty to legislate on the matters for which we have exclusive responsibility.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Specifically on the point about devolved powers, is it not the case that in that letter the Minister received legal advice saying that there is a very weak case for enforcing those powers on the Welsh Government?

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady, who made an admirable contribution, knows that we do not comment on legal advice.

If publication, and the proper monitoring and recording that it necessitates, do not achieve the aim of bringing excessive spending on facility time back down to a reasonable level, it will be necessary to consider the imposition of a cap. A reserve power is very much a power of last resort.

Mr Anderson rose—

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady, who made an admirable contribution, knows that we do not comment on legal advice.

If publication, and the proper monitoring and recording that it necessitates, do not achieve the aim of bringing excessive spending on facility time back down to a reasonable level, it will be necessary to consider the imposition of a cap. A reserve power is very much a power of last resort.

Mr Anderson rose—

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I wish to explain what we are now proposing, because it is a little different from what we proposed previously. I will give way to him before I conclude on the facility time cap.

A reserve power is very much a power of last resort. Although our amendment 17 brings back the reserve power, we are not simply replicating the provision that this House considered previously and that was deleted from the Bill in the other place. The amendment before the House today incorporates a number of safeguards that will trigger how and when the reserve power to cap facility time would be exercised. We have listened to the concerns of Members of this House and the other place and have sought to address those concerns in the amendment.

3.15 pm

The published data under the facility time publication requirements in this Bill will provide valuable information about levels of spending across the public sector and inform decisions about what should be regarded as a reasonable level of spend on facility time, taking into account the needs of the relevant sector as well as the particular circumstances of individual employers within the sector.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) rose—

Nick Boles: Let me finish this bit, because I am trying to explain what is different about what we are doing. I will then be very happy to give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Anderson: And me.

Nick Boles: Of course.

It is our intention that exercise of the reserve power will not even be considered before there are at least two years of data from the bodies subject to the publication requirement. Following the publication of the second year’s data, should a particular employer’s facility time be a cause for concern, having regard to all relevant factors, the Minister will send and publish a letter to the employer drawing attention to the concerns. The employer will have the opportunity to set out the reasons for the level of facility time. They will then have at least a further year from the date the Minister notifies it of concerns to make progress on its facility time levels. Nothing will be done until a third year’s data have been published. Only then will the Minister be at liberty to exercise the reserve power and make regulations to cap facility time for those employers.

Mr Anderson: A person who enjoys facility time will spend a lot of that time trying to manage huge reorganisations and redundancies, most of which are the responsibility of the Minister’s former Government. Can he explain what he means when he says things such as “excessive” and “reasonable”? Over the past four years, Gateshead council has lost 48% of its budget and 2,000 people have been made redundant. People have been engaged day and night, trying to redeploy and retrain people. How on earth is a Minister in Whitehall going to be able to pull all that together and say, “Well, that works for them, but it does not work for others.”?

It is nonsense.

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman is right. What is reasonable can vary according to the organisation and the situation of that organisation, which is why we want to collect two years of data before we establish what seems to be a reasonable level by looking at comparable organisations. I will come on to the fact that we will also be creating the possibility of removing the cap from an organisation if it has a particular situation, such as the one that he describes, that would justify a much higher level of spending on the different kinds of facility time.

Alec Shelbrooke: What my hon. Friend is trying to make explicit is that, across the trade union movement there are shop stewards who do an excellent job, day in, day out, but there are some situations where the facility time is taken advantage of. One merely has to think of
Grangemouth. Can he be clear on this? He has struck the right balance in the way that he looks at things, but at no time has he said that all shop stewards are swinging the lead or that a lot of valuable work goes on.

Nick Boles: I am very happy to confirm and applaud what my hon. Friend said. In truth, I would be as worried if an organisation was declaring no spending on facility time as it was declaring excessive spending on facility time. Helping people with training or with health and safety issues is not just appropriate, but vital in a well-run organisation. He will recognise, as will Members across the House, that there have been agencies and Departments—we have had direct dealings of this within the civil service—that were allowing an abuse of the system. We want to restore confidence in the system by making it clear that we need transparency. If there is still excessive behaviour, we will introduce a cap.

Wes Streeting rose—

Nick Boles: No, I will finish. We know that when we introduced a similar provision in the civil service, we found that some organisations were acting perfectly responsibly and others were allowing an abuse of the system, hence we introduced a cap in the civil service. That has saved the taxpayer money and has not in any way undermined the proper fulfilment of responsibilities by trade union representatives. I shall now make some progress—

Stephen Doughty rose—

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is indulgent. I appreciate his generosity. Given some of the rhetoric from some of his ministerial colleagues and others about the matter, does he recognise that people might have a reasonable suspicion that even after collecting the data, the Government might seek to use these powers perniciously, going after particular groups whose practices they are not happy with, rather than using the powers in the way that he describes? Does he accept that that is a reasonable suspicion?

Nick Boles: I do not. After all, I am the Minister and I will be in charge of this until the Prime Minister decides otherwise. The hon. Gentleman has had enough time to judge whether or not I am sincere. He will also note that in the amended proposals that we are putting forward today, there have to be three years’ data before we can introduce a cap, and that where there is some concern about the level of spending we have to allow the organisation an opportunity to explain why that level of spending is appropriate. That responds in part to what the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) said. Partly through the good offices of hon. Members in this House and in the other place, there are now greater safeguards to ensure that there can be no abuses.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am a bit confused about what the cost will be of a Minister or civil servants sitting down and sifting through mountains of data from every council and every public body covered by the provision to determine whether facility time has been abused, when from his own lips the Minister has just admitted that he does not know whether there has been any abuse. If there is not a problem, why are we bringing in this expensive system that is impossible to regulate?

Nick Boles: I do not accept that it will be expensive. Although there are no data because the transparency clauses have not yet been applied, I point the hon. Gentleman to estimates that the public sector as a whole spends on average 0.14% of its total pay bill on facility time, the civil service spends 0.07%—half of that—and the private sector spends 0.04%. I can promise him that if he multiplies the pay bill of the public sector by that percentage, he will arrive at a very large figure indeed, and a great deal more than the cost of implementing these clauses.

Wes Streeting rose—

Nick Boles: I have been generous and I will be generous again, but I shall try to make some progress.

As I indicated, the amendment provides that the cap may be disapplied for as long as necessary and to the extent necessary for individual employers. This would enable a temporary lifting of the cap for one or more specific employers, and we propose to use it in circumstances where the employer and Ministers consider it necessary. We envisage that should a particular employer experience a need for more facility time, perhaps during a period of change or following a particular incident, Ministers can allow this so that facility time can be increased to respond to the circumstance. The reserve power that this amendment would deliver is considerably improved from the version that was deleted in the other place, and I urge the House to support it. I commend the amendments to the House.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I want to make it clear right at the outset that we remain opposed to this Bill. Despite some of the changes that it has undergone
in another place, it remains a dreadful, mean-spirited, partisan, petty piece of legislation. Having got that off my chest, I recognise that Members in another place have made a valiant attempt to make a silk purse out of this particularly malformed sow’s ear, so that after today it may end up being a slightly less ugly sow’s ear than it was, but it will remain a malodorous porcine lug, for all their lordships’ noble efforts.

Many of the changes that peers made are welcome if we consider the crudeness of the Bill in its original form. On the first group of Lords amendments and the Government’s response to them, Lords amendment 2 was passed in the other place by 320 votes to 181, requiring the Government to commission a review of electronic voting in industrial action ballots within six months of Royal Assent. After the review, amendment 2 would require the Government to publish a strategy for rolling out electronic voting.

Government amendment (a) would revise Lords amendment 2 so that Ministers are required only to publish a response to the review, but need not take further action to actually introduce e-balloting. The Government have consistently resisted e-balloting on the grounds that they still had concerns about the safety of electronic voting, despite the fact, as many hon. Members have pointed out, that the Conservative party used electronic ballots for the selection of its London mayoral candidate, although I suppose the Conservatives may now be regretting that, given the poor performance of the candidate they selected using that method. Perhaps that explains the Government’s concern.

It is clear that the Government’s real objection to e-balloting and, indeed, to workplace balloting, which we argued for unsuccessfully in this House and in the other place, has been that they do not want high turnouts because their new threshold barriers could be more easily reached if more people were more easily able to vote.

Not only will all ballots for industrial action require a minimum 50% turnout under the Bill, but those working in the loosely defined “important public services group” will face an additional hurdle of needing a 40% yes vote from all those eligible to vote. That means that these thresholds place higher requirements on those industrial action ballots than on any other democratic process within the UK. For example, the 50% turnout threshold was not reached for the last London Mayoral election or most local government and devolved elections.

The Government have agreed that Ministers should be required to commission an independent review of the use of e-ballots for industrial action within six months of Royal Assent. They have agreed that it will be possible to run pilots as part of that review, as the Minister said, but the Government are proposing that after the review Ministers would need to publish a response, but not necessarily to take any further action. There would be no requirement to publish a strategy for rolling out electronic voting.

Andrew Gwynne: Is there not a slight concern that this is just a delaying tactic by the Government, who do not intend to introduce these measures? Given that in 2016 many people are quite used to banking online, registering to vote online and submitting their tax returns online, do not questions about security and anonymity full by the wayside?

Kevin Brennan: I know the Minister, and I take him at his word when he says that that is not his intention and that this is not a delaying tactic. However, to coin a phrase, he is a here today, gone tomorrow Minister—I say that from experience, as a former Minister—and somebody else may well occupy his place in the future. That person may not have the good intentions the Minister has outlined to the House today, and we must legislate for that possibility, rather than assume that somebody with good will is going to occupy his seat in perpetuity.

The Government propose that they would not have to publish a strategy after the review. Let me be clear: their amendment is not necessary. I accept that they have moved a long way in accepting the review, the pilots, the requirement to lay a report before Parliament, the need to consult experts and to get advice and recommendations, and the need to commission a report within six months of passing the Act. Those changes are significant, and they go part of the way towards achieving what we have argued for right from the start, as well as achieving most of what was agreed in the other place with cross-Bench support.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As someone who, along with other colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), considers that electronic balloting is probably the right way to go, may I ask whether the hon. Gentleman welcomes the progress the Minister and the Government have made in that direction? I believe that the Minister, and indeed any future Minister, although I hope this Minister remains in his place for a long time, will ensure that the evidence is looked at and that, provided it shows that electronic balloting is the right way to go, which I very much hope it does, we will go forward with it.

Kevin Brennan: Obviously I cannot comment on how long the Minister will remain in his post—we will see what happens in the forthcoming reshuffle. However, I did recognise the movement the Government have made, although I made it clear that their amendment to their lordships’ amendment is unnecessary and that the whole matter could have been dealt with in a much more straightforward manner. However, we are where we are, having received these amendments from the Lords, and those are all that we can discuss today.

Ultimately, it is inconceivable that any Minister, having received a report on how e-balloting could be introduced safely, would then deny trade union members the opportunity to participate in a ballot using modern electronic communications. The only possible reason for Ministers at that future point to reject an expert report outlining the appropriate way to introduce modern technology into ballots and to offer the opportunity for easier participation in a democratic vote would be a desire to suppress turnout.

Mr David Davis: The hon. Gentleman comes right to the point. He does not have to rely on the good will of this Minister, who I am sure will be in the Cabinet in six months. The reason I asked the Minister to outline...
Mr Kevan Jones: What is having to review all this information going to cost the taxpayer? The Minister skated over that. Surely if it is to be done thoroughly and effectively it will come at great cost to the taxpayer.

Kevin Brennan: Indeed. Given that the Government’s stated purpose in doing this is to look after the interests of the taxpayer, it is ironic that what my hon. Friend says is exactly the case.

As I said, we are dealing with what we have got back from the Lords. We would not have wished this provision to remain in the Bill at all. We support the Lords amendment to remove it from the Bill completely, and I am setting out to the House the consequences of not doing so.

The original clause 13 included a reserve power for Ministers to introduce regulations imposing an arbitrary cap on the amount of time that union reps in the public sector can spend in the workplace improving health and safety standards, promoting learning and training opportunities, consulting on redundancies or on TUPE transfers, negotiating better pay and conditions, and even representing members in grievances and disciplinary hearings. We agree with the Lords that the clause on facility time should have been removed from the Bill altogether. It is an unnecessary interference in the conduct of good industrial relations. It also goes against the Government’s professed desire to support devolution, as other hon. Members have pointed out, including the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). As the Minister will know, it is being resisted by the devolved Administrations.

We acknowledge, however, that significant advances have been made in Government amendment (a). We support the Lords and want this clause removed from the Bill, but if the House decides not to do so, Government amendment (a) will at least make some improvement to a proposal that should never have appeared in the first place.

Alec Shelbrooke: I should like to speak to amendment (a) to Lords amendment 2. I hope my comments are met in the spirit in which I hope to make them.

I want to outline a frustration that I expressed on Second Reading when I spoke about turnout thresholds within the private sector. In my remarks, I made it clear that trade unions have a very important part to play in the workplace, whether on health and safety, bullying, contract renegotiations regarding a change in working practices or funding, or many such issues. It is wrong to be seen not to appreciate the work that trade unions do. Indeed, as I said earlier, many shop stewards in this country do an outstanding job. I had experience of that when I was a member of Unite, with some excellent shop stewards who worked very well.

I also said on Second Reading that I was not keen on turnout thresholds in the private sector, because, as I outlined, the threshold to go on strike in the private sector is much higher than in the public sector. Whatever the rights and wrongs of it may be, when people go on strike in the public sector, there will generally always be a job to go back to because it has been funded largely by Government through taxation, whereas in the private sector the same threshold cannot be guaranteed, especially in smaller business. If a workforce withdraws its labour,
On Second Reading, I cited Grunwick in the 1970s. I repeat that I do not support the Conservative party’s attempts in the 1970s to break the strike in that company, run by George Ward, because people were working in appalling conditions. Strike action was taken to try to improve conditions that would be unacceptable today. As I said previously, I applaud the last Labour Government for introducing a legal requirement to allow a trade union to operate in the workplace if that is the wish of members of staff.

I therefore hope hon. Members understand my regret that movement was not made on turnout thresholds in the private sector. The flip side of that is that I believe that it is right to have a turnout threshold in the public sector.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that many trade unions have thresholds in their rule books to ensure that a certain percentage of members must vote? When I was a full-time official, my union, the GMB, had a threshold. It is therefore not the case that the threshold is uniform across all unions or businesses.

Alec Shelbrooke: I accept that, but as the hon. Gentleman says, the threshold is not uniform, and in the public sector it is right to have a threshold for taking action when there is a lot of employment protection in terms of having jobs to go back to.

Although I have regrets about the threshold for the private sector, I believe that electronic balloting will lead to higher turnouts and will meet strike thresholds, and as long as the system is secure and can be seen to be genuine, it is the right thing to do. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to apply the policy as quickly as possible because that will enable the private sector to meet the thresholds more easily than perhaps it can now.

There is a balance to be struck. There needs to be some control on those in the public sector who cause great disruption to people who work in the private sector who may not enjoy the terms and conditions that they do. Unreservedly support thresholds in the public sector, but I do not have the same regard for them in the private sector. Hon. Members can refer back to Hansard and my comments on Second Reading, which explain my views further.

The Government’s approach to electronic balloting is right. When it can be proved to be safe and reliable, it should be introduced because I believe the Bill will have the unintended consequence of having a bigger effect on union members in the private sector than on union members in the public sector.

Chris Stephens: I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my trade union activity in the past 20 years.

In the past few days in the media, we have seen the performance of somersaults of Olympian proportions, and I commend Ministers for that. Having voted down sensible amendments in Committee and on Third Reading to allow alternative methods of voting in industrial action ballots, Ministers found themselves so out of step on the work and organisation of trade unions that even arch-Thatcherites such as Lord Michael Forsyth are friends of the workers by comparison. If I were a member of the Conservative party, I would be very worried about that.

I welcome this minor change. As we have argued previously, if e-balloting is good enough for the Conservative party to elect its candidate for London Mayor, surely it is good enough for trade unions to use when making their choices. As Lord Cormack said in the other place, “I cannot for the life of me understand why the Government are arguing against a system that the Conservative Party felt was good enough for the selection of a candidate for London Mayor”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 March 2016; Vol. 769, c. 1861.]

3.45 pm

I listened carefully to the reasons the Minister gave for the decision to let the Conservative party use that system, but not the trade unions. I gently say to him that if a vote was taken on who out of the trade unions and the current Mayor of London had disrupted the public’s lives more, I do not think that the answer would be what the Government would hope.

Online balloting is more accessible and inclusive. We firmly believe that access to electronic balloting will enhance engagement and participation, as more people use electronic devices to communicate every day.

Frankly, we cannot fathom the suggestion that online balloting is unsafe and insecure. The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) said that she had difficulty accessing the ballot. I wanted to ask her a number of questions. Did the email with the accompanying link to the ballot paper say, “If you press this link, the website may be unsafe and insecure”? Perhaps it said, “Clicking this link may lead to a fraudulent act.” What does that mean for the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith)? Is he unsafe and insecure—some Government Members are nodding their heads—or is it only Conservative party members who have access to safe and secure emails? Do Conservative party members have more privileges than an American Express gold card offers? That is what the trade union movement and members are asking themselves. Why is there one rule for them and another for the rest of us?

The difficulty with postal balloting—the Minister has been pressed on this before—is that the number of post boxes across the UK has reduced by 17% in the past 10 years, so it is more difficult for people to participate in a postal ballot.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Given the increase in postal charges in recent years, does my hon. Friend agree that it also costs more to do postal balloting?

Chris Stephens: Yes, I agree. I also take the view that postal balloting prolongs the length of a dispute because of the time it takes to conduct such a ballot. Electronic balloting allows for greater flexibility and efficiency.

Like the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), we are disappointed that the pilot will not extend to workplace balloting as a secure option, because that would increase democracy in the workplace. The TUC
has previously argued that there is no evidence that workers feel intimidated into voting a particular way when ballots take place in the workplace, as has been argued by the Government.

Although the Government have accepted the need to commission an independent review on the use of e-ballots for industrial action, their amendment (a) effectively means that Ministers would only have to publish a response to the review. They would, therefore, not be obligated to introduce a strategy to roll out electronic voting. That is simply unacceptable.

Lords amendment 2 is actually very moderate. The question is whether the Government’s response is good enough or whether it weakens the intent behind the Lords amendment. Having listened carefully to the Minister, we can only conclude that Government amendment (a) does weaken the other place’s intention.

The Government propose to revise the Lords amendment in such a way that Ministers would be required only to publish a response, but they would not need to take any action. That underlines what the Government intend to do after the e-balloting review. They intend to do nothing: there will be no strategy on how to proceed and, therefore, no actual commitment to allowing electronic balloting in the future. That is absurd. If the Government were truly intent on modernising the law, they would allow for electronic balloting and secure workplace balloting. I would be interested in the Minister’s response to that. Our view is clear. Electronic balloting will modernise the law, promoting democracy and inclusion.

We have always been clear that the clause on facility time is completely unnecessary and unwanted. Having such a clause in the Bill signals intent: the Government’s intent to interfere with the facility time arrangements—the basic industrial relations arrangements—not only of devolved Administrations but of local authorities across the United Kingdom. As Lord Kerslake put it in the other place,

“The Government are saying that the costs should be transparently known and proportionate to the benefits...However, this is fully secured...through Clause 12. There is no need for the reserve powers contained in Clause 13.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 March 2016; Vol. 769, c. 1903.]

He further stated:

“If, however, the public body is a local authority, it has its own democratic mandate and is answerable to its own electorate for the cost. Given the immense financial pressures now on local authorities, do we really think that they are incapable of making this judgment?”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 March 2016; Vol. 769, c. 1906.]

Although we acknowledge that some amendments have been made by the Government, that is simply not good enough. Any attempt by the UK Government to instruc

devolved institutions on how to treat their workers should be robustly resisted. Facility time allows union representatives to spend time in the workplace improving the safety and health of their workers. Representatives also promote training opportunities and negotiate better pay, terms and conditions for employers, among many other roles and responsibilities. Limiting the ability of unions to play such a role in our public sector will have a damaging impact on public sector workers across the United Kingdom.

Trade unions are key social partners, which play an important role in sustaining effective democracy in society, particularly in the workplace. The existence of good employment practices is a key contributor to economic competitiveness and social justice. In Scotland, the SNP Government have taken a different approach. We have taken a modern and progressive approach to industrial relations and believe that trade unions are at the heart of achieving fair work. The UK Government should work with trade unions in a social partnership approach rather than launching yet more attacks against them.

Industrial relations mechanisms should be agreed at a devolved or local level. It beggars belief that the UK Government do not believe that a legislative consent motion is required for a UK Minister to dictate policy in these areas. The detail of much of the Bill is set out in regulations, and there will be no formal opportunity for the Scottish Government or the Welsh Government to influence such regulations. Today, we need a commitment from the UK Government that the rights of workers across the UK will not be restricted by the imposition of facility time.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) asked the Minister whether the Health Secretary would “make regulations that affect facility time in the health services of Scotland and Wales, which are wholly devolved and under the control of Health Ministers in those countries”.

The Minister replied, “Yes,” but stressed that “health policy and the management of the NHS in those countries will remain...in the control of the Governments” —[Official Report, Trade Union Public Bill Committee, 22 October 2015; c. 347.]

He was referring to the Governments of the devolved Administrations. I said at the time:

“Having only just debated Evel last week, it seems that the UK Government now want to dictate to devolved administrations”.

On 2 February, the Minister said that the Government would not change the proposals on facility time and check-off provisions in the Bill. However, the infamous letter referred to earlier of 26 January—the letter was leaked by the Socialist Worker newspaper and published widely in other media outlets—contained a number of concessions that the Government proposed to make to the Bill in the House of Lords. Those concessions included giving devolved Administrations the right to maintain facility time and check-off arrangements. It would be helpful if the Minister confirmed today that devolved Administrations will maintain that control over facility time. The SNP will continue to push to derail any attempt by the UK Government to dictate to Scotland and other devolved Administrations how they should treat their public sector workers.

Mr Kevan Jones: First, I declare an interest as a member of the GMB. My wife also works for a trade union.

We often hear the cry from Conservative Members that the turnout in union ballots is not high enough. We have before us a mechanism that would at least assist with that, by getting more people to participate in e-ballotting. I have seen some pretty poor excuses for statements, but today’s statement about why we cannot introduce e-ballotting for trade union ballots must win the prize for the poorest argument.

This Government pride themselves on wanting to be an e-Government on everything from driving licences to the new universal credit, which can only be accessed
online. The Minister said the Government need to be convinced that e-balloting would be secure, but in response to numerous interventions from Labour Members, he did not articulate the reasons why he thought the process was in any way insecure. I would respect his position more if he came up with reasons and said what the problems are. The idea of a review is clearly the classic civil service “kick it into the long grass” approach.

Nick Boles: I do not want to take up time because lots of Members want to speak, but may I draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to elections conducted in the Philippines? Interesting, a company called Smartmatic—chaired by a former Labour Member, his colleague Lord Malloch-Brown—was put in charge of conducting online voting for the entire population of the Philippines. There was a hack, in which the identity data of 70 million people were stolen, and a report said that every registered voter’s data were open to abuse.

Mr Jones: I know this Government love things foreign, but may I tell the Minister, with great respect, that he need not go very far to find examples of where e-voting has worked and there have not been any problems? I am referring to the pilots that took place in 2004, including in my constituency and others in the north-east, after which the Electoral Commission’s report found no problems with e-voting. He will obviously want to go on a fact-finding trip to the Philippines to look at this—I am sure we would all welcome his going there—but the fact is that he just needs to look at what has happened in this country.

I must say that the Minister put up the very flimsy defence to the question, “If it’s all right for the Conservative party, why is it not all right for the trade union movement?” I would have respected his position if he had come up with concrete reasons why he thought electronic—

[Interruption.] Well, he cites the Philippines, but has he actually looked at the Electoral Commission’s report on e-voting in 2004? It quite clearly stated that there was no issue of fraud or any risk to security. The fact that the Government then got cold feet about what I must say was a rather hysterical campaign against postal voting is neither here nor there.

Andrew Gwynne: That has been said not just by the Electoral Commission, but by the Electoral Reform Society, which is obviously expert in e-voting. It has certainly conducted a number of internal elections for the Labour party using e-voting, and it would be quite capable of running similar elections for the trade union movement.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Minister backed himself into a corner by saying that such votes were so important that they could not be done electronically. Let us look, for example, at foundation trusts, which elect their governors by electronic voting and are quite happy that such a system is secure. The Minister may think that that is not very important, but my constituents certainly think that choosing those who run their local hospital and have a lot of powers in my area is a pretty important decision.

My hon. Friend is right that electronic voting is used by many organisations, including private companies and charities, to consult their members. Organisations such as the Electoral Reform Society, which are used by many bodies to conduct ballots, whether in electronic or postal form, not only have a track record of impartiality and strict adherence, but are respected not just in this country but internationally—the Minister is interested in international comparisons—so it is pretty pathetic to say we need more evidence.

The other weakness in the Government’s argument is that I am not convinced that, once they have had this so-called review, they will actually implement the proposal. The proposal came from the trade unions, and I congratulate the general secretaries and others who have backed it. It would be a move forward by improving access to voting for trade union members and by improving the situation.

4 pm

I turn briefly to the facility time cap. This one is remarkable. The Minister quite clearly stated that he did not know what the abuse was. If he does not know what it is, why is he trying to fix it? We all know why—it is a way of attacking the trade unions. I will give him a chance to say this, but he has not demonstrated what the cap system they have come up with will cost. It will mean sifting through all the various organisations and then going into detail, because those organisations will individually have to justify why they need facility time. It is a bit of a dog’s breakfast.

I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said about devolution. This Bill is another example of this Government saying that they are committed to devolution and to giving decisions to local authorities, but then doing exactly the opposite and dictating to local authorities what they should and should not do. With democratically accountable organisations, these things should be up to the electorates to decide.

There is another important issue that the Minister did not touch on. It is all right to argue about whether people can use facility time, but, in these so-called reports that are going to be done, no indication is going to be given of what money is saved by organisations such as local councils because they have good industrial relations and can ensure that, for example, when redundancies are needed that can be done efficiently.

Rachael Maskell: I wish to challenge the Government about the way in which they are handling the Lords amendments. They need to be clearly scrutinised to make sure that there is evidence behind what is said, as today is yet another example of a Government who are evidence light when putting their proposals before Parliament.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will just quickly declare an interest first. I am a member of Unite and of the GMB, and was a Unite official for 17 years.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Does my hon. Friend agree that the evidential basis for the entire Bill has been non-existent throughout its passage through Parliament? Levels of industrial action are at historical lows in the UK. The days of work lost per year to strikes are down 90% since the 1980s.
Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points, and in particular, the point that levels of industrial action are at an all-time low. The industrial action that is occurring is in the public sector, where the Government are failing to negotiate with the trade unions, as we see today with the junior doctors. We have to examine why we are in the situation that we are in, but the evidence does not sit on the Government's side.

I have overseen many industrial action ballots, including paper ballots and electronic indicative ballots. There is greater engagement with electronic balloting. There is a reason for that—it is convenient. It is also far more accurate. We do not have the same issues as with paper ballots, because in electronic ballots it is very clear whether a vote is a yes or a no, whereas other forms of voting can be more ambiguous—we all experience that on election night. The intention of the person voting is very clear in an electronic ballot.

I put this challenge to the Minister. He has talked about his tour of the world, but we are talking about ballots here in the UK and an evidence base from the UK. That evidence is overwhelming; I would say that it shows 100% security of electronic balloting. Other countries may not have such rigour in their processes, so it is inappropriate to bring them into the equation. It was very telling that the Minister was unable to say why it was less safe to use electronic ballots than postal ballots because the evidence simply is not there.

It is also important that the Government acknowledge the temperature of industrial relations, in the public sector in particular. People express a view about decisions that have been made on terms and conditions because it is essential that the Government respond to that. High turnouts will help inform the Government in their decision-making processes. They are vital.

Like many of my colleagues, I point out that the Government depend on electronic means for matters that I would say are far more serious: tax returns, local government council tax collection, driving licence applications and registering to vote in a parliamentary election are all done electronically. We know that many—if not all—bank transfers of millions of pounds in which the Government engage are done electronically, so why does a vote of an independent trade union require even more vigour than processes that the Government already use? It does not add up, other than to say that the Government are using this as a political tool.

The Labour party does not have confidence in the Government's intentions for the process of review and roll-out for electronic balloting, and they should set out the timetable for that review. They say that it will start in six months, but when will it end, how long will it last, and how will it lead positively to a roll-out? We must start examining why we are in the situation that we are in, before assessing whether there have been excessive costs?

How will the Minister balance the minuscule cost of facility time with the amount of money that trade unions save through employers not going to employment tribunals or having such high sickness levels, and by so much value being added to organisations through increased productivity? I would like a response. How will the Minister assess the cost of health, safety, learning, and all the value that trade union reps bring?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If we are all brief, nearly everybody will get in.

Tommy Sheppard: At every stage of this Bill I have asked what great calamity there is in our land’s industrial relations that requires us to bring forward new primary legislation. I have yet to receive an answer, because of course there is none. This proposal is unique among many that we have considered in this House, because it is not a proposal to change public policy as a result of a problem that has been identified in society; the proposal before the House is motivated purely by the ideology of fictions inside the Conservative party that have scores to settle, and whose antipathy towards the trade unions is manifest.

Some Conservative Members—they are not in their place at the moment—do not share that view, but overall that is where the centre of political gravity lies in the party of government. It is setting itself an attitude that will inform public policy on trade unions that is not shared by almost any other Government in Europe, or in the advanced capitalist world. Why are the Government going so far out on a limb to set themselves apart from everyone else? I accept that the Bill is now slightly less bad than it was on Second Reading, but we should be under no doubt that this is still very much an anti-trade union Bill.

This Bill is designed to curtail the expression, capacity and effectiveness of free trade unions in our country, and I must speculate about whether this is a genuine change of heart on behalf of the Government, or whether other factors may be involved in their consideration of how many fronts they can fight on at once. I wonder whether the proximity of 23 June and the referendum that will happen then have persuaded the Government that they should try not to engage in too large a conflict with the trade unions of this land, because they need their support in order to secure the Government’s position of staying in the EU. That is why we all want to see the words written down in black and white, rather than accept the spoken words of Ministers from the Dispatch Box at this time.

I am glad to say that the situation is different in Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) explained, the Scottish Government are committed to working in partnership with the trade unions of Scotland to try to build our economy towards prosperity. We believe that trade unions are a vital component of civil society. If my party is
[Tommy Sheppard]

re-elected next week, we are pledged to do everything we can within the law to compromise the provisions of this Bill and to prevent them from frustrating the operation of free trade unions.

I shall engage with two further issues under consideration. The first is e-ballots. When the Government first announced their attitude to e-ballotting, it sounded very much like an analogue Government in an digital age and that they were scared of the possibility of e-ballotting. It is a matter of some irony, is it not, that it takes such a contemporary, modern and forward-lookin institution as the House of Lords to try to persuade the Government of the error of their ways? I accept what the Minister said and I accept the Government’s position that they have moved slightly on this issue. They can no longer defend the indefensible, which would be to say that they would not allow electronic balloting in a society where it is now commonplace and the norm for most of our citizens.

I see you looking at me, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I shall try to be as quick as I can. We are concerned when the Minister tries to give himself a get-out clause. If he had come up with an amendment saying that e-ballotting would go ahead unless it could be shown that there were clear and demonstrable problems for its introduction and roll-out, we might have had more sympathy with him. What he is trying to achieve, however, is to give himself a get-out clause to pretend this from happening in the future. In a post-referendum situation, he might not be so well disposed to favouring the trade unions.

The Minister also provided what I think is a thin defence when he spoke about this being a statutory matter. It is statutory only in the sense that trade unions operate within the framework of legislation—but so do charities, private companies and indeed political parties. As I say, I find that to be a very thin defence.

Finally, I want to make a point about the cap on facility time. I have witnessed some bizarre debates in this Chamber, but frankly, this one borders on the surreal. We are being asked to pass legislation to try to prevent something that the Minister accepts we do not even know exists. This is fantasy legislation and fantasy law-making. I think we should reject the proposal for a facility time cap, support the Lords amendments, reject the Government’s attempts to weaken them and, if we get the chance, finally vote against this anti-trade union legislation.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I shall be brief. I welcome the Government’s shift in position, particularly on check-off. I do not believe that check-off has any intrinsic costs to employers. For many public sector organisations, this is literally a check in a box on the payroll system. I view the shift of view as testament to the hard work of thousands of ordinary working people who take on additional responsibilities as shop stewards in their own time to support and protect their fellow workers’ rights—a task for which they are often thanked neither by their co-workers nor their employers, yet they sometimes go above and beyond in their role.

Trade unions have a proud history of internationalism, and tomorrow is International Workers Memorial day—a day strongly supported by the TUC, the trade union movement as a whole, lawyers and the Health and Safety Executive. I mention this because I shall not be able to attend tomorrow’s events. I would like to pay tribute to Herbert Styles, the former Unite representative and Blue Star Fibres worker who religiously organises this event sequentially in Inmmingham, Grimsby and Cleethorpes.

This is a growing event, with greater attendance every year by families who are deeply grateful for the work Herbert puts in. Time is taken to remember those who have lost their lives in the course of their day-to-day work. I shall not be there to lay a wreath tomorrow, but Jonathan Spurr will be there in my place to do so. I would like to see this day recorded on our calendars. Can the Minister do anything to assist in recognising the role of trade unions and workers and those who lose their lives in the course of their day-to-day work. Can he help to get this recorded in calendars and diaries across the UK?

4.15 pm

Mr Anderson: This is supposed to be about modernising—that is the word the Minister used—ballots, but it is really about trying to limit people’s ability to take strike action. Let us be honest: he knows that if electronic balloting was allowed, the turnouts would go up, way beyond the limits set out. The lights have come on in the Conservative party and it has realised that it has set itself a trap and walked into it. In a situation where the Government are trying to stop people being able to take industrial action by setting ludicrous limits, they have set a precedent and had a debate that says, “If you are genuine, let us have as many people participating as possible.” Let us look at the history on this issue. In the 1980s, the Tory Government tried to control the right of people to take legitimate industrial action under the law and were told, “If you do away with workforce ballots, you will reduce the turnout.” The facts and figures have proved that for more than 30 years; the average turnout in workplace ballots was 80% but now if you get 40% you are doing well.

The proposals on facility time show the real ignorance of the Conservative party, tied to its arrogance; it just does not know what goes on in the workplace. Let me give two examples. In 1986, I spent every day for a fortnight visiting a man in hospital, 30 miles away from his workplace. He had been buried under 50 tonnes of coal and ultimately died, and we did not take evidence from him; we took what was used in a coroner’s case. Five years later, I was working for Newcastle City Council, encouraging home care workers who had worked themselves into an early grave. I was saying, “Look, it is really in your interests to leave work on ill-health retirement agreements.” They would not talk to personnel officers because they were frightened of that sort of authority figure, but as a local trade union representative I was able to convince them it was the right thing for them to do and for the authority to do. We saved having to give people compulsory redundancy and we were helping to manage the system. Under what is being proposed now, the likes of me will no longer be there. There will be some clerk filling in forms to send down to London for a clerk there, and there will be thousands of these things. This really has to be stopped. It is nonsense and it should be thrown out.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I know, as does anybody who has been involved in these things, that for the past 50 or 60 years
every Tory Government manifesto has had a clause attacking the trade unions. He referred to facility time, and the proposal shows how inexperienced Ministers are on industrial relations. Any major employer welcomes facility time as it saves them a lot of money in the end.

Mr Anderson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. If instead of talking to the TaxPayers Alliance to get information, the Government had spoken to any reasonable employer in this country or any trade union that deals day in, day out with this, they would have got a picture of the real story, not just some made-up attack on the trade union movement, which is what this is really all about.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I realise that time is short, so I shall be brief. Welcome as it is that the Government have been forced into a series of embarrassing U-turns, my party, which does not receive funding from the trade union movement, does not regard the Bill as a sensible attempt to look at some of the issues relating to party funding. Clearly, that should be done in the round and fairly, including looking at trade union funding, and we would support such an approach. This always set out to be a cynical, politically motivated Bill that undermines the important role that trade unions play in the democratic process. Encouragingly, Members in the other place have acted in a measured approach. This always set out to be a cynical, politically motivated Bill that undermines the important role that trade unions play in the democratic process. Encouragingly, Members in the other place have acted in a measured and cross-party way. Rather than simply striking down rafts of the Bill, as many would have liked—we would have liked to see that for some parts of the Bill—they have suggested cross-party, sensible and measured amendments.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is it not amazing that a party that tells us all that it is in favour of the free market has in this case resorted to very high-handed regulation?

Greg Mulholland: It certainly presents itself as an extremely draconian Bill whose drafting involved no collaboration of any kind.

I think that, welcome though it is, the Government’s change of heart has not gone far enough. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard): it is clear that the Government have realised that they cannot make enemies of the trade unions when they need the trade union movement in order to secure a “yes” vote—an “in” vote—in the EU referendum. I look forward to working with trade unionists, with the Government, and with members of all parties in seeking to achieve that.

Time is short. Let me end by saying that, given the Government’s welcome U-turn, we will not oppose the amendment. Nevertheless, the Government have simply failed to make the case that electronic voting is not a sensible, modern way forward, which exposes the fact this is really about trying to stop trade unions from reaching the threshold rather than sensibly reforming the system. Alongside others, we will continue to make the case for such reform.

I believe that the Government should think again about the attitude to trade unions that they have shown during this process, and should work together with parties.
Trade Union Bill 27 APRIL 2016 Trade Union Bill

Garnier, rh Sir Edward Garnier, Mark Gauke, Mr David Ghani, Nusrat Gibb, Mr Nick Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl Glen, John Goodwill, Mr Robert Gove, rh Michael Graham, Richard Grant, Mrs Helen Grayling, rh Chris Green, Chris Green, rh Damian Greening, rh Justine Grieve, rh Mr Dominic Griffiths, Andrew Gunnmer, Ben Gyimah, Mr Sam Hallon, rh Robert Hall, Luke Hammond, Stephen Hancock, rh Matthew Hands, rh Greg Harper, rh Mr Mark Harrington, Richard Harris, Rebecca Hart, Simon Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan Hayes, rh Mr John Heald, Sir Oliver Heappey, James Heaton-Harris, Chris Heaton-Jones, Peter Henderson, Gordon Herbert, rh Nick Hinds, Damian Hollingbery, George Hollinrake, Kevin Hollobone, Mr Philip Holloway, Mr Adam Hopkins, Kris Howarth, Sir Gerald Howell, John Howlett, Ben Huddleston, Nigel Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy Hurdt, Mr Nick Jackson, Mr Stewart James, Margot Javid, rh Sajid Jayawardena, Mr Ranil Jenkins, Mr Bernard Jenkyns, Andrew Jenrick, Robert Johnson, Boris Johnson, Alistair Johnson, Joseph Jones, Andrew Jones, rh Mr David Jones, Mr Marcus Kennedy, Seema Kirby, Simon Knight, rh Sir Greg Knight, Julian Kwarteng, Kwasi Lancaster, Mark Latham, Pauline Leadsom, Andrea Lee, Dr Phillip Lefroy, Jeremy Leslie, Charlotte Letwin, rh Mr Oliver Lewis, Brandon Lewis, rh Dr Julian Lidell-Granger, Mr Ian Lidington, rh Mr David Lilley, rh Mr Peter Lord, Jonathan Mackey, Craig Mackintosh, David Main, Mrs Anne Mak, Mr Alan Malthouse, Kit Mann, Scott Mathias, Dr Tania May, rh Mrs Theresa Maynard, Paul McCartney, Jason McCartney, Karl McLaughlin, rh Mr Patrick McPartland, Stephen Menzies, Mark Merriman, Huw Metcalfe, Stephen Miller, rh Mrs Maria Milling, Amanda Mills, Nigel Milton, rh Anne Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew Mordaunt, Penny Morgan, rh Nicky Morris, Anne Marie Morris, David Morris, James Morton, Wendy Mowat, David Mundell, rh David Murray, Mrs Sheryll Neill, Robert Newton, Sarah Nolan, Mr Andrew Normoyle, Jesse Nuttall, Mr David Offord, Dr Matthew Paisley, Ian Parish, Neil Patel, rh Priti Pawsey, Mark Penning, rh Mike Penrose, John Percy, Andrew Perry, Claire Phillips, Stephen Philp, Chris Pickles, rh Sir Eric Pincher, Christopher Pouler, Dr Daniel Pow, Rebecca Prentis, Victoria Pritchard, Mark Pursglove, Tom Quin, Jeremy Quince, Will Raab, Mr Dominic Redwood, rh John Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob Robertson, Mr Laurence Robinson, Gavin Robinson, Sir Geoffrey Robinson, Mary Rodgers, Sir Andrew Rudd, rh Amber Rutley, David Sandbach, Antoinette Scully, Paul Selous, Andrew Shannon, Jim Shapps, rh Grant Sharma, Alok Shellbrooke, Alec Simpson, rh Mr Keith Skidmore, Chris Smith, Chloe Smith, Henry Smith, Julian Smith, Royston Soames, rh Sir Nicholas Sollowy, Amanda Souby, rh Anna Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline Spencer, Mark Stephenson, Andrew Stevenson, John Stewart, Bob Stewart, Iain Stewart, Rory Streeter, Mr Gary Stride, Ken Stuart, Graham Sturdy, Julian Sunak, Rishi Swainey, rh Mr Desmond Swire, rh Mr Hugo Syms, Mr Robert Thomas, Derek Throup, Maggie Timpson, Edward Tolhurst, Keith

Abrahams, Debbie Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina Alexander, Heidi Ali, Rushanara Allen, Mr Graham Anderson, Mr David Ashworth, Jonathan Austin, Ian Bailey, Mr Adrian Bardell, Hannah Barron, rh Kevin Benn, rh Hilary Betts, Mr Olive Black, Mhairi Blackford, Ian Blackman, Kirsty Blenkinsop, Tom Blomfield, Paul Boswell, Philip Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben Brake, rh Tom Brennan, Kevin Brock, Deidre Brown, Alan Brown, Lyn Brown, rh Mr Nicholas Bryant, Chris Buck, Ms Karen Burden, Richard Burgon, Richard Butler, Dawn Byrne, rh Liam Cadbury, Ruth Cameron, Dr Lisa

Tomlinson, Justin Tomlinson, Michael Tracey, Craig Tredinnick, David Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie Truss, rh Elizabeth Tugendhat, Tom Turner, Mr Andrew Tynan, rh Mr Andrew Vara, Mr Shailesh Vickers, Martin Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa Walker, Mr Charles Walker, Mr Robin Wallace, Mr Ben Warburton, David Warman, Matt Watkinson, Dame Angela Wharton, James Whately, Helen Wheeler, Heather White, Chris Whittaker, Craig Whittingdale, rh Mr John Wigglesworth, Mr David Williams, Craig Williamson, rh Gavin Wilson, Mr Rob Wollaston, Dr Sarah Wood, Mike Wragg, William Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes: Jackie Doyle-Price and Guy Opperman

NOES Campbell, rh Mr Alan Campbell, Mr Ronnie Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair Champion, Sarah Chapman, Jenny Cherry, Joanna Clwyd, rh Ann Coaker, Vernon Coffey, Ann Cooper, Julie Cooper, rh Yvette Corbyn, rh Jeremy Cowan, Ronnie Cox, Jo Coyle, Neil Crausby, Mr David Crawley, Angela Creagh, Mary Crea, Stella Cradden, Mr Roger Crisp, rh Penny Cryer, John Cummins, Judith Cunningham, Alex Cunningham, Mr Jim Dakin, Nic Danzuk, Simon David, Wayne Davies, Geraint De Piero, Gloria Docherty-Hughes, Martin Donaldson, Stuart Blair Docherty, Stephen Dowd, Jim Dowd, Peter
The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 268.

Clause 13

**PUBLICATION REQUIREMENTS**

**Motion made, and Question put.** That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 17.—(Stephen Barclay.)

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 268.

**Division No. 257**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry

Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr lain
Zeiicher, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Jessica Morden and Jeff Smith
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gymah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hancock, rh Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hudson, Neville
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, John
Kwarteng, Mr Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddingon, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Stephen
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McGuirk, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morrison, Sir John
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jess
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosalyn
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Warton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and Guy Opperman

NOES
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 17 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made to the words so restored to the Bill.

Tellers for the Yes:
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Roberts, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Ryan, rh Joan
Salmond, rh Alex
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Smirner, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wis hart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr lain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jeff Smith and Jessica Morden
Clause 3

Ballots: 40% Support Requirement in Important Public Services

Nick Boles: I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to consider the following: Lords amendments 3 to 6.
Lords amendments 7 and 8, Government motions to disagree, and Government amendments (k) to (p) in lieu.
Lords amendments 9 to 16 and 18 to 29.

Nick Boles: The amendments improve the Bill and take account of a number of points of concern raised by Members of both this House and the other place. This is a raft of amendments, and I hope hon. Members will understand if I focus on the highlights in the order in which they appear in the Bill.

The 40% ballot threshold relates to strike action in important public services. The broad reference to “ancillary workers” has been removed and a “reasonable belief” defence for unions has been added. Those changes provide more clarity and certainty for unions and employers.

On the timing and duration of industrial action, the ballot mandate has been extended from four to six months, and to up to nine months where the union and the employer agree to that. That responds to concerns that four months was simply too short a time to enable both sides to resolve a dispute.

On the provision to provide two weeks’ notice of industrial action to an employer, the Bill now continues to allow for the current period of only seven days’ notice, where the employer and the trade union agree to that.

On picketing, there was great concern in this House, but less so in the House of Lords, about the Bill’s reference to “armbands”. That reference was taken from the original picketing code, which has been in force for a great deal of time. We do not want picket supervisors mistakenly believing that they must wear an armband. I hope that that will be welcome, particularly to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is not in his seat, but who eloquently raised concerns about the issue.

The House debated at length the principle that union members should make an active choice to contribute to a trade union’s political fund. The other place established a Select Committee on Trade Union Political Funds and Political Party Funding under the chairmanship of Lord Burns, and I would like to place on record my gratitude to him and all the members of the Committee for their deliberations on this question.

The Bill has been amended to reflect the Select Committee’s recommendations on opting in. Our manifesto commitment suggested that we wanted to extend the opt-in principle for trade union members, and the revised provision meets that commitment. In future, all new trade union members will have to make an active choice to contribute to the political fund through an opt-in.

Our amendment corrects some legally defective drafting in the amendment tabled by Lord Burns and agreed to by the Lords. In particular, instead of the certification officer being given responsibility for issuing a code of practice, our amendment places a statutory obligation directly on unions to provide an annual reminder to existing members of their rights to opt out. That complements the position for new members, who will be required to be offered the right to opt in.

We have also improved requirements on unions to report details of political expenditure in their annual returns. That reflects the debates that we had about the importance of that issue in assisting union members to make informed decisions about whether to contribute to a union’s political fund. At the heart of the provision is transparency and proportionality.

The Bill has been amended to require reporting on all expenditure from a union’s political fund, including to causes and campaigns, but it also fixes what became characterised as the onerous obligation for the union to report on “every bus fare”. Instead, unions will be required to report on the total expenditure going to each political party or organisation in each of the categories.

Finally, the other place rightly agreed to increase parliamentary oversight of regulations that could seek to lower the reporting threshold once it has been raised and therefore increase the regulatory burden on trade unions.

On check-off, we had robust debates in this House, and there were equally robust debates in the other place. Those debates related to union subscriptions being deducted automatically from wages in the public sector. The Bill we welcome back to the House allows check off to continue where the costs are met by the trade unions and on the basis that union members have the option of paying subscriptions by other means. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is not in his place, made an eloquent argument for an amendment on this very issue, and I indicated on Report that we would look at it closely as the Bill went through the House of Lords. I therefore hope that he is satisfied with the decision by the Government to accept this amendment. I pay tribute to him for his work, both privately and publicly, in making the case for this important change.

Our manifesto committed us to reforming the role of the certification officer. The Bill removes the requirement for the certification officer to be able to act in some areas only where a complaint has been received from a member of a trade union. Instead, the certification officer will be able to look into issues that come to his attention from third parties, or in the course of his duties. However, the provisions have been amended to increase the independence of the certification officer by ensuring that he is not subject to ministerial direction. As I have said previously, the certification officer is under no obligation to act on complaints or representations from third parties.

Nevertheless, concerns were raised that spurious or vexatious complaints could tie up the certification officer’s resources and, indeed, place an unfair burden on trade unions. The Bill has therefore been amended to require that the certification officer must have reasonable grounds to suspect a breach before appointing an inspector to conduct an investigation. I am confident that this will
protect unions from vexatious complaints and over-zealous regulation. However, I am happy to assure hon. Members that we will keep this under review to see how it works out in practice. In response to human rights concerns, the judicial oversight of the certification officer has been strengthened. The Bill has been amended to allow appeals to the employment appeals tribunal on the certification officer’s decisions on the grounds of fact as well as law.

I hope that hon. Members will welcome the amendments. I believe that they improve the Bill, and I hope the House will see fit to accept them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I call Kevin Jones.

Mr Kevan Jones: Kevin Brennan.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sorry—Kevin Brennan.

Kevin Brennan: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is a great physical similarity between me and my hon. Friend, and it was entirely understandable on your part to mistake one for the other.

First, as I should have done when speaking on the previous group of amendments, I declare my membership of Unite the union and my very proud membership of the Musicians Union.

As the Minister said, the Government are accepting most of the amendments in this group. Due to the time constraints, I will not deal with all of them. He highlighted the significant changes, including on check-off, which we very much welcome. He will recall that during our debate on Report the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) tabled an amendment on these provisions. I pointed out that it was extraordinary that a Conservative Government were seeking to make illegal a voluntary arrangement between parties, even where one party is paying for the service, when that arrangement is neither immoral nor illegal. That would have been an extraordinarily illiberal measure. I am glad that in their lordships’ House the Government gave way on this matter and it is no longer in the Bill. That is very welcome.

I welcome what the Minister said on the record about the certification officer. It is extremely important that the Government recognise the concerns that have been expressed about the potential for vexatious complaints by third parties and the tremendous waste of time that that could be for all concerned. I also welcome his comments on a review of how the provision works out in practice. Although, as I have made clear, we do not agree with what the Government are doing in relation to the certification officer, that is a welcome assurance, and I am glad that he has put it on the record here at this stage before the Bill goes back to the Lords.

Perhaps the most controversial and contentious element of the Bill has been the Government’s desire to create an opt-in process for trade union political funds. Lords amendments 7 and 8 relate to that. The original Government proposal meant that existing trade union members who pay into their union’s political fund would have to opt back into the fund, in writing, within three months of the Bill’s passage, and do so again after five years.

5 pm

Let us imagine if every organisation in the country was required to get a recommitment to every standing order payable to it within three months and in writing. It would obviously result in only one thing: massive problems for that organisation, whether it was a bank, a voluntary group, any membership organisation or a subscription to a magazine. It was always clear to us that the proposal was utterly unworkable, and designed mainly to deprive unilaterally the governing party’s main political opponent—the Labour party—of an important source of funding. It seemed to be a pretty naked attempt to undermine effective opposition from the Labour party in this place and beyond.

That is why the House of Lords set up a special Select Committee to look at the matter, as the Minister said, under the able chairmanship of Lord Burns. We, too, are grateful for his efforts and those of his colleagues on the Committee and other Members of the House of Lords. We thank them—not only Labour peers but those from other parties and Cross Benchers—for approaching the issue in such an imaginative and collaborative way. I recognise, as did the House of Lords in its report, that the Government made a manifesto commitment to introduce opt-in. However, they made other manifesto commitments about big business and we have not yet seen much action on those, but we will leave that for the moment.

The Conservative party manifesto stated that it would introduce opt-in, and it was elected with an overall majority in the House of Commons, albeit on less than 40% of the vote. The Government have therefore been able to argue that the House of Lords should not remove opt-in from the Bill under the normal conventions that the other place follows. The Lords amendments are extremely skilfully drafted. The House of Lords has taken the view that opt-in should apply only to new members of a trade union, that there should be a longer period—at least 12 months—for trade unions to adjust their rules and procedures and that there should be no automatic requirement to opt-in again after five years.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that this will not be difficult for many trade unions because on their application forms to join, there is a box to tick to contribute to the political fund? As someone who ran a political fund, I know that that was the case in the GMB. Is this therefore not another example of proposed legislation that is not really needed?

Kevin Brennan: Given that my hon. Friend has been physically mistaken for me, I am not surprised that our opinions are identical on this matter. I agree with him.

Mr Anderson: May I take my hon. Friend back to his comments about the work of the House of Lords? I echo the words of Lord Patrick Cormack, who was a Member of this House for 40 years. He said:

“But we do not have to advance on that at such a pace that we seriously disadvantage one of the great parties of the realm and unbalance our democracy in the process.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 March 2016; Vol. 769, c. 1876.]

Does not that get to the nub of what this was all about—unbalancing democracy in this House and disadvantaging the Labour party? Lord Cormack was absolutely right. It is a shame that there are not more like him in the Conservative party in this House today.
Kevin Brennan: I pay tribute to Lord Cormack for his work on the Bill and his words in the House of Lords. He might seem to some an unlikely hero of the working class, but in this instance he has reflected what one nation Conservatism should mean. That phrase is bandied about from time to time, but his interventions and those of other colleagues in the House of Lords remind us that we legislate not just for one Parliament but for the future. I will go on to describe why it would have been very dangerous if the Government had stuck to their original plans.

The House of Lords looked for a workable way for the Government to introduce their stated manifesto commitment without it becoming a crude and clumsy device to starve the second largest party in Parliament—the Labour party—of a long-standing source of finance from the very institutions that founded it. My hon. Friend just said this in another way, but I think that the Lords have done the Government a big favour. Had they proceeded with the original proposals, they would have created—make no mistake about it—a lasting bitterness and resentment in the trade union and Labour movement and, indeed, beyond. We are grateful for the support received from other political parties.

I have no doubt, as many of their lordships pointed out, and, indeed, as paragraph 130 of the House of Lords cross-party Select Committee report noted, that the original proposal would

“make the Labour Party more inclined to take unilateral action against the Conservative Party and its funding when next in government.”

It appears that, at this very late hour, that point has hit home with Ministers, and I very much welcome that.

The Government have decided to think again about their proposals on political fund opt-ins and have tabled amendments (k) to (n) to replace Lords amendments 7 and 8. The requirement to opt into political funds will apply only to new union members. As a result, union members who have already voluntarily agreed to make contributions will not be required to opt in again to support ongoing trade union campaigns. Existing members will be required to opt in only if their union votes to establish a political fund for the first time. The Government have also conceded on the issue of five years and have permitted members to opt in within three months and to renew their political fund subscription annually. On that basis, while retaining our opposition to the Bill in general and to opt-in in particular, we will not seek to divide the House on the Government amendments, given the substantial concessions they have made.

Tommy Sheppard: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the clear intention behind the move from opt out to opt in is an attempt by some members of the Conservative party to attack the funding of the Labour party. Does he agree, however, that our defence of the right of trade unions to engage in political activity will be more effective if we ensure that they are able to engage not just in activity to support the Labour party, but in other political action that achieves change and support, whichever party they feel serves their members’ best interests?

Kevin Brennan: It is accepted that there is a special relationship between the Labour party and the trade union movement, which founded the party. Of course, they use political funds to campaign in all sorts of way. I am grateful to all parties that have recognised the importance to our constitution of the political funds of trade unions and the vital role they play in our democracy. Trade union money is the cleanest money in politics, compared with some of the sources of money and donations to political parties, and long may that continue.

I do not want to detain the House for much longer, but it would be remiss of me not to conclude without paying tribute to all those who have made this change possible and worked so hard to improve this dreadful Bill. I include all my hon. Friends in our BIS Front-Bench team, including my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State; former members of that Front-Bench team who helped at earlier stages of the Bill; Members from other parties in the House who have helped to fight the good fight; and my hon. Friends in the Labour party.

I want to pay special tribute to my good friend Baroness Smith of Basildon and her team in the Lords—Baroness Hayter, Lord Stevenson and Lord Mendelsohn—as well as all the other peers from other parties and from no party at all who voted to create the Select Committee and who worked so diligently and expertly to get us to where we are today.

It is said that our constitution means that the Opposition have their say but the Government get their way. In this instance, the Opposition have had their say and, at least in part, also got their way. As a result, the legislation has had some of the most pernicious edges knocked off, even if it remains a pig’s ear.

Mr Kevan Jones: I welcome the work of the Lords, which my hon. Friend has just outlined. It is quite clear what the Bill is about. The Prime Minister talks about being a one nation Conservative, but he wants to be a one nation Conservative with one party—the Conservative party—at an advantage. If we want to understand Conservative Members’ disappointment, we have only to look at the Secretary of State’s face, which says it all.

There was no need for the legislation. It was based on a prejudice born of not understanding the way in which trade unions work, and it was an attempt to ensure that the Conservative party had not only a political advantage but a major financial one. The original requirement in
I used to deal every day of the week with people who, having been a member for a while, chose for whatever reason to opt out. There is a clear mechanism, in most trade unions, for people to do that. The idea that people are being forced to give money against their will, is just not the case. As I said earlier, when people join and fill in an application form, they take a conscious decision to tick whether they want to pay the political levy. Again, this provision is not really needed, but is based on both the ignorance of Conservative Members and the vindictiveness of a section of their party. When they won the general election in 2015, they thought that they could just roll on and do anything they liked to the democratic processes of this country.

The provision on check-off is another useless piece of legislation, because many councils and organisations already choose to levy an administration fee for handling the check-off system. Again, I do not think that the provision will be very onerous on the many trade unions who already pay such a fee. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said earlier, this is a minor issue in that it does not involve a huge amount of money. If we are saying that trade unions should not be subsidised by the taxpayer in such a way, that is fine, but in many cases trade unions are already not being subsidised, so this is another provision that is not needed.

Rachael Maskell: It is really important to calculate the real cost of check-off. The cost is absolutely nominal, and many trade unions are actually subsidising local authorities, the NHS and other public bodies with the amount that they pay for the levy.

Mr Jones: I agree. This shows my age, but the process used to have to be done manually, which meant that there was a cost. My hon. Friend is quite right that, with modern-day computer payroll systems, for example, the cost is very difficult to determine.

I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West, oppose the Bill as a whole, but given the compromise that we have got because of the EU referendum, we are in a good place. However, I would just issue a final warning. I hope Conservative Members will not, once the EU referendum is over, bring in legislation to fill in what has been left out of the Bill. That would not only be another attack on trade unions, which are among the most highly regulated sectors in our country, but would show the vindictiveness that still exists in a section of the Conservative party. I look forward to the introduction, not long after June, of a Bill exploring total transparency in party funding in this country. If trade unions can have openness in terms of their money, we should decide it is time for other donations to political parties to have the same type of scrutiny and transparency, so that people can make up their own minds when they go to the ballot box.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I apologise to Chris Stephens. I should have called him before the last speaker.

Chris Stephens: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I agree with many of the points he made.
SNP Members have always opposed the Government’s proposals on trade union political funds for the simple reason that it should be up to trade union members to decide where their money goes. It is up to them to decide whether they should support one political party or another, or whether they should sponsor individual candidates, as has happened in some cases, rather than work for a particular political party.

I emphasise the point that this is an attack not just on the Labour party but on the ability of a trade union to organise effectively across a community. Political funds have done great community work, health and safety campaigning, and anti-racism campaigning, sponsoring organisations such as Hope not Hate and Show Racism the Red Card. There is also charity work and international work—trade unions do fantastic work across the world.

It will come as no great surprise to any trade unionist that the change on check-off is not a major one. Unison has said that it has 11,000 different agreements where it contributes to the cost of check-off. We welcome the Government’s U-turn on that.

I have participated in proceedings at every stage of the Bill’s progress. I will say a few words about that. If the voices of those with experience of a trade unionised workplace and those with a trade union background had been listened to and heeded, we would not be where we are now. There perhaps would not even have been a Trade Union Bill. Many Opposition Members have pointed out on a regular basis how unnecessary and unwanted this legislation is.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I declare an interest as a member of Unison and of the Community trade union, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I should also say that although I am a member of those unions, I have very good employers in the people of Ilford North and do not anticipate going on strike any time soon.

The Government’s concessions are welcome, but it is something of an irony that it has fallen to the unelected House to defend some of the most democratic elements of trade unions and their commitment to democratic life in the country. For some reason, this Government, who were elected with a slender majority of just 12, seem to think that that majority gives them carte blanche to trample all over the democratic traditions, values and heritage of our country.

It is not just the brazen attack on party political funding, and the Labour party in particular, that the Government have embarked upon with this Bill. Look at their record in the short time that they have governed as a single party. They have sought to rig the House of Commons, pack the House of Lords, gag charities and civil society, and restrict trade unions. This Sunday, new restrictions kick in on any publicly funded body; restrictions that have the potential to gag all sorts of people, including academics. It is a complete dog’s breakfast of a proposal. We will see what the higher education Bill says later this year; the Government will undoubtedly try to have another go at student unions, like they did in the 1990s.

I have been listening to the Minister this afternoon, and in particular, to what he said about the previous group of Government measures, which unfortunately passed, underlining why the Bill should still be opposed. There can be no decent evidence-based argument against trialling electronic balloting for trade union industrial actions and proposals to strike. The Minister himself could not offer a single shred of evidence to argue against a simple trial.

The Bill has really been about delegitimising trade unions. Whenever people go on strike and take industrial action the Government want to be able to say that a hard rump of activists have prompted it. But even the measures in the Bill would not have stopped the junior doctors or London transport workers going on strike. The turnout in both cases exceeded the threshold in the Bill. If the Government are serious about trade unions having broader and greater democratic legitimacy, they should unshackle the hands of trade union leaders and activists, so that they can do what they want to do and have asked to do, namely enter the 21st century by having electronic balloting.

We also had the farce about facility time. That goes to the heart of the Government’s fundamental misunderstanding of the role of trade unions. Full-time reps and staff who are let off part time for facility time play a valuable role in good industrial relations. They take up cases on behalf of their members, and ensure that they are well represented and supported. They advise employers on how to improve the workplace environment. Where there are good industrial relations, with trade unions and employers working together, the likelihood of a strike is lessened, and the workplace environment is better for everyone.

Chris Stephens: Is another key role for trade unions that of welfare, and giving workers assistance and help that they might not know about?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. The hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience from his own background in the trade union movement, and good employers value that working relationship with trade unions. When I speak to trade union members—whether in my local authority where I am an elected member of the London Borough of Redbridge, or representatives in other workplaces—they tell me that they do not have excessive facility time; often they do not have enough. They struggle to cope with caseloads, particularly when there are major changes to employment involving terms and conditions or staff numbers. That generates a huge burden and workload, and I do not think that the Government appreciate or value that.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only thanks to trade unions campaigning and funding legal action that millions of people have received rightful compensation for industrial injuries such as mesothelioma, or that there is the miners compensation scheme that was pioneered by the trade union movement? Without that, millions of people in this country who suffered through no fault of their own—apart from going to work—would not have received rightful compensation.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree, and if we are honest, too often trade unions have to speak up for people who would otherwise not have a voice. Often, because of the failures of this place and different Governments over the years, trade unions have had to
exercise pressure on behalf of their members, and exercise that muscle to ensure that Governments act to protect those who have been done a terrible injustice.

**Jo Stevens:** I speak as a former trade union lawyer who dealt with the legal cases that my hon. Friend referred to, and as an employer who benefited from having a unionised workplace to resolve issues and disagreements, and to get changes through companies. Without union representation in the workplace, that would have been much more difficult. Does my hon. Friend agree that we can see things from both sides?

**Wes Streeting:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I have sat on the employer side of the table when working with trade unions more than I have sat on the side of employees, even though I have been a member of a trade union for as long as I have been in full-time work. Employers often value that relationship with trade unions. It is not an adversarial relationship—well, sometimes it can be, and the breakdown of industrial relations, particularly when strike action occurs, is a sign of failure. When people choose to strike they lose their pay, so they do not do it lightly. Many families struggle to balance their budgets at the end of the month, with too much money and not enough money left, so losing a couple of days' pay is often a real hardship. They do not take such action lightly, and that is not understood enough when we speak in glib terms in this place about trade union industrial action.

I listened to what the Minister said about concessions that have been made, and how no changes will be made to facility time for a few years until we have done all the counting and assessment, but how long will that take, and how much money and civil service time will it cost? Bizarrely, the Government will waste time counting trade union facility time for employers up and down the country, but they will not count the number of children in poverty. That tells us all we need to know about this Government's wrong-headed priorities, and about the timewasting involved in introducing this Bill in the first place. I congratulate Members of the House of Lords—where the Government do not have a majority—on the way that they have torn this Bill apart and exposed it to forensic scrutiny, and we heard expertise from across the political spectrum.

**Kevin Brennan:** The Bill also received forensic scrutiny in the House of Commons, but we could not win any votes.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend has pre-empted me. I was about to congratulate not just my Front-Bench colleagues on their diligent work, but also my colleagues on the Bill Committee. I followed some of the sessions and read the evidence, and there was forensic scrutiny. The Government’s arguments did not stack up, and many of us have come to this Chamber time and again to get them to rethink.

5.30 pm

The Government have done some rethinking, but I share the cynicism of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) that this probably has more to do with the fact that the penny has dropped for the Prime Minister, who has realised that trade unions play an important role not only in the workplace, but in the life of our democracy. He is probably counting on those trade unions to make a positive case for Britain to remain in the European Union because of all the benefits it brings to people’s rights at work. Many of those rights would not be enjoyed, if it were not for the pressure that trade unions bring to bear, whether it be on this Parliament, the European Parliament or the European Commission. We should celebrate the work of trade unions and end this futile denigration of their work. This Bill in its current form, even as amended, should not be supported.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** I would like to put on record the fact that I am a member of the GMB union. It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Llwynypia (Wes Streeting), whom I commend for his long-standing commitment to this issue and for his work on the Bill.

Trade unions are a vital part of a free and democratic society, with a proud history of working hard on behalf of their members to achieve fair and just outcomes. Their roots lie in the industrial revolution, but their aims and aspirations are just as important to the 21st century context of an increasingly digital workforce, the European marketplace, globalisation, the challenges presented by an ageing population and the need for highly skilled workers to deliver the higher-skilled, higher-waged workforce that we need and aspire to in the UK.

My constituency is rich in small and medium-sized enterprises, and I want to see a vibrant local economy, providing high-quality services, well-paid jobs, excellent apprenticeship schemes and clear routes for progression in the workplace for those who want to develop their career. Trade unions have as much a role to play now as they did when they were first created in a very different employment and economic environment.

I want to share some examples of the positive differences unions have made and continue to make in my constituency. As a councillor, I was proud to vote for Southwark Council to adopt Unison’s ethical care charter—a commitment to dignity and respect for those who work so hard on behalf of vulnerable residents. The ethical care charter delivers better terms and conditions for care workers, but just as importantly, it delivers better standards of care for vulnerable residents by providing minimum visit times, paid time for travel and a commitment to training. Paying the London living wage for home care workers has resulted in higher-quality applicants working in this vital service, as well as a better quality of life for carers and their families.

**BECTU—the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union**—has fought a hard campaign for its members working at Picturehouse cinemas in my constituency. The campaign started at the Ritzy in Brixton and has extended to the new East Dulwich Picturehouse and the West Norwood Picturehouse, which will open next year. It is an excellent example of a modern trade union campaign, generating huge support among local residents and customers via social media. This campaign has achieved significant progress in driving up rates of pay for Picturehouse staff by 26% over three years, but there is more to do to achieve the goal of ensuring that all staff receive the London living wage—work that is hampered in part by the approach of Picturehouse and its parent
company Cineworld in refusing to recognise BECTU in some branches in favour of internal staff forums, which is a practice that should not be allowed.

Last week, I attended the launch of an important new campaign by Unison, “Making waves for a Living Wage”, calling for the water industry in the UK to become the first sector to be fully living wage accredited. This campaign has already succeeded in persuading several water companies to progress towards living wage accreditation—and in some cases to achieve it. It is an achievable, practical campaign, which the water companies can afford to implement and which will have huge benefits for low-paid staff working in this sector. It is a great example of the positive difference unions can and do make.

**Jo Stevens:** The Unison campaign on the living wage provides a perfect example. We would not have had a living wage campaign without the trade unions setting up the wider campaign in the first place.

**Helen Hayes:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Only yesterday, I was encouraged to see so many local NHS staff who are members of trade unions, including the GMB, Unite and Unison, coming out during their lunchbreak to show their support for the BMA and the junior doctors’ strike. They know that it is only by working together as one team—doctors, nurses, therapists, technicians, receptionists and cleaners—that our wonderful NHS delivers the world-class healthcare that it was set up to do.

Union members across the country know that industrial relations work best when there is a professional and respectful relationship between employers and employees. Change is often needed in response to changes in the economy, policy or legislation, or when particular injustices arise, and it is often best achieved by different parties—unions, employers and consumer groups—coming around the table to negotiate, work together and resolve differences or develop new practices. The situations we never hear about, but which are much more common, are those where there was no strike action and a settlement was reached through effective joint working. Such effective working relies on an even balance of power between different parties. This divisive and mean-spirited Bill seeks to shift the balance of power in a way that can have only negative consequences. It is right that negotiation and positive joint working take place in every possible circumstance, but in the rare instances where all other avenues have been exhausted—for example, when a Secretary of State for Health rejects out of hand any compromise offer he is asked to consider—the right to withdraw labour by taking strike action is an essential right, and its existence can often be the very thing that focuses minds on all sides on achieving effective negotiations.

The Government’s change of heart on opting in to trade unions use their funding for political campaigning and is only by working together as one team—doctors, nurses, therapists, technicians, receptionists and cleaners—that our wonderful NHS delivers the world-class healthcare that it was set up to do.

**Greg Mulholland:** I will not detain the House for long, as it has been a long day. I just want to remind the House that in this place it has consistently been the Liberal Democrats who have called for a proper reform of the party funding system. We have done that fairly and equitably, looking at the issues relating to funding from big business and from wealthy private donors, as well as the issues with trade union funding. It has been frustrating, even in my 11 years in Parliament, that that has been frustrated at times by the Conservative party and at times by the Labour party, with both acting in their own self-interest, seeking to preserve their own sources of funding while seeking to deal with the other’s. The Bill is still clearly doing that today and it is the wrong approach.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, but his party is not clean on this, given the money it accepted from Brown, who was found to be a fraud. So I do not think the hon. Gentleman should be lecturing others about transparency in party funding.

**Greg Mulholland:** I respect the hon. Gentleman, but that is a poor comment, given that I am talking about the party funding system. As he knows full well, issues have arisen for all parties with various donations that were accepted in a reasonable way and later found to have question marks about them. That is one reason we need to deal with this, but it is about the system and so his comments do him no favours on this occasion.

I warmly welcome the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), another Member of a party outside the two-party system that we have had in the past, but which is now gone in British politics. He said that although it is right that trade unions use their funding for political campaigning to stand up for the rights of their workers and important rights for British people, that is not the same thing as simply funneling money to the Labour party to win elections.

I have a very interesting perspective on the matter. During my first five years as the proud, new, and perhaps in some ways slightly naive MP for Leeds
North West, I found myself courted regularly by my local trade unions. I got on with them very well. As for their agenda, they told me consistently how disgusted they were with what Tony Blair's new Labour Government were doing to workers' rights and trade unions, and sought my Liberal Democrat support. I was only too happy to give that support, and to work with them.

I subsequently became lead member of Leeds City Council, and had direct and very strong relationships with my local trade union representatives—but then came the 2010 general election, and despite all that, and despite their disdain for Tony Blair and new Labour, they paid for billboards to go up in my constituency saying “Please vote for your local new Labour candidate”. That is not what I think hard-working trade union members paying into a political fund expect, and I think that it should be looked into by the trade union movement and by the Labour party.

Ultimately, we need to move to a system of transparency. I agree with the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in one respect: he made the sensible point that we should be doing all this together rather than through what is clearly a cynical Bill, and indeed a cynical attack on the main source of funding for the Labour party. I do not support that, although I have spoken of the need for a greater differential between funds for the Labour party and funds for political campaigns that may, from time to time, be supported by other parties—indeed, potentially all parties, and even Conservative Back Benchers.

We also need more transparency when it comes to the very shady organisations that funnel money from companies and private donors and pass it on without always revealing who those donors are. That arrangement is clearly unacceptable and needs to be reformed, but, again, all of us—all the parties in the House—must reform it together. The Bill does not provide for that, but we will continue to do it.

I am proud that it was the Liberal Democrats who pushed for a House of Lords Select Committee to lead recommendations on party funding reform, and that it was that Committee which twisted the Government's arm so that they came up with these U-turns. We think that that is sensible, as it saves the trade unions the clearly unfair and unnecessary administrative burden of having to contact all their existing members who signed up on the existing basis.

I look forward to continuing this discussion in the right place and in the right framework—not in the context of this divisive Bill, but in the context of proper cross-party discussions about how we can finally, and properly, reform party funding as a whole. We will participate fully in those discussions, and we look forward to working with Members in all parts of the House.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.
Lords amendments 3 to 6 agreed to.
Lords amendments 7 and 8 disagreed to.
Government amendments (k) to (p) made in lieu of Lords amendments 7 and 8.
Lords amendments 9 to 16 and 18 to 29 agreed to.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,
That, at the sitting on Wednesday 4 May—
(1) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to any Motion in the name of Jeremy Corbyn as if the day were an Opposition Day; and proceedings on such a Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and
(2) notwithstanding sub-paragraph (2)(c), as applied by paragraph (4), of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), backbench business set down for consideration at that sitting may then be entered upon at any hour, may continue, though opposed, for three hours, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(Stephen Barclay.)

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Stephen Barclay.)

5.45 pm
House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Drones (Safety Risks)

1. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of potential safety risks posed by drones to civil aviation.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): Drones have great potential, but it is important that they are used safely. There are already tough penalties in place for negligent drone use, including up to five years’ imprisonment for endangering an aircraft. The Department continues to work with the British Airline Pilots Association and the Civil Aviation Authority to assess the safety risks of drones.

Paul Flynn: Should not the Government heed the warning of Heathrow and, instead of taking their rather complacent position, realise not only the potential for catastrophes as a result of vandals or careless people using drones, but the dreadful possibility of terrorists using drones against stores of flammable material or nuclear power stations? Already, drones are being used to take mobile phones and drugs into Wandsworth prison. Should not the Government wake up and realise that this new menace is a potential great threat, and take precautions to reduce universal access to drones?

Mr McLoughlin: There is no complacency whatever from the Government on the use of drones. As I have said, there is a prison sentence available, and obviously I will keep the situation under review. It is also important to find out the facts behind certain incidents. It is now thought that the incident reported on 17 April was not a drone incident.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Could the Secretary of State update the House on the state of investment in our roads in the north-east, particularly the A1?

Mr Speaker: No. That is a most interesting matter, but a little distant from the matter of drones. Save it for the long summer evenings that lie ahead.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): There are growing concerns about drone incidents that threaten public safety. It is not very clear whether the problem lies with the regulations themselves or with the enforcement of those regulations. Will the Secretary of State look at those issues?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes, I certainly will. Earlier this week I met BALPA—the meeting had been planned before the incident on 17 April—to discuss that issue as well as the problems that laser pen use is causing for civil aviation in this country. I will certainly keep those things under review and do further work, along with BALPA, the industry and the CAA, on drones and drone use.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that all regulations and guidance on drones and air safety will apply and be communicated to airports outside London, such as East Midlands airport in my constituency, to ensure that we have a consistent air safety policy across the country?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a very good point: this is a matter not just for London airports, but for airports outside London and right across the country, which serve very important international connections.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I hear what the Transport Secretary is saying about his engagement with airports, but this is also an issue for stadiums, railway stations and other places where the public gather in huge numbers. What discussions has he had with the widest possible range of stakeholders, including local authorities, on the use of drones?

Mr McLoughlin: I have updated the House on the issue addressed by the tabled question, namely aviation. Of course, there are wider issues and the Government keep them consistently under review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful for that—even if it was not much of an answer, to be entirely honest. The Secretary of State also briefly touched on another very important issue relating to the threat that laser pens pose to airports across the United Kingdom. BALPA has called for all but the lowest-strength laser pens to be banned. What is his response to that?

Mr McLoughlin: As I informed the House a few moments ago, I met BALPA earlier this week. It has come forward with issues about laser pens. There is a bigger problem with laser pens, and much more evidence about the way in which they have been used. It is illegal to shine them in someone’s eyes, and there have been more prosecutions, but I am willing to take further action once we have reached agreement on the best way forward.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you may recall that this time last month, I asked the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), when, after three years of working groups, we would be told what
the Government were going to do about the danger of drones to civil aircraft. His answer, you will recall, left us none the wiser.

This week, things became even vaguer when the Minister appeared to say in a written answer that he is not even going to consult on anything until the European Aviation Safety Agency has decided what to do. That is all happening at a time of reports that drones might have hit a civil aircraft, and of drones being banned over London altogether when President Obama was in town. Other countries have already brought in registration schemes and other initiatives, so when are we going to see some clear proposals from the Government, without having to wait for a US President to come to town?

Mr McLoughlin: Part of the point was made by the hon. Gentleman in his question when he said, “it might have been”. Governments do not legislate on what might be; they act on what the dangers are. As I have said, we are in discussions with the airline pilots’ union BALPA, as well as the CAA, about the right way to develop this. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that all drones should be banned completely, I should point out that the Labour party never thought about when it was in office.

Disruption Payment Scheme (Train Services)

2. Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the schedule 8 disruption payment scheme for Network Rail and train operating companies. [904738]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): The framework and the amount of schedule 8 compensation are set by the Office of Rail and Road, which is conducting a review into this issue at the moment. The Department has provided input into the consultation, and the right hon. Lady is welcome to raise her concerns directly with the regulator.

Joan Ryan: I know that the Minister has concerns about schedule 8 payments, as do I. It is scandalous that train operators make millions from rail delays at the expense of passengers suffering from a poor standard of service. What immediate steps might the Government take to give power to the regulator to ensure that any net profits made by train operators from unplanned delays and cancellation caused by Network Rail go towards improving rail passenger services across the country, particularly in the light of the very low levels of passenger satisfaction?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) have raised this matter with me eloquently on several occasions. I know that those things are part of the considerations of the current review. The right hon. Lady and I are as one on the view that the rail industry has to do more to improve the current compensation payments, which are rather generous in absolute terms but are not well advertised or well claimed, and I am looking forward to introducing the policy to reduce the delay repay threshold to 15 minutes. Ultimately, our goal should be to get the trains running on time so that passengers do not have to claim compensation. That is what underpins the Government’s record investment in the railway.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Constituents of mine wishing to get back to Bexhill and Battle after 9 o’clock on a Monday or Tuesday night are having to undertake a large portion of their journey by replacement bus, and we have just found out that that will carry on for the rest of the year. I declare an interest because that impacts on me on a Monday evening, but my intentions, as ever, are purely altruistic when I ask the Minister whether she would meet me to try to find out whether Network Rail can conduct this engineering work during the night.

Mr Speaker: It is good that the hon. Gentleman is doing more than just talking to himself about the matter. That is very encouraging.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend represents many thousands of travelling constituents, and he is assiduous in raising their concerns. I will, of course, meet him and look at what can be done to speed up that particular piece of work.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Passengers are, of course, completely inadequately compensated for delays, and I welcome the support that the Minister is giving to my campaign to halve the delay repay timings. Would she also support my campaign to sack Southern, which has proved itself completely incapable of running a railway service and should have its services handed over to Transport for London?

Claire Perry: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman is supporting the Conservative party’s manifesto commitment to reduce delay repay to 15 minutes. It is lovely that at least some shreds of that coalition co-operation are still in action. He and I have discussed the Southern franchise many times. It is difficult. There are record levels of engineering work taking place on the line, and we are doing all we can, as he knows, to ensure that passengers suffer the least disruption possible and get the compensation to which they are entitled when their trains do not run on time.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Schedule 8 compensation is not making its way to my travelling public. Eddy Leviten regularly contacts me from Acton main line station, where there are no staff, no way of buying a ticket, no indicator board and only two trains an hour. Travelling from Acton main line station, which is only one stop from Paddington, should not be a case of taking your life in your hands and leaping into the unknown.

Claire Perry: I am not going to give the House a boring diatribe about the purpose of schedule 8. [Interruption.] I know hon. Members would all be fascinated. The point of schedule 8 is slightly different from the point about compensation paid to passengers under the delay repayment scheme or the national conditions of carriage. It is absolutely right that we should bring forward proposals. For the hon. Lady, a compensation threshold that kicks in at 30 minutes is probably not worth a lot, but one that starts at 15 minutes may be valuable. Ultimately, however, the hon. Lady’s constituents have a far greater choice of transport than many other people in this country, and that is why we are investing in the railway—north, south, east and west.
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Some 80% of passengers entitled to a refund when their train is cancelled or delayed make no claim, largely because train operating companies make claiming too difficult. To improve passenger compensation arrangements, the Office of Rail and Road recommended that the provisions of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 should apply to rail. This month, however, the Government have further delayed introducing that by another year. Why should train operating companies have such beneficial compensation arrangements, while the Government intervene to delay giving passengers their right to compensation?

Claire Perry: The question that comes to mind is: why did the hon. Gentleman’s Government do nothing about this for 13 years? It took a Conservative Government—[Interruption.] I encourage the hon. Gentleman to stay focused on the facts. Delay repay compensation levels have increased eightfold over the past five years, but there is far more to do. The actual amount of compensation available is more generous in this country than in almost any other country in Europe, but I want to reassure him about the CRA exemption. The industry had argued for a permanent exemption, which I found completely unacceptable. We have given the industry time to adjust to make sure it gets this right.

A30 and A303 Upgrade

3. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What plans his Department has to upgrade the A30 and A303.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The road investment strategy announced the upgrade of all remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and A358 to dual carriageway standard, together with the upgrading of the A358 in Somerset from the M5 at Taunton to the A303 at Ilminster. Highways England is making good progress, and three major schemes are planned to begin construction by April 2020.

Neil Parish: I thank our excellent roads Minister for clearly stating the improvements from Stonehenge to Ilminster and through to Taunton, which are very welcome, but there is a stretch from Ilminster to Honiton that actually needs a little more improvement. We have got the co-operation of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership, and we could actually get a 60-mile road through to Honiton, and on to Exeter, to make sure we have a second arterial route to Devon and on into Cornwall. I would like an update from our excellent Minister.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wants a detailed disquisition from the Minister, and I fear he will not be disappointed.

Andrew Jones: The first road investment strategy did include some smaller scale improvements to that section of the road to improve safety and journey quality. However, it is a very challenging area in which to make improvements: it is a protected landscape and a very beautiful area, as my hon. Friend showed me when he drove me along the routes last summer and I heard at first hand the opportunity presented by such investment.

We have started the second road investment strategy process, and Highways England is developing route strategies to inform that process. I will obviously take account of my hon. Friend’s contribution in the process, and I will make sure that Highways England liaises with him locally.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the upgrade of the A303, particularly where it joins the A358 and links from the A30. However, at the recent Neroche annual parish meeting, which I attended, it was suggested that the preferred options would be submitted to the Government by 2018 and there was a certain mithering in the audience about whether the Government would actually go ahead and build the road. Will the Minister confirm that this will take place by 2020, as it is so crucial for the wider south-west, not just Taunton Deane?

Andrew Jones: I can understand why there is local cynicism, because the scheme was cancelled by former Governments, but let me provide some reassurance. We are looking at consultations starting next year, the development consent order process in 2018 and the start of work in early 2020, so I am happy to provide the reassurance that my hon. Friend wants.

Heathrow Expansion (Transport Infrastructure Costs)

4. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the potential cost of transport infrastructure for a third runway at Heathrow.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Airports Commission assessed the surface access requirements of each short-listed airport proposal as part of its work published in July 2015, and it estimated that there would be a cost of up to £5 billion for surface access works in relation to the Heathrow north-west runway.

Ruth Cadbury: There are clearly widely differing estimates of the capital costs of building an additional runway at Heathrow, but what is not in dispute is that building an additional runway there will cost significantly more than building one at Gatwick. If the Government decide to go ahead with expanding Heathrow, who will pay the difference—the airline passenger or the taxpayer?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that some of the estimates for surface access differ widely, even by the standards of some economists. One must bear in mind that the three sets of figures include different things over different timescales, the main one being the work required exclusively for airport capacity, where the airport would be expected to make a major contribution; the projects that support airport capacity, but have wider benefits; and those in the Transport for London figures, which are needed in respect of wider population and economic growth during the next 20 to 30 years.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Do the Government accept the Airport Commission figure, which is £5 billion, the £2 billion from Heathrow or the £18 billion from TfL? Is this not just more of the 30 years of disinformation we have had out of Heathrow?
When are the Government going to come to a decision, make their view clear and stop delaying matters just because of elections?

Mr Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention to what I just said, he would know that I explained that those figures relate to different things over different timescales. On the decision, perhaps he could wait until my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) poses her question to the Secretary of State.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Can the Government give us any indication of the time period for construction from when the decision has been taken until the runway at either Gatwick or Heathrow is completed?

Mr Goodwill: It is important to note that the additional time we are taking to look at a number of economic and environmental factors will not delay the delivery of a runway at whatever location is decided on.

Electric Cars

7. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What plans his Department has to improve infrastructure for electric cars.

Mr Goodwill: I can tell my hon. Friend that great advances are being made not only with electric cars but with electric buses. I was at the Wrightbus factory in Ulster recently, where buses that will go all day are on a charge. Those vehicles would be perfect for the sort of project that she suggests.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Not just physical but intellectual infrastructure is required to support the electric vehicle industry, not least because the extreme voltages are extremely dangerous to people who do not know what they are doing and because the engines are entirely different from petrol and diesel engines. Has the Minister seen the campaign by the Institute for the Motor Industry for a proper accreditation, training and licensing system to spread knowledge about electric vehicles, and might his Department be able to support it?

Mr Goodwill: It is certainly important that the people who work on these vehicles are adequately trained. But I would caution the hon. Gentleman about suggesting that electric vehicles are more dangerous than the alternatives; anyone who has seen a petrol tank catch fire will realise that electric vehicles are intrinsically very safe.

Airport Expansion (South East)

8. Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): When the Government plan to announce a decision on the location of a new runway in the south-east.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): A number of important decisions on airport capacity were taken by the Government in December, including to accept the case for expansion in the south-east. However, we must take time to get the decision right on a preferred scheme. The Government are further considering the environmental impacts, and the best possible measures to mitigate the impacts of expansion.

Dr Mathias: On 24 March, as chair of the all-party group on Heathrow and the wider economy, I wrote to the Secretary of State with 64 questions about his Department’s work in that area. Unfortunately, I have received answers to none of those questions. Will he accept that it is essential to address important questions on noise, air quality and deliverability before he makes this decision, so as to give confidence in the decision-making process?

Mr McLoughlin: When that decision is made, I will be accountable to the House for why certain decisions were taken. In a letter from my hon. Friend that I did reply to, I pointed out that it would not be appropriate for me to provide a running commentary until the Government have come to a final decision. When we do that, we will be fully accountable for the decisions and recommendations that we make.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister at least a little ashamed of the fact that a major inquiry under Howard Davies has made its recommendations, but nothing has happened? At the same time, we are putting all our national treasure into
High Speed 2, but by the time that arrives in 2033 we will find that the driverless car has made it totally redundant.

Mr McLoughlin: I will take no lectures from a man who supported a Government who saw our position on the infrastructure league tables move from 7th, when Labour entered government in 1997, to 33rd by the time it left government in 2010, //Interuption,/ The hon. Gentleman says that it was all his fault—those were his words and not mine.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): More than 700 businesses have chosen to locate their headquarters in Buckinghamshire, not least because of the proximity of that excellent local airport, Heathrow. Far from building on the previous question, it is fair to point out that whereas HS2 brings absolutely no net economic benefit to Buckinghamshire, Heathrow does. It is a long time since Howard Davies reported. Will the Secretary of State get a wiggle on?

Mr McLoughlin: You have chastised a few people this morning, Mr Speaker, for making tendentious links with airports and HS2. My right hon. Friend refers to Heathrow as her local airport—I have not heard it described like that before, but in her case it is a good description and her constituents are well connected to that airport. I want other parts of the country to have the same opportunities that London is getting in its good transport connections.

Mr Speaker: I call Alan Brown, who I do not think will refer to Heathrow as his local airport.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is not, Mr Speaker, but this decision could impact on Scottish airports.

To return to the Secretary of State’s earlier comments, I think that the Government should provide a running commentary on what they are doing about this important decision. Will he state clearly what additional work is being done to refine considerations on air quality and noise? Will that work be completed, and what else needs to be done for the Government to come to a decision?

Mr McLoughlin: I am afraid that I disagree with the hon. Gentleman about providing a running commentary, for the reasons that I gave in my earlier answers. That work is being done, and I hope soon to inform the House of the Government’s recommendations.

Low-carbon Transport

9. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps he is taking to promote low-carbon transport.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government are committed to delivering the emissions reductions needed to meet our climate change targets. That includes promoting the uptake of low-emission vehicles, reducing emissions from the road freight sector, and encouraging sustainable choices such as walking and cycling.

Dr Cameron: A quarter of the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions come from transport emissions, which the Government have pledged to cut. Will the Minister follow the example of the Scottish Government, who are committed to investing £62.5 million to create low-carbon infrastructure?

Mr Goodwill: I will take no lessons from the Scottish Government on low-carbon infrastructure. We have some very tough targets—for example, for the electrification programme on our railways—which we are determined to meet. We will set our fifth carbon budget later this year and publish our emissions reduction plan shortly afterwards.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Electric cars are a form of low-carbon transport. Given the disasters with the nuclear power stations in Normandy and Finland involving EDF, will the Minister explain whence the electricity for all these electric cars?

Mr Goodwill: Electric cars can benefit from surplus electricity overnight and use that off-peak electricity very effectively, and I for one believe that nuclear generation will be part of our future energy strategy.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Too few companies in east Lancashire either offer or advertise the cycle to work scheme. What can the Government do to extend the scheme in areas such as mine?

Mr Goodwill: The Treasury is an enthusiastic backer of the cycle to work scheme, and I know that many people have taken it up and that many companies can make sure their employees get information about it. It is a great scheme that gets a lot of people on to two wheels and reduces not only carbon dioxide emissions but other pollutants that cars produce.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The most low-carbon forms of transport are cycling and walking. Extraordinarily, the Government chose to release the long-awaited “Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy” on Easter Sunday, although I can understand why the Minister did not want people to notice it, because while it is long on aspiration it is rather short on investment. Cycling UK has produced a detailed breakdown and concludes that by 2020-21 the amount of money spent on cycling outside London will be just 72p per head. How far does he think that the CWIS can go on 72p?

Mr Goodwill: I think we should hang on a minute. When we came to power in 2010, we were spending £2 per head, but by the end of the coalition we were spending £6 per head, which is a very good record of investment in cycling. In the spending review, the Chancellor confirmed more than £300 million for cycling over the next five years, and many of the decisions on cycling are made by local authorities, some of which, at least, are still run by the Labour party.

Daniel Zeichner: I think that was an admission of a dramatic cut to cycling, but let us move on to walking. As we approach walk to work week, which I am sure we will all be doing, it is interesting that the strategy contains no measurable targets for walking at all. When I pressed the Minister in written questions, he sidestepped...
the issue and claimed that the strategy contained two “objectives” for walking. Why do we have to wait until 2025 to have any measurable targets?

Mr Goodwill: We are determined to increase levels of walking—children walking to school and people walking as part of their everyday lives—and I know that many people understand the importance of walking not only to improving our transport infrastructure but to contributing to cleaner air in our cities.

Train Station Ticket Offices (Disabled Access)

10. Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): What steps are being taken to ensure that ticket offices at train stations are accessible to disabled people. 

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Clare Perry): As my right hon. Friend knows, rail travel in this country is booming. A vital part of that growth is ensuring that rail is accessible to all, including passengers with disabilities, at every stage of their journey. The statistics suggest that disabled people are using the railways in ever greater numbers. In fact, the number of disabled persons railcards in circulation has risen by 12% year on year—a growth rate that far outstrips that of passengers without disabilities.

Mrs Spelman: The concourse at Birmingham International train station in my constituency is to be improved to provide better access for the disabled, but will the Minister put pressure on the Chiltern line, where the carriages are much higher than the platforms? Would it not be possible to replicate what Transport for London does, at Westminster station, for example, by elevating a section of the platform?

Clare Perry: My right hon. Friend raises the valuable point that there has to be a joined-up approach—we need operators and Network Rail to work together. I will look at the issue she raises about the station, but she should be aware that any improvement works carried out at a station in the UK have to comply with UK disability standards.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for her reply earlier, but given that Network Rail has financial issues and that £50 million is being taken out of the Access for All scheme, will the Minister explain what pressure she can put on Network Rail to make sure that stations that are not accessible to disabled people, such as Reddish North in my constituency, are upgraded, so that everybody can have access to a good rail service?

Clare Perry: I am afraid that many of this country’s stations date from Victorian times when this was not even an issue. We are very proud of the Access for All scheme. Almost half a billion pounds has been spent, and money will continue to be spent, with the prioritisation of stations based on footfall and other such criteria. I would be more than happy to see whether anything can be done at the station the hon. Gentleman mentions, but we have to make sure that the money is spent in areas where most people are travelling. For me, this is absolutely part of railways for the future: it is vital for people with disabilities to be able to access their trains, and rolling stock will be fully disability compliant by 2020.

Regional Airports

11. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What plans he has to support the development of regional airports.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I recognise the very important role that regional airports play in providing domestic and international connections and the vital contribution they make to the growth of regional economies. UK airports operate in the private sector, and it is for them to determine levels of investment and to attract airlines to operate from them.

Dr Whitford: Inward tourism is a major industry in Ayrshire, whether it be for golf and sailing or the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory. My local airport, Prestwick, has 660,000 passengers a year, but no connection to London—and, on the basis of discussions I have heard in this place, there is no sign of a connection to London. Will the Minister consider developing a strategy to support regional airports with connectivity in the short and medium term to bring more inward tourists?

Mr McLoughlin: The hon. Lady talks about connections and connectivity into London. This is one of the reasons the Davies commission was established. When we look at expansion in the south-east, we need to bear regional connectivity very much in mind. We must provide some reassurance to those who want further services from regional airports into London that they will have that opportunity.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am reliably informed that Cornwall Airport Newquay is now the fastest-growing regional airport in the country. I thank the aviation Minister for his support in helping us to open up a new route from Newquay to Leeds Bradford. It will be essential to have regional air connectivity in place to make sure that, as our economy grows, the benefits are felt right across the country. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that the regional air connectivity fund will continue to be available to help smaller regional airports to open up new routes?

Mr McLoughlin: I am very glad that the route mentioned by my hon. Friend did qualify for the regional air connectivity fund. It is there and continues to be available. I believe it has made an important difference. The route my hon. Friend mentioned is certainly one that I have used on a number of occasions when travelling to his and other Cornwall constituencies.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Minister will know that London Luton airport is undergoing a substantial and welcome expansion, but there is also enormous spare capacity at Birmingham airport. Birmingham could make a significant contribution to the air travel needs of London and the south-east with a simple and inexpensive upgrade in electrification of the railway line through Leamington Spa and Banbury, linking Birmingham airport directly to Crossrail and
Local Major Transport Projects (Funding)

12. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for local major transport projects.

Mr Goodwill: This Department is providing over £7 billion for the local growth fund, which will fund over 500 local transport projects by the end of the Parliament. As part of that fund, we have launched a new £475 million fund for transformational local transport schemes that are too large for the main allocations, and we have invited local enterprise partnerships to bid by July.

Fiona Bruce: The construction of a 20-year awaited bypass for Middlewich would not only alleviate local congestion but open up employment land and thus support the regional economy by helping to create jobs. Will the Minister meet me and Cheshire East Council representatives to discuss the merits of a funding application for this project?

Mr Goodwill: I would be happy to have that meeting, particularly if my hon. Friend involves the local enterprise partnership, as LEPs are central to putting these bids together. These types of investments are important for the local regional economy and some of the councillors' own objectives might be relevant.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister look very carefully at the plans that are being forwarded by the Mersey Dee Alliance for a direct strategic rail link to Manchester airport? Such a link would have a dual benefit, speeding traffic to the airport while taking cars off the M56.

Mr Goodwill: That is just the sort of project that Transport for the North will be looking at. As aviation Minister, I understand the importance of good surface connectivity to airports to ensure that they can continue to grow, and Manchester airport, with its £1 billion investment programme, is an example for others to follow.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Government have given considerable amounts of money to the Labour-dominated West Yorkshire combined authority, which spends most of the money in the Labour heartlands, ignoring the needs of areas such as mine. A Shipley eastern bypass, for instance, is vital to my local economy. How can the Minister ensure that the Government's money is spent in areas like Shipley as well as in the Labour heartlands? If he cannot persuade the Government to act, will he directly fund the bypass that my constituents so desperately need?

Mr Goodwill: One of the important changes that have taken place since our move from regional development agencies to local enterprise partnerships is a tendency to give more consideration to business and economic matters than to some local political objectives. I think that that is a great change, and I hope that, as a consequence, there is far less pork-barrel politics in Yorkshire.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): A number of major transport projects are mentioned in “The Northern Powerhouse”, but west Cumbria seems to have been omitted. Will the Government look into how we can improve our transport links, and, in particular, will they give consideration to the nuclear developments that are taking place in the region?

Mr Goodwill: We recognise that all parts of our country, including the peripheral areas, benefit from transport investment. The good news is that this Government understand the importance of infrastructure investment, unlike previous Governments who did not see it as such a priority.

DVSA (Driving and Theory Tests)

13. Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): When he last had discussions with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency on the administration of driving and theory tests.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State in the other place, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, has been having discussions with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency about trialling changes in the practical driving test to make it more reflective of modern driving conditions, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has recently had discussions with the DVSA about future provision of the UK driving theory test.

Iain Stewart: I have received a number of complaints from driving instructors and pupils about significant delays in the provision of dates for tests at the Bletchley centre in my constituency. The DVSA has said that it is investing more resources, but this remains an issue. May I ask the Minister to take it up with the new chief executive, as a matter of urgency?

Andrew Jones: Demand for driving tests has been increasing rapidly. It has increased by more than 50% since 2013-14, and we expect the trend to continue. We are seeing the same pattern in relation to HGV tests. The DVSA has responded by bringing in more examiners and improving its forecasting model to match resource better with demand, as well as redeploying examiners from shorter-wait centres to those with longer waiting times. As for the specific issue of the Bletchley centre, I should be happy to take it up with the new chief executive.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I too am receiving complaints about delays in Kettering for driving tests and about cancellations of appointments. May I urge our excellent roads Minister to get on top of this problem before it gets out of control?

Andrew Jones: I am happy to take up any local problems affecting any colleague with the DVSA.

Cycling (Rural Areas)

14. Stephen Phillips (Seaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What plans the Government has to encourage cycling in rural areas.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): On 27 March—during the Easter break, when people had plenty of time to read it—we published the draft “Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy.” We want everyone in the country, including people in rural areas, to have access to safe, attractive cycling routes. Local authorities have a detailed understanding of their roads, and are well placed to decide how best to provide for cyclists on them.

Stephen Phillips: Safe and attractive cycling routes are important, but a number of constituents who are keen cyclists have written to me about the problem of potholes, of which I have personal experience—and a scar to prove it, although I do not intend to show my hon. Friend where it is. Will he join me in welcoming the £28.4 million that Lincolnshire County Council will receive this year for highways maintenance, and will he also encourage highways officers in Lincolnshire to continue to do what they can to reduce the risk posed by these dangerous potholes?

Mr Goodwill: Lincolnshire is a wonderful county for cycling, not least because it is relatively flat. The Government have allocated substantial funds for the repair of potholes, but I would encourage local authorities to concentrate on how effectively they are using that money. There is some good new technology out there which will mean that potholes can not only be repaired but stay repaired. We often hear stories about potholes being temporarily repaired and then opening up again very quickly.

Rail Electrification (North of England)

15. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on rail electrification schemes in the north of England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): We have electrified five times as many miles of track in the last six years as the previous Labour Government did in 13 years, and almost all that work has been in the north of England. I call that good progress.

Diana Johnson: Can the Minister explain why the privately financed £100 million Hull to Selby rail electrification scheme has been stuck in the Department for Transport for nearly two years, while her Department is announcing schemes such as the one involving £27 billion for Crossrail 2 between Hertfordshire and Surbiton? If she is really serious about the northern powerhouse, why can she not get a wriggle on and get this privately financed scheme to happen?

Claire Perry: I think that that is Humberside for a wriggle, Mr Speaker. Rail North and I completely share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for faster and better rail journeys for her constituents, which is why the new franchise that we let last year will give her constituents brand-new trains—bye-bye, Pacers!—more services and more direct connections. Hull is getting £1.4 million for its station in time for the city to take pride of place as the UK city of culture 2017. She should be pleased with that record.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The Southport to Manchester line has been prioritised for electrification, but we might lose our direct link to south Manchester and the airport through Piccadilly. Why is that happening, and how does it constitute progress?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman has raised a service question that I am not across, but I will get back to him.

Topical Questions

T1. [904727] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): We have continued to deliver on issues that affect the motorist, following the findings last year that defeat devices were fitted to Volkswagen vehicles. I instructed the Vehicle Certification Agency to test 37 different vehicle types in the UK over a period of six months to ensure that similar devices were not present on other models. The tests confirmed that they were not, but they did confirm that existing lab tests designed to ensure that emission limits were being met were inadequate. That is why we have been at the forefront of securing tough new Europe-wide real-driving emissions tests. We have also announced further funding to help with the problem of potholes across the country.

Mrs Gillan: I recently completed a blindfolded walk with that excellent charity Guide Dogs to try to understand the challenges faced by visually impaired people, and I am greatly supportive of its campaign to improve access for guide dog owners and their dogs. It is not right that they should be often refused access to businesses and services because their dog is with them. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that taxi and private hire vehicle drivers receive adequate disability awareness training, given that a large number of guide dog owners are still being turned away from those vital transport services?

Mr McLoughlin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question, and I entirely agree with the point she makes. Taxis and private hire vehicles are essential for many disabled people, and drivers are required to make reasonable adjustments for disabled passengers. It is also a criminal offence to refuse carriage to an assistance dog. Failure to comply with that requirement can result in prosecution and a fine on conviction of up to £1,000. A driver was recently fined £1,546 for refusing access to a guide dog; that figure included legal costs as well as the fine. That message
needs to go out right across the industry, and we will draw it to the attention of the licensing authorities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): On Monday, the Minister of State said that Volkswagen had not yet fixed any cars in this country. NOx emissions pose a serious health risk to drivers, and indeed to everyone. As he acknowledged, we now know that all manufacturers produce diesel models that pollute above approved limits. How will he address the problem of higher NOx emissions across all models, and will he take urgent action to ensure that when it comes to Volkswagen, the UK is not left at the back of the queue?

Mr McLoughlin: We certainly will, and the Minister of State and I have been dealing with the matter. Before I get to the hon. Lady’s attacking us for not doing enough, she needs to remember who started the dash for diesel. Gordon Brown reduced the duty on low sulphur by 3p in his 2001 Budget—just before a general election—which increased diesel car registrations in Great Britain from 3.45 million, or 13% of the UK fleet, to 8.2 million, or 28% of the fleet.

Lilian Greenwood: That decision was of course based on the science at the time. As the Secretary of State knows, American VW owners may be entitled to up to $5,000 in compensation, while the owners of the 1.2 million VW vehicles in this country are not receiving a penny. Last week, the No. 10 press machine assured us that the Secretary of State had pressed VW specifically on the discrepancy in compensation. However, the Minister of State said on Monday that compensation was a matter for the courts, not Ministers. This is a matter of basic fairness, so when will the Secretary of State step up a gear and fight for a decent compensation deal for UK VW drivers?

Mr McLoughlin: I have made it clear in the meetings that I have had, as has my hon. Friend the Minister of State in his conversations, with not only Volkswagen but other motor manufacturers, that we take this subject seriously. We want to see action. When the hon. Lady responded to my point about the huge increase in diesel cars in this country, I am glad that she said that the decision was based on the evidence at the time; that shows that the proper research was not done.

T2. [904729] Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the House of Lords recently completed a review of the impact of the Equality Act 2010 on disabled people. A large part of the review focused on the accessibility of taxis and private hire vehicles. Will the Minister update the House on what action the Department will take as a consequence of the review?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I can indeed update the House. The Government are committed to ensuring that disabled people have the same access to transport services and opportunities to travel as everybody else in society. We plan to commence sections 165 and 167 of the Equality Act by the end of this year. I was pleased to see that raised in the Lord review, as I have been working on it for some time. Drivers will be required to provide assistance to wheelchair users, and to refrain from charging extra.

T7. [904736] Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Minister take the trouble to come to the north-east and take the train from Nunthorpe, Middlesbrough to Newcastle? Using an ancient Pacer train, it takes almost 90 minutes. The journey might be quicker by bicycle. If we had had a new train every time it was announced that the old ones would be replaced, we would have a whole fleet of them. If the Minister came and got a wiggle on, that might speeds things up a bit.

Mr McLoughlin: I think I need a bit of mentoring in the dialect being used this morning. I accept that the last Labour Government did nothing to improve the system in their 13 years. I am glad to say that new trains will be operating on that line by 2020 as a result of a decision that I took, which was to override the advice, and to instruct the permanent secretary that the Pacers would be phased out, and that we would have new trains on the line. I am very proud of that decision.

T3. [904730] Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Every time I come across Network Rail, it seems to have a great deal of power, but to be utterly unaccountable to central Government. As we are seeing in Lincolnshire, that power can be used to frustrate growth infrastructure schemes that have the support of local authorities. What can the Minister do to ensure that Network Rail does not act to stop schemes that are in the best interests of local people and supported by local authorities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): The best schemes are those that are strongly supported by local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and local businesses. Network Rail is in a new phase in which route responsibility will be devolved, and it will work to a set of investment plans that are agreed, based on important bottom-up analysis.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Over the past 10 years, destinations and routes from Scotland have doubled, but flights to London have fallen by more than a third. Not only do we need starter routes, such as the Inverness to Heathrow route that we will have next week, but we need to up the frequency of these routes and guarantee them, as that would allow them to bed in and become fully established. Will the Minister establish a point-to-point public service obligation, including specific regional hub airports, and do all he can to create PSOs for airports such as Skye in my constituency?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): We absolutely understand the importance of PSOs and of aviation, particularly for island communities. I am pleased that we have seen such a successful uptake of many of these routes, a number of which have been started without needing subsidies because of the buoyancy of the economy and the aviation sector.

T4. [904731] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The slogan of CrossCountry trains is “Going that bit
further”; my constituents would be delighted if it did exactly that and instructed more than three out of 63 trains a day on the inter-city service between Birmingham and Bristol to stop at the city of Gloucester. Will the Minister with responsibility for rail confirm whether the Department will require CrossCountry to restore decent commuter services from Gloucester on that line as part of its franchise extension?

Claire Perry: Nobody could be more assiduous in calling for those service requirements than my hon. Friend, but we must not have services to cities such as Cheltenham lost as a result of a change that he is requiring. I can confirm that discussions are ongoing. We have asked CrossCountry to report on the best way to deliver the services that he is talking about, and I am looking forward to discussing that with him shortly.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Despite the Secretary of State’s pride in the Pacer announcements, there remains huge under-investment in transport in the north, compared with London in particular; the ratio is 24:1. Ministers are now saying that they are going to cut the subsidy to the Northern franchise by up to 85%. Does he really think it adds to the credibility of the northern powerhouse if it takes half a day to cross it, in trains that are better suited to a railway museum than a railway system?

Claire Perry: I would sometimes like to offer Opposition politicians another briefing about what these new franchises are going to deliver. It sounds a bit like “The Generation Game”, but thanks to my Government, the hon. Lady’s constituents will be rid of those outdated trains, and will get many more services of a much better quality; that will be delivered at less cost to the taxpayer. Only a Labour politician could argue for worse services and more subsidy.

Mr McLoughlin rose—

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) wanted the Minister with responsibility for rail, but he is lumbered with the Secretary of State.

Mr McLoughlin: What my hon. Friend wants and what he gets are two entirely different things, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about the need to improve capacity on the networks, and I am very interested in what all the people who wish to travel between Goole and Leeds. The new rail franchise for the north will provide a tremendous increase in capacity and a lot of new routes, and we will see whether his argument stands up.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): With the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim Fathers, can we get a helping hand to do up Retford railway station, including the car parking, so that people can see the best of British when they visit my area?

Mr McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman is far more familiar with Retford station than I am, but this is certainly something that would be considered by the local growth fund. I suggest that he goes through the necessary procedures to encourage his local enterprise partnership to apply for that funding.

T6. [904735] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Roadmaster velocity patcher can fill 300 potholes in a day, and Lincolnshire has got one—but we would like more. What help can the Minister offer my county council in getting more? Will he consider incentivising councils to work together so that we can increase the nationwide fleet of these fantastic machines?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the Roadmaster velocity patcher, and the Government certainly support the use of innovative and efficient methods to maintain our local highways. We have provided a budget of more than £6 billion for highways maintenance, plus there is the pothole action fund. We have introduced incentive elements to the highways maintenance fund, which includes an element of collaboration. I should like to see local authorities working with their neighbours right across the country in exactly the way that my hon. Friend describes.

Mr Speaker: The Minister clearly enjoys a life of undiluted excitement.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What are the Government doing to stem the flow of job losses among British qualified seafarers? In particular, will the Minister with responsibility for shipping have a look at how some of our regulation operates here? My constituents tell me that the operation of the certificates of equivalent competency, for example, are putting them at a disadvantage compared with seafarers from other parts of the world.

Mr Goodwill: We certainly have the best-qualified seamen in the world, due in no small part to the tonnage tax scheme and the SMaRT—support for maritime training—funding of £15 million a year. It is of concern if less-qualified people are taking jobs. I know that there are particular problems in the North sea with regard to jobs being cut. I would be pleased to meet the right hon. Gentleman to talk about the matter in more detail.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure me that the Department is training apprentices and investing in apprentice-training programmes, so that the country can continue to have the skills and expertise to keep on with our world-leading transport infrastructure programme and improvements?

Andrew Jones: I can indeed give my hon. Friend that assurance. The transport infrastructure skills strategy sets targets for delivering apprenticeships throughout the supply chain, and will deliver them via procurement contracts. One apprenticeship will be created for every £3 million to £5 million of contract value, or for 2.5% of
the workforce per year, depending on the contract type. Apprenticeships are right at the heart of our skills agenda.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I freely admit that I want the Secretary of State, and I hope that I get him. He has visited Bullsmoor Lane in my constituency, and he knows that it is being used as a slip road off the M25. It is a residential area with a very serious accident record. There is a lot of freight coming into north London and using the road as a route to central London. May I ask him in good faith to meet me and two of the leading resident representatives to discuss this very, very serious issue, and to find a satisfactory way forward?

Mr McLoughlin: Well, sometimes we get what we want, Mr Speaker. I am more than happy to meet the right hon. Lady on this. There does seem to be some confusion over whether it is a matter for Transport for London or for Highways England. That is no answer to the people who are suffering from the problems. It is a very difficult area to deal with, because of all the residential implications, but we will have that meeting.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I do not really care who answers my question. From the Minister’s description earlier, the local major transport projects fund could have been tailor-made for the Carrington bridge and the Worcester southern link project, which the finest minds at the Worcestershire LEP are preparing a bid for. May I say to the Secretary of State and his team that there should be no wiggle room for the Government in approving this project?

Mr McLoughlin: I visited—probably almost a year ago to the day—the bridge to which my hon. Friend referred. I cannot quite remember what was going on at the time. I viewed it from a site that was opened by his father some 30 years previously. The point that he makes about it being a suitable scheme for the local majors fund is certainly one that should be considered, and I urge the LEP and the local authority to ensure that they put in an application for it to be considered.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State work with the new Labour—obviously—Mayor of London to ensure the effective development of the HS2 Crossrail interchange at Old Oak? In particular, will he revisit the deal he made with the current Mayor of London in 2014, which means that no development—commercial or housing—can take place on the site unless there is a very extensive movement of the lines almost immediately after they open at great public expense?

Mr McLoughlin: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I take no election for granted and I will meet whoever is the Mayor of London, but I very much hope it is my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who will be able to work much better with the Government than the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan). With reference to development around Old Oak Common, that site will be a major transport hub in the United Kingdom, so it is very important to get the infrastructure right.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Department has responsibility for delivering a number of local and national transport infrastructure projects, so will the Secretary of State undertake to write into every funding agreement that at every opportunity we will procure British steel for the construction of those projects?

Mr McLoughlin: I am happy to say that we have made a number of changes to our procurement process to reflect exactly the point that my hon. Friend makes. Wherever we can, we should support our own industry. That must be on a competitive basis, but there is a special case for British steel and about 98% of the steel that Network Rail purchases is British.
Trade Union Bill (Discussions)

10.35 am

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Prime Minister if he will instruct his adviser on ministerial interests to launch an inquiry as to whether discussions between Ministers and officials and representatives of trade unions or the Labour party concerning amendments to the Trade Union Bill constitute a breach of the ministerial code of conduct. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): The Cabinet Office has advised me that there is no breach of the ministerial code and nothing for the Prime Minister’s adviser on ministerial interests to investigate.

The Trade Union Bill is now in ping-pong and, as is customary at such times, Ministers have held regular discussions with shadow Ministers to discuss possible compromises that would secure passage of the Bill and delivery of the commitments made in the Conservative party’s manifesto. On the basis of the amendments passed by this House yesterday evening, I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are well on the way to securing all our manifesto commitments—ballot thresholds for strikes, reforms to the role of the certification officer, a tightening-up of rules around facility time, action to stop intimidation of non-striking workers, and the introduction of a transparent opt-in process for union members’ contributions to political funds.

The question of compulsory opt-in to trade unions’ political funds was one of the most contentious, especially in the House of Lords. Noble Lords referred the clauses in the Bill to a special Select Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Burns. Following the Select Committee’s report, the House of Lords voted by a large majority to accept an amendment to restrict the opt-in to new members and to exclude existing trade union members.

My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that I hold regular meetings with trade union leaders and the general secretary of the TUC, not just in relation to the Bill, but in relation to other responsibilities of mine, including our support for the excellent work of Unionlearn.

Trade union support for the campaign to remain in the European Union is not new and should not come as a surprise to anyone. The TUC declared its support for the campaign in February. The GMB union did the same on 22 February, Unite on 14 March and Unison on 13 April.

Mr Jenkin: We all remember the Prime Minister foretelling that the next great scandal would be a lobbying scandal, and here it is. Trade union leaders have been complaining that they are unable to campaign effectively for a remain vote in the EU referendum while the Government’s Trade Union Bill has been threatening trade unions and their funding. The Bill would have implemented a Conservative manifesto commitment to “legislate to ensure trade unions use a transparent opt-in process for union subscriptions”.

As a result of the amendment being accepted, a 19-year-old who has just started a job and is a member of a trade union will now never be asked by a trade union whether he wants his political fund subscriptions to be taken out of his pay packet.

The Prime Minister told the House of Commons on 15 July last year:

“There is a very simple principle here: giving money to a party should be an act of free will. Money should not be taken out of people’s pay packets without them being told about it properly”—[Official Report, 15 July 2015; Vol. 598; c. 885.]

and he likened that to mis-selling. On 16 March, the Minister in the other place described the Labour amendment, which the Government have now accepted, as a “wrecking amendment”. Yesterday, the Minister made a wholly unexpected concession when he announced his decision to abandon opposition to the change in the Bill.

It is now being reported on Channel 4 News and in today’s papers that those unexpected concessions are linked to a £1.7 million donation that trade unions might make from their political funds, which are now much larger than they would have been, to the Labour remain campaign, Labour In For Britain. Until recently, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) was trying to raise £75,000 for a few leaflets, balloons and badges; now the campaign is getting £1.7 million. It has been confirmed to me by more than two independent sources that No. 10 instructed those concessions to be made after discussions with trade union representatives. That being true would amount to the sale of Government policy for cash and political favours.

Lest there be any doubt about the impropriety of this deal, Her Majesty’s Opposition should ask themselves this question: what would they be saying if this Government had altered a Bill in order to give extra money to the Conservative party or to the Conservatives’ remain campaign, Conservatives In? My hon. Friend the Minister should ask himself this question: what would have been the reaction if a Labour Government had changed a Bill in order to favour the Labour party’s ability to support the Government on some controversial policy and in order to give the Labour party money? This stinks—it reeks the same as cash for questions. This shows that this Government really are at the rotten heart of the European Union.

The seven principles of public life require public office holders to “avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence...their work.”

The ministerial code states:

“Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises”, or appears to arise,

“between their public duties and their private interests”.

In this matter, the Labour party constitutes one of their private interests.

Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister instruct his adviser on ministerial interests, Sir Alex Allan, to launch an investigation? If my hon. Friend the Minister and the Cabinet Office are right, he has nothing to fear from such an investigation.

Nick Boles: May I start by saying that I have the greatest respect for the passion and commitment, which have lasted for not just years but decades, that my hon.
Friend has brought to the cause he advocates with such vigour—that we leave the European Union? I have nothing but total respect for that passion and commitment.

I just want gently to correct my hon. Friend. Friend on a few points of fact, because he focused so much on the important question he raised that a number of the things he suggested about the current mechanism for union members’ subscriptions to the political fund were not absolutely correct.

The first point to make is that it is not the case that somebody who has recently joined a trade union, and to whom the new requirement for an opt-in will therefore not apply, will never be asked whether they want to pay into the political levy—very far from it. There is a long-standing legal requirement that they are offered an opt-out from that political levy and that that is communicated clearly to them. That opt-out is not just a one-time thing; it is not something they are offered only when they join—it is something they can exercise at any time, and they need to be reminded of it regularly.

The other thing to say is that, while estimates from different unions vary, the overall estimate is that roughly 13% to 14% of all trade union members joined in the last year. I am not going to suggest that all trade union members will have needed to opt in to the political fund over this Parliament, but a substantial proportion will have.

I am afraid my hon. Friend is also not correct to say that we are talking about a Labour amendment. The amendment was moved by Lord Burns—somebody for whom I know my hon. Friend has the greatest respect, as a fearsomely independent former permanent secretary. The amendment flowed out of a Committee in which there was some very fearsome representation of all parties. It was clearly inspired by Lord Burns’s argument that it is not reasonable to ask people who have signed up to an arrangement in good faith then to have to sign up again through a different process simply because we have changed the law later on. I did not agree with that argument, and nor did we in this House, but what happened often happens when the House of Lords feels very, very strongly on an issue, when there is a very, very large majority against the Government’s position, and when an Independent Member of the House of Lords has moved an amendment that has secured support not just from the official Opposition and from the Liberal Democrats but from a huge number of Cross Benchers—and not just from Cross Benchers but some very significant members of our own party.

I urge my hon. Friend to look at the people who spoke in the debate and voted, or very assertively chose not to vote, in support of the Government’s position. They included not just Lord Cormack and Lord Balfe but Lord Forsyth, who supports the same campaign on the European Union that my hon. Friend has supported and who, both privately and publicly, said that he thought it was a profound error for us to pursue a compulsory opt-in for all existing members. So it is not right to say that it was just a Labour position.

My hon. Friend suggested that it was inappropriate for the Government to do anything in terms of making changes to legislation to further private interests, and of course he is right. However, it is not right, and not even in the moment, to categorise the official policy of Her Majesty’s Government in that way. We support the proposition that the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union. He disagrees, honourably and valiantly, but it is not a private interest—it is Government policy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is very good to have this further opportunity to re-emphasise our implacable opposition to the execrable Trade Union Bill, which is entirely unnecessary, bad for workers, and bad for businesses. As the Minister said, the Lords set up a cross-party Committee chaired by Lord Burns to look at the unworkable proposals on trade union political funds and party political funding. That Committee came up with a series of Salisbury-convention-compliant recommendations that were voted for by an overwhelming majority of peers from all parties and from none.

Will the Minister confirm that he recently met Lord Burns, who made clear the strength of feeling in the other place on this matter? Will he also confirm that he has received overwhelming representations from all quarters, including the trade unions? By the way, it is hardly surprising, given that this is the Trade Union Bill, that he should receive representations from the unions. Is it not the case that all these various representations made it clear that the proposals on political funding were unworkable and breached the long-established convention that major changes to the funding of a political party should happen only by agreement?

It would appear, at least partially that the Minister listened—well done—but he should have listened earlier, and he needs to keep listening. Will he therefore have a few more meetings with trade unions, which have made entirely reasonable proposals on e-balloting and facility time that still remain in the Bill? There is still time for him to think again.

Nick Boles: I can confirm that, as the hon. Gentleman said, earlier this week I held a meeting, at my request, with Lord Burns in which I discussed with him an amendment to the Bill that we had put down and were intending to move. That amendment would still have applied the compulsory opt-in to existing members of trade unions but would have built a longer period of transition for trade unions to implement it and would also have changed the arrangements on the requirement for renewal of their opt-in to align it with the political fund ballots that need to take place every 10 years.

I had hoped that Lord Burns would feel, if not enthusiastic about that compromise, at least able to indicate that he would not actively oppose it when the Bill went back to the upper House in the next stage of ping-pong. Lord Burns, who is a man for whom I have huge admiration and a great deal of liking, was very clear to me that that was not an acceptable compromise and that not only would he not support it, but he would actively propose the reinstatement of his amendment, which excluded existing members.

Lord Burns made it very clear that his judgment was not so much a political one—it was certainly not particularly inspired by questions about the balance of party funding. It was simply based on his experience in the financial services industry, where he said it was very unfair to ask people to sign up to new things when they have already expressed an opinion on that very same question by a means that was previously legal. He said that that applied in this case; he thought that it was wrong and he
could not support it. We then reflected on Lord Burns’s position and tabled the amendments that we passed last night.

As for the comments made by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) about the rest of the Bill, I want to be very clear with him and other Labour Members: this Bill is going to dramatically improve the state of employment relations and the state of industrial action. At the moment, a trade union, including various education trade unions, can hold a strike three years after a ballot has been passed with a turnout of less than 20% of their members and close more than 1,000 colleges. That is currently legal. When the Bill—which will pass through this House with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin); I anticipate that the noble Lords will pass it next week—receives Royal Assent, it will no longer be possible to inflict on hard-working parents the closure of a school in the middle of the week on the basis of a tiny turnout secured several years ago. That is why I am proud of this Bill and why my hon. Friend can be proud of it: we have secured our manifesto commitments for all working people.

Mr Speaker: The Minister, regrettably, has been diverted from the path of procedural virtue as a result of the cheeky inquiries of the Opposition Front Bencher. We cannot now have a Third Reading of the Trade Union Bill. We must focus narrowly instead on the matter of the urgent question, which I know will be done faithfully by Dr Liam Fox.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Given this change to the Trade Union Bill, and following on from our abandonment of our manifesto commitments on immigration by not renegotiating free movement, will my hon. Friend tell us which of our election commitments we will not now abandon in trying to seek a remain vote?

Nick Boles: Your cautionary tone is ringing in my ears, Mr Speaker; so I will answer my right hon. Friend’s question by narrowly focusing on the measures in the Bill that demonstrate, as I said at the start of my answer, that we have genuinely secured everything that was in our manifesto. This point came up in my discussion with Lord Burns, who really knows a thing or two about legislative drafting. Having read and re-read the precise words in our manifesto about the commitment to introduce a transparent opt-in for the political fund, he said that he was absolutely confident and very clear that the amendment that he tabled, which was passed in the other place and which we have now accepted, fulfilled that manifesto commitment in full; and not only that, but that the further introduction of the opt-in to apply to existing members was not given cover by the Salisbury convention, and that he would make that very plain in his speech in the upper House, if we were to try to restore that position. I mean no criticism of those who wrote our manifesto—it is a wonderful document that will live through the ages—but their wording was not so precisely established as to secure that additional application of the opt-in to existing members of trade unions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We in the Scottish National party reiterate our complete opposition to the Trade Union Bill. Can the Minister confirm that it would be strange, on a piece of legislation that affects 6 million workers, for a Government not to consult bodies that represent those 6 million workers? Can he also confirm that the Government were considering concessions as far back as 26 January, when a memorandum in his name was leaked to many media outlets? Can he confirm what ongoing discussions he is having with devolved institutions, which still have major problems with the Bill and its extent as it relates to facility time and other issues?

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman made a valuable contribution to our deliberations at all stages, but perhaps especially in Committee. I seem to remember that his criticism was both vocal and incisive on almost every measure in the Bill. Of course, he is right. Not only do we hold discussions with institutions in society about which we are legislating—I think it would be a little unfair if we did not—but we actually invited them to give evidence to the Committee. One of the most terrifying sights that I have seen in a long time was the general secretary of Unite, the general secretary of the GMB, the general secretary of Unison and the general secretary of the TUC all sitting in a row giving evidence to that Committee. Of course it was right to do that.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that we have consulted the devolved Administrations. I have had a number of conversations by phone and in person with Ministers in the devolved Governments, who have expressed some concern about whether all the provisions in the Bill should properly apply to them, although we are absolutely confident that all the provisions in the Bill relate to reserved matters and therefore apply to everyone and every trade union in the United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I chaired the Trade Union Bill Committee, and therefore I am not going to comment on the Trade Union Bill, but may I make a general House of Commons and constitutional point? There would be concern if, as part of the ping-pong process, any Government at any time made concessions on a Bill as a result of something that had nothing to do with that Bill. My hon. Friend is an honourable man, and I am sure that he can confirm that no Government of which he was a part would ever do that.

Nick Boles: I think I have explained pretty clearly what the process was. I speak for myself in simply saying that when I met the intransigent force of Lord Burns, I decided that perhaps discretion was the better part of valour. That is not to say that Ministers do not have discussions on all sorts of issues with all sorts of people in society. It is the Government’s policy to support the remain campaign. The previous general secretary of the TUC is a board member of Stronger In and has been for months. The trade unions that I have listed made their positions very clear long before the Bill came back to this House or, indeed, the opt-in was considered in the upper House. I gently say to my hon. and right hon. Friends that not every compromise is a conspiracy.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Now that the Government, according to the barmy idea that is being propagated this morning by the right wing of the Tory
party, are seemingly prepared to give way on different subjects, can I ask the Minister: what is the price for dropping this lousy, rotten Trade Union Bill altogether? I will try to get it.

Nick Boles: It is the goal of my life to give pleasure to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to tell him that there is no price, because we believe in this Bill. We believe in our manifesto, and we are well on the way to delivering it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I hope that the Minister will understand why people are asking these questions when we read from a senior political journalist in The Telegraph the following words:

“Last night a union source said bosses had always been clear that it would be ‘difficult’ to spend significant amounts on the campaign to keep Britain in the union while fighting against the Trade Union Bill. But they revealed that unions will now step up their campaigning and funding efforts in light of the concessions”,

Can he confirm right now that this journalist is absolutely wrong, that her sources are incorrect and that no such trade took place?

Nick Boles: I am afraid that I will just have to repeat what I have already said. There is a natural process towards the end of a parliamentary Session in which concessions are made on Bills to secure their timely passage. What trade unions decide to do about their long-standing commitment to back the remain campaign is entirely a matter for them.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I think this is a very rare occurrence of the Government actually listening to Members of Parliament both in the upper House and in this House. I welcome that, and it is the right thing to do. It is right that the Government should meet trade unions—of course they should. The legislation is an attack on trade unions and does nothing whatsoever for employee-employer relations. It is a wrecking piece of legislation, and any concessions can only improve the Bill. I hope we can have more concessions in the short time left for the Bill’s passage.

Nick Boles: The right hon. Lady is far too kind to me. I did not want to listen at all. I am afraid I simply acknowledged that, faced by an array of forces—it is not just led by Lord Burns, but includes most of the Cross Benches, all the Liberal Democrats, all the members of Labour party and very influential Conservative peers, such as Lord Forsyth, Lord Deben, Lord Balfe and Lord Cormack—neophytes in this game like me perhaps need to concede defeat.

Mr Speaker: It is true that the noble Lord Cormack is a very special “parli-a-mentarian”.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): As the grandson of a trade union shop steward who went on to become a Conservative activist and whose son made it to the other place, I can say to the Minister that he has had correspondence on this issue from Government Members raising the concerns of their constituents who also happen to be trade unionists. May I thank him for listening in relation to that correspondence and paying attention to it? It is a profoundly Conservative principle not just to get through the business in our manifesto, but to engage with the other place to improve it.

Nick Boles: My hon. Friend’s father did not just make it to other place, but made it into the Cabinet and was a very significant performer in the area of employment law and industrial relations, so we have much to learn from his work. My hon. Friend is right. I hope it is not breaking a confidence to say that I have had conversations with other Members of the House who were deeply concerned about this specific provision. I should not mention their names, but they include very significant—in fact, leading—supporters of the campaign to leave the European Union.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Has there ever been any psychological explanation of why so many Tory MPs have such a loathing of trade unions?

Nick Boles: I do not recognise such loathing, and I certainly do not feel it myself.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) in congratulating the Minister on the way in which he has handled the Bill? Again, is it not the case that the Minister has had conversations with many people from all parts of the House, including on the Government Benches, both in the Commons and in the other place, about their concerns and that many of those concerns have now been addressed without any concessions at all being made to us?

Nick Boles: I can confirm that, and none was more important than my hon. Friend, who had some very serious concerns. He did exactly the right thing: he came to see me privately about them as we were deliberating in the House. He tabled an amendment on Report which he did not move because I had reassured him that we would look at closely as the Bill progressed. Yesterday, when he was not in the Chamber, I specifically mentioned that he had been influential in our decision ultimately not to press ahead with the measure that would have removed the check-off arrangement for trade unions in the public sector.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I declare an interest as someone who has paid the political fund levy since 1969, and is a former president of Unison and a member of the TUC general council. I assure the House that the trade unions are quite clear that they do not want the Bill at all. When the Government were pushing this Bill they were reminded that even Winston Churchill spoke against what they are trying to do. I will also say very clearly that, whatever gossip people are hearing, there is no doubt that the trade unions would have funded the Labour party’s remain campaign, because they realise that the people who the Prime Minister of this country described as swivel-eyed loonies and the other right-wing reactionaries who would deregulate this nation will be worse for working people. Whatever the outcome of the Bill, and even if it had not been changed at all, I am convinced that the trade unions would have been in that position on behalf of their members, putting their money where their mouth is.

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman’s words speak for themselves and are very powerful.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This is a shabby political episode. The Government have been caught diluting trade union legislation to persuade the trade unions to come on board with the campaign to stay in the European Union. Is it not clear that the Government, big business, the big banks, the BBC and now the big trade unions are all ganging up on the British people to try to persuade them to stay in the European Union?

Nick Boles: Nothing pains me more than to have angered my hon. Friend, as I clearly have. I have huge liking and respect for him; whenever he asks me to visit his constituency I drop everything to come, because I just think he is a great man. But I reject what he has said. Unlike in any other case, perhaps in this case he is blinded a little by his passion for the issue. I simply point out that all he need do is look at the front pages and editorial pages of every single newspaper that is traditionally seen as a Conservative supporter to see that there is a balance of opinion in this debate and his arguments are being well represented.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Given the impact the Bill will have on workers’ rights across the whole of the United Kingdom, what discussions has the Minister had with the devolved Administrations since the Lords amendments?

Nick Boles: I have not yet had that pleasure, but I anticipate it.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): This is a very simple issue, on which the Minister could give a very straightforward answer. The allegation is that the Trade Union Bill was watered down for the benefit of the trade unions on the understanding that they would then make a considerable donation to the campaign to stay in the European Union. Will the Minister give us a clear denial, with the authority of the Dispatch Box, that any such discussions took place with Ministers or officials, and that in no way whatever was the watering down of the Bill done with any mention of funding from trade unions to the EU remain campaign? It is very simple for him to deny it if it is not true.

Nick Boles: I aspire—and probably always will—to be as straightforward as my hon. Friend. I have been very clear: we went through a process of negotiation, not just with shadow Ministers but with members of other parties and none in the other House. We have secured a package that, I have to say, I do not believe any hon. Member on the Government Benches would have predicted; when we introduced the Bill, no one would have predicted that we would have secured as much of it as swiftly and as easily as we have, because it was probably the most politically controversial Bill in our original Queen’s Speech. As for decisions by trade unions to back the campaign for which they had already declared long before yesterday’s consideration of the amendments to the Bill, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) spoke very clearly when he said that the trade unions would have supported the campaign wholeheartedly and full-throatedly anyway, because they believe that it is in their interests and the interests of their members to do so.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I do not think that there was anything so grubby as a deal, but if an agreement was reached I congratulate the Opposition Chief Whip on showing how politics can be done. May I urge the Minister now to ask the private sector to follow the leadership of the trade unions and contact their employees to make the case for Europe and the terrible threats to jobs, investment and growth if we leave a single market of 500 million consumers?

Nick Boles: I am not sure, Mr Speaker, whether you would count that question or my likely answer as directly relevant, but I will venture on until you stop me. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of businesses, small and large, have many beefs about the European Union—I do, too—but ultimately think that it is in our interests to stay. I agree with the hon. Gentleman to this extent, that I think all of us should be doing all we can, whether financially or in other ways, to encourage the people we represent to see that their interests are best protected by staying in.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) who asked this urgent question speaks passionately on behalf of his own union, which is the general and municipal union of Brexit bigots. [HON. MEMBERS: “Order!”] It is extraordinary that he asked for the adviser on ministerial interests to be woken from his slumber—that adviser has been virtually unemployed since he was appointed, after the previous holder of the office, Sir Philip Mawer, resigned because he believed that he should have been called in to investigate the conduct of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who gained absolution through resignation. As Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, why on earth is the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex not demanding an inquiry into the two Ministers who gave £3 million to Kids Company in the face of advice from civil servants, three days before it collapsed? It is because the office of the adviser has been degraded and politicised. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Calm down. Calm. The benefit of yoga, even for Ministers, should not be underestimated. Let me intercede briefly because there were calls of “Order” when the hon. Gentleman used a word about Members on the Government Back Benches. I did not intervene because I judge that to be a matter of taste. There is no imputation of dishonour and—I mean this in no unkind spirit—the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), and other likeminded souls, are perfectly capable of looking after themselves. Their honour has not been impugned in any way, and that is why I did not intervene. The remark stands, and the Minister must reply.

Nick Boles: There are no bigots on the Government side of the House, least of all my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex. I am not sure, Mr Speaker, whether you are absolutely certain that my likely answer as directly relevant, but I will venture on until you stop me. It is not that a deal was reached; but if an agreement was reached I congratulate the Opposition Chief Whip on showing how politics can be done. May I urge the Minister now to ask the private sector to follow the leadership of the trade unions and contact their employees to make the case for Europe and the terrible threats to jobs, investment and growth if we leave a single market of 500 million consumers?
Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is entitled to his view, but I hope the House will not take offence if I say that I will judge whether a remark needs to be withdrawn. With great force and eloquence the Minister has offered his view, and I respect him for that, but we will leave it there.

Paul Flynn: But he hasn’t answered the question.

Mr Speaker: If I were to intervene on grounds of order every time a question is not answered, nothing else would ever happen in the Chamber.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I confess to a sense of bemusement at this urgent question, which seems to be little more than a contrived confluence of the pet prejudices of right-wing Tories, namely trade unions and the European Union. That said, I restate my absolute opposition to this Bill. Will the Minister confirm that trade unions remain a part of civil society and have an absolute right to make representations to the Government on behalf of their members, irrespective of what right-wing Conservative Back Bencher might wish?

Nick Boles: Of course I confirm that, but the position governing strike action, the proper regulation of trade union activities with regard to finances and membership, and the position on picketing and intimidation of non-striking workers, were not acceptable until this Bill was introduced, and they will remain not acceptable until the Bill has secured Royal Assent. Of course I accept that trade unions have an important role in society, but they needed and will benefit from this reform. I put on record my gratitude to all my hon. Friends, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex, for their support for the Bill.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Today is International Workers Memorial Day, which serves as a poignant reminder of why we need good and strong trade unions in our society. I also think it right that the trade union movement is opposed to many of the measures in the Bill, which is an attack on how it operates on behalf of its members. On the substantive point of the urgent question, the Bill is not yet legislation and has not been enacted. Surely the fact that a Labour-affiliated trade union has decided to donate some of its Labour-affiliated political fund to a Labour-supported affiliated trade union is perfectly within the law.

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman has had a good run, and he should be patient. I am sure his point of order can be heard later, if it is sufficiently important to warrant either his staying in the Chamber or his returning to it.
am sure Members know. Fletcher Christian mutinied on the Bounty. Christian ended up on Pitcairn Island, which is 9,000 miles from here. I can just imagine the Leader of the House as the governor of Pitcairn, dressed in his white linen shorts, his solar topee and his white socks and sandals, lording it all over 56 inhabitants. If he wants, I can put in a word with the Prime Minister for him—because I see that the Prime Minister is trying to advance my career.

Can we have a debate on irresponsible politics? I suspect the Leader of the House might never have heard of Arfon Jones, but he tweeted:

“I think we should have a protest where thousands of us send emails containing the words bomb+terrorist+Iran. That should keep GCHQ quiet.”

Now Arfon might be a stupid crank, but he is also the Plaid Cymru candidate for North Wales police and crime commissioner.

Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the deeply worrying breakdown of the e-borders system on 14 and 15 June last year? We need to know, first: have there been other breakdowns? Were full warnings index checks implemented and, above all, why did the Home Secretary cover this up for so long? The Leader of the House says that we should leave the EU so we can control our borders, but surely the lesson we should learn is that the greatest threat to our borders is, frankly, Tory incompetence.

The Leader of the House says that we should consider Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill on Tuesday. As I walked into Parliament this morning, the police were moving on two homeless people who have been sleeping on the doorstep of this parliamentary palace for the last week. Under the Tories, rough sleeping has doubled and funding for those sleeping rough has halved. We believe that this Bill will make the housing crisis in London even worse. So will this Government ensure, for heaven’s sake, that for every single social housing unit sold off, at least another is built in its place?

On 29 November 2012, the Prime Minister said of the Leveson inquiry that there would be “a second part to investigate wrongdoing in the press and the police”.—[Official Report, 29 November 2012; Vol. 554, c. 446.]

I listened to the Home Secretary very carefully yesterday. She made an excellent statement, but she also said:

“We have always said that a decision on Leveson 2 will be made when all the investigations have been completed.”—[Official Report, 27 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1441.]

Well, that is not right. Up until now, the Government position and the Prime Minister’s position has always been that Leveson 2 will start—not might start—as soon as the police and prosecuting authorities have finished their work.

Surely, one of the many lessons we must learn from Hillsborough is that when the relationship between the police and the press gets too close, it corrupts them both. After all, some have argued that the law of libel means there is no need for a strong independent press regulator, but the 96 people whose reputation was dragged through the mud by the police, The Sun and The Spectator could not sue for libel, could they? So surely we need Leveson 2 now more than ever.
The shadow Leader of the House talked about Leveson 2. Let me simply remind him of the Government’s position, which is that we will not move forward until the case is complete. That is the right thing to do, and we will continue to stick to our position. The hon. Gentleman also made a point about Arfon Jones. Yes, I do know who he is, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the views he has expressed are objectionable. It is my sincere hope that he is not elected as police and crime commissioner in that part of north Wales.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the e-borders programme was supposed to arrive and be put into effect when Labour was in power, but that did not happen, because Labour failed to deliver it. When Labour Members talk to us about what we have done in government, they should bear in mind that they were in power for 13 years, and that they started by dismantling the exit checks at our borders and then completely failed to provide an alternative.

The hon. Gentleman talked about homelessness. Let me just remind him of his party’s record in government. In 13 years, the Labour Government built fewer council houses than we built during the first Parliament in which we were in office.

Let me now return to the question of anti-Semitism, and pay a personal tribute to the hon. Gentleman. When it comes to this issue, his has been a voice of reason, sanity and common sense in the Labour party, and he deserves credit for that. However, I wish that all his colleagues saw things in the same way. What he said about Ken Livingstone was absolutely right. Ken Livingstone’s comments yesterday, suggesting that the measures that were at the heart of yesterday’s controversy were not anti-Semitic, were disgraceful. I do not understand—as, indeed, many Labour Members do not understand—how Ken Livingstone can still be a member of the Labour party today. He should be suspended from the party for the things that he said. I also think, however, that there has been some naivety on the Labour Benches this morning.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) said on the “Today” programme that she regarded these events as “trial by Twitter”, and likened what had happened to the tweeting of a picture of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) on a zip wire. It is clear that she does not fully understand the gravity of the situation. We heard wise words from the shadow Leader of the House, and I respect him for that, although I profoundly disagree with what he said about my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. He made a powerful point, and, in this regard, he is a beacon of sense in his party; but where is the sense on the rest of the Labour Benches in respect of what is a deeply, deeply serious matter?

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): A number of my constituents have been victims of what appears to be a financial scam, and Humberside police have referred them to Action Fraud. The contact that they have had with Action Fraud is minimal, and they are very dissatisfied. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the work of Action Fraud?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has made an important point, and I pay tribute to him for raising this issue in the House. We are, of course, aware that a range of different scams are taking place throughout our society, and that the victims are often vulnerable people. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will be here next week, and I hope that my hon. Friend will take advantage of the opportunity to ensure that the issue is on his radar as well.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business.

Let us forget about Ed Balls day. Today is International Workers Memorial day, when we remember all those who have been killed in the workplace. The slogan for this day is “Remember the dead—fight for the living”. I think that those words are very apt, given that we are currently considering the Trade Union Bill.

Will the Government not simply do the right thing, and accept the unaccompanied child refugees who are currently languishing in a variety of refugee camps in southern Europe? When even the bleeding hearts on the Daily Mail are calling for the Government to accept these wretched children, surely the time has come for even this, the most callous of Governments, to reconsider their position and do the right thing. They will have their chance, for it seems that on 9 May, the Lords amendment will return to the House of Commons. Will the Government look at it positively, and, for the sake of the country and all its people—even the right-wing press—will they do the right thing by these children?

When I was growing up in Scotland, a little announcement was sometimes made during previews of the television programmes that people would see on their analogue sets: “not for viewers in Scotland”. It occurred to me that we could resurrect that announcement and apply it to Prime Minister’s Question Time, because most of the last two sessions have dealt exclusively with the academisation of English schools: not for viewers in Scotland, and not for viewers in most other parts of the United Kingdom. The Leader of the Opposition can make them more inclusive for everyone throughout the United Kingdom. The Leader of the Opposition can raise whatever issues he wants—it is up to him to do that—but perhaps the time has now come to review Prime Minister’s questions to see whether we could make them more inclusive for everyone throughout the United Kingdom, particularly as we now seem to have two Labour parties as well. Perhaps the Leader of the House will support that call.

May we have a debate on the Government’s commitments on defence spending in the Clyde shipyards? I remember only too well some of the things that were said during the independence referendum. I particularly remember a leaflet that went round—it was common currency—that had been designed by the Labour and Tory alliance. The suggestion was that “separation kills shipyards”. It was actually quite a neat little slogan, implying that it would be all boom within the Union and doom and gloom if we secured independence. Of course we now recognise that for the nonsense it was. It is not independence that is killing the shipyards; it is this Union that is killing them slowly and painfully by diminishing the orders and delaying the start of the works. The Scottish people feel duped by all the commitments that were made during the independence referendum, so may we have a full debate so that the Government can explain fully what is going on? We need to ensure that the work is started on time and that all their promises are honoured.
I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, as Leader of the House, has full access to the Prime Minister’s diary, so perhaps he can explain why there will be no prime ministerial visit to Scotland in advance of the Scottish election. In fact, the Prime Minister is probably the last person Ruth Davidson wants to see if she has any ambition, given the likelihood of the Conservatives beating Labour into third place. We would love to see him, however, because every time he appears, the Scottish National party gains an extra two percentage points. Will the Leader of the House encourage his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to come to Scotland? He could even come himself. The more Tories there are in Scotland in advance of the election, the better it will be for the Scottish National party.

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have great regard for him as a parliamentary colleague, but sometimes his rhetoric lets him down. He describes us as the “most callous of Governments”, but we are providing the second largest amount of aid to all the refugee camps around Syria and doing as much as any nation in the world bar the United States to help the people affected. We are taking 20,000 people not from other European countries but from the refugee camps where they are most vulnerable. He talked about unaccompanied children, but we are taking unaccompanied children not from other EU countries where they are safe and under the control of the Governments of those countries but from the camps where they are vulnerable. Surely that is the sensible, wise, thoughtful and considerate thing to do. We are not saying, “No, we will provide no assistance.” We are providing assistance to those who have not been able to make it to Europe, and that is a policy that we resolutely stand by.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Prime Minister’s questions dealing with education. I would simply remind him that that is a consequence of devolution. This is a United Kingdom Parliament, but it is true that in his constituency, education is a matter not for him but for the Member of the Scottish Parliament. This is one of the differences that we have debated over recent months. The reality is that this is a consequence of the devolutionary settlement that he has championed from the start.

The hon. Gentleman talked about defence spending in the Clyde shipyards. He is absolutely right to suggest that if Scotland were independent now, it would not be getting big orders from the Ministry of Defence. He wants a debate and a chance to vote on these matters; he will soon have an opportunity to vote on whether to remove from Scotland one of the biggest defence facilities in the United Kingdom, on getting rid of the jobs there, and on removing from Scotland what is an important part of its economy as well as an important part of our nation’s defences. When he can explain his position on that in the context of the welfare of Scotland, I will take him seriously on these issues.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Scottish election, and about the Conservatives in Scotland. I have been to Scotland since the start of the election campaign and I am delighted to see that the Conservatives are moving up in the polls, although I am sure that there is no connection between the two. All of us on this side of the House believe that we have the best leader in Scotland. We believe that she will play a crucial part in Scotland’s affairs over the coming years as people come to realise that the SNP Government in Edinburgh might make a lot of noise but are actually incapable of getting the job done.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): On 12 May, the Prime Minister is hosting an anti-corruption summit in London. That has never happened before, and it will have a far-reaching impact. May we have a debate on the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and on our progress towards creating fully open public registers of beneficial ownership information?

Chris Grayling: That subject is due to be debated in Westminster Hall shortly, but my hon. Friend is right about the role that the Government have played over the past six years—first in coalition, and then on our own. We have delivered more change and progress on such issues than any previous Government, and that is something of which we should be proud.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the announcement of the business. With this afternoon’s business, which was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee, the day and half-day next week, and the half-day in the following week, we are inching ever closer to the 27 days to which the Backbench Business Committee and Back Benchers are entitled within the parliamentary Session. I thank the Leader of the House for that.

As has been mentioned, today is International Workers Memorial Day, which is commemorated by the TUC and trades councils all around the country, including at a memorial service at noon in Saltwell Park in my constituency of Gateshead. This day, on which we say, “Remember the dead; fight for the living,” is for those who died in industrial accidents or from diseases contracted due to workplace conditions. Will the Leader of the House consider recognising International Workers Memorial Day in the parliamentary calendar in future?

Chris Grayling: On the subject of International Workers Memorial Day, may I first say that this country is a better place than it was in the past? Representing an area where there have been large industrial accidents in the past, the hon. Gentleman is right not only to recognise the progress that has been made, but to remember those who died before progress was made. None of us would wish to go back to those days. Even though we often debate the complexity of health and safety regulations, I put it on the record that it is not in the interests of anyone in this country, from business owners to workers to those who are not involved at all, to have an environment in which people are at risk in the workplace. When industrial accidents occur, as tragically happened at Didcot power station recently, we all bitterly regret it. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and hon. Members on both sides of the House for the work that they will do to mark this occasion. Let us never go back to the days when such things were commonplace in this country.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who now dominates the parliamentary calendar, controlling far more of it than the Government, will find an opportunity to recognise this important day and to ensure that Members have the same opportunity in coming years.
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Macey, a nine-year-old little girl from my constituency, is not very well at the moment; in fact, I think she was taken into hospital again last night. To make her completely better, she is going to have to go to the United States and the NHS is providing for that. There was a problem, however, because she could not get a passport. She and her mother do not have passports, and it would have taken up to six weeks to get them. Thanks to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) and the personal intervention of the Home Secretary, the passports will now be sorted out tomorrow. Macey asked whether I could thank the House, and the Home Secretary in particular, for that. Perhaps we could have a general debate some time in the future about how the Government can, at times, work together for common sense.

Chris Grayling: I think my hon. Friend’s words say it all. We wish Macey all the very best in her treatment and a full recovery. The image of this place is often one of political debate and confrontation, but there are decent people on both sides of the House, one of whom is my hon. Friend, working on behalf of their constituencies and trying to solve problems such as this, where all of us want the right thing to be done.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that Calvin Thomas is retiring today after 26 years’ great service to the House, including 16 years as a Doorkeeper, working in the Special Gallery since 2009. I know Calvin well, in part because we have sometimes been confused due to our similar, if different, names. Calvin has been consistently friendly, helpful and charming in carrying out his duties as a valued member of our staff, so may I ask that the Leader of the House conveys the whole House’s thanks to Calvin and wishes him a happy and well-deserved retirement on our behalf?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman has said it eloquently on all our behalves, so I simply echo his words and not only wish Calvin a happy retirement, but express our thanks to the Doorkeepers, who are great servants of the House, treating us all with great courtesy and good humour and performing enormously valuable work for us. We value what they do enormously.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may know, the UK Sepsis Trust has been working for some time with the Health Secretary to establish a public awareness campaign on Sepsis. Sepsis currently claims about 44,000 lives in the UK every year and the symptoms of the disease are still not well recognised. May I have a debate about what could be done to introduce a sepsis-specific public awareness campaign for both children and adults? I believe that such a campaign would have the potential to save the lives of thousands of people every year.

Chris Grayling: May I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend on the work she is doing in this important area? I am aware that the Health Secretary is taking this issue enormously seriously and has had meetings with those campaigning for the kind of public awareness work that she is talking about, and I am certain he will wish to take that forward. This is a very serious matter and it behoves us, as representatives of our constituents and as members of the Government, to try to look for ways to deal with challenges such as this.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): May I ask the Leader of the House to condemn the Labour police and crime commissioner candidate for north Wales, David Taylor, for appallingly callous Twitter comments that can be interpreted by right-thinking people only as mocking Hillsborough families?

There are growing concerns that Government links with Tata and the Warwick Manufacturing Group will result in the sacrifice of heavy-end primary steel production at Port Talbot. Will the Leader of the House press the Business Secretary to make a statement to assure Port Talbot workers that this Government prioritise their future in deeds as well as words, and that all proposals for a UK steel solution will be assessed based on the evidence and with the interests of UK citizens first and foremost?

Chris Grayling: I can simply assure the hon. Lady that the Government take this matter enormously seriously, and the Business Secretary will be here again next week. The Government have taken an interest in this from the Prime Minister downwards—he has taken a personal interest in what happens at Port Talbot. None of us wants to see Port Talbot disappear; we want to see it continue to make steel. It is in all of our interests that that happens and we will work as hard as we can to make sure it does.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the conduct of the EU referendum campaign thus far? When canvassing in my constituency, I have found that local residents, regardless of their political views, are angered by the intervention of the outgoing President in our domestic affairs. They are also furious about £9 million being spent by the Government on leaflets and they think the Treasury booklet making forecasts for 2050 is crazy, given that, just like weather forecasters, these people cannot even get their projections right for the next day.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is a vigorous campaigner on these matters and feels passionately about them. As I announced earlier, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on this on 9 May, when he will have the opportunity to express himself as succinctly as he wishes about the booklet that went through people’s doors. The interesting question is whether the factors that he has described will and are having an impact on the polling relating to the campaign.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): We have heard from the shadow Leader of the House this morning that a British Airways computer system designed to stop the movement of terrorists crashed for 48 hours last year. Furthermore, I have learned that the British Airways outsourcing programme threatens 900 skilled workers who are working to protect our country. May we therefore have a debate to discuss the role of outsourcing in this event and to stop BA threatening our national security in a bid to save money?
Chris Grayling: The Government take our national security enormously seriously. While the failure the hon. Lady talks about took place, border control checks remained in place—as they always do and will. People's passports are checked when they arrive in this country. The e-borders system is mostly about trying to ensure that we check people when they leave the country, which has never happened previously and is very important; we had hoped it would happen many years ago but, for various reasons, it never came to pass under the previous Government.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the implications for the United Kingdom of the five Presidents' report on economic and monetary union? As my right hon. Friend will be aware, under the guise of single market legislation the proposals are to take control over insolvency law, company law and property rights. Do the Government not have a duty to tell those in financial services and the City about the consequences of remaining in the European Union?

Chris Grayling: The five Presidents' report, a major document published by the European Union, sets out the vision of those who lead its institutions for the next 10 years. It has provoked—and will continue to provoke—a lively debate about the future direction of this country and of the European Union as a whole. If my right hon. Friend feels that the matter should be debated in the House, I should say that I suspect that the Backbench Business Committee still has time available for a debate in the next couple of weeks. I suspect that this subject might attract fairly widespread participation.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Last week, during business questions, I raised an issue that is very serious in my constituency: the 20% increase in the use of food banks over the past year. That increase is precisely due to benefit delays and, even more criminally, benefit sanctions. I mentioned my constituent Paul who has been sanctioned for three whole years. The Leader of the House told me that that could happen only if three reasonable job offers had been turned down.

I want to return to this issue today to ask another question. First of all, let me point out that Paul is on £36 a week. His three-year sanction was due to his filling out his job logbook incorrectly, turning up 10 minutes late after having problems getting a bus, and expressing dissatisfaction after waiting for an hour at the jobcentre. He has therefore been living on £36 a week for three whole years. Will the Leader of the House consider, as a matter of urgency, a debate on the issue of sanctions, as an increasing number of people are having to depend on the charity of others?

Chris Grayling: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman goes back and looks very closely at the circumstances of the case. I personally introduced the three-year sanction for people who, on three separate occasions, turn down a reasonable job offer—in other words, people who refuse to work. It remains my view to this day that if people who can work refuse to work and refuse to work again and again, they should not be entitled to carry on receiving support from the benefit system.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week came the really welcome news that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education had safeguarded the qualifications and teaching of community languages. I will list those languages for the benefit of the House: Gujarati, Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi, Japanese, Arabic, modern Greek, modern and biblical Hebrew, Polish, Portuguese and Turkish. That means that we have safeguarded the qualifications and the teaching of those vital languages in the modern world so that everyone can communicate. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State was not able to regale the House with the good news at questions this week. Something such as this should not be left to wither on the vine. Surely we should have a statement on that position, so that we can ensure that everyone understands that, from 2018, those languages are safeguarded in our education system.

Chris Grayling: Of course that is enormously important. Although we have the benefit in this country of having the nearest thing that there is to an international language in the English language, it is right and proper that, as a cosmopolitan society, we champion languages that not only preserve the culture of the different communities that live here, but open up enormous opportunities for Britain around the world. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I have no doubt that he will look to the different channels available to him to ensure that these matters are debated and explored more in this House.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Last week, I spoke in the national living wage debate to highlight the potential injustice of the decision to deny the living wage to those under 25. A young person could start work at the age of 18 and be in a role for seven years before being paid the same as their older and potentially less experienced colleagues. Can we have a debate in Government time to give Members the opportunity to persuade the Government to right that wrong and extend the living wage to the under-25s?

Chris Grayling: It has been the policy of this Government, and indeed of the previous Government, to differentiate in respect of minimum and living wages when it comes to younger workers and older workers precisely because when a young worker enters the workplace the employer is making an investment decision as well as a recruitment decision. The employer takes responsibility for training and developing that young person.

We did not want to see—indeed the hon. Lady's party previously did not want this—a situation in which it was unattractive to hire a young worker, and we stand by that principle to this day. Of course many young people who start on the national living wage will move up the pay scale either through success in their own workplace or by moving to a different job. I still think it is important to do everything that we can to incentivise employers to take on young people.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): As we are talking about the dodgy behaviour of police and crime commissioner candidates, may I say to the Leader of the House that a number of folk standing for election next week are ex-coppers trading on their record as police officers? Does he agree that the Government
should bring forward proposals to ensure that ex-police officers standing to be PCCs make their police service record available for public scrutiny?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am aware of allegations about the Labour PCC candidate in Humberside. If the stories alleged about that candidate are true, he is unfit for public office, and it is a matter of public interest that the truth should be known before election day.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Back in 1847 when Lord John Russell was Prime Minister, our taxi licensing laws were developed. We now have a problem in the north-west of England, where one local authority is handing out hackney carriage taxi licences like sweeties. The problem is that with a hackney licence a person can operate as a private hire vehicle driver anywhere in the country, so there are now taxis from that local authority operating as far afield as Bristol without appropriate checks and balances. May we have an urgent debate on how we can bring our taxi licensing regime up to date?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I was not aware of the situation that he describes. I will make sure that it is drawn to the attention of the Secretary of State for Transport who I am sure, if he was also unaware of it, will want to look at the matter very seriously.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has threatened to introduce legislation that would make it illegal for Stoke Gifford parish council in my constituency to charge for an organised sporting event that attracts several hundred people to quite a small park every weekend. Given that the Government have been a champion of localism and passed the Localism Act 2011 in the previous Parliament, that is a tad hypocritical. May we have a debate on the freedom of local councils to charge organisers who run sporting events in their parks?

Chris Grayling: I am not aware of the proposal that my hon. Friend refers to, but I understand his concern and I can see why he would raise it as a matter of importance in the House today. I will draw that issue to the attention of the Secretary of State. Clearly, we want to encourage local authorities to support, develop and underpin events that bring communities together. My hon. Friend makes an important point about his own constituency; I will make sure that we get a proper response for him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This week has seen another dispute between the other place and this Chamber. I am sure that instead of leading to unaccompanied child refugees being brought into the country, it will lead to more cronies being appointed to the House of Lords. The Leader of the House has said previously that there is no appetite for proper reform. Where is the public appetite for even more cronies and dosens than the current 800, and where is the manifesto commitment to continue stuffing the other place? May we have a statement on the matter?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues insult many of the very deserving and effective people who operate in the other place—people who represent the disability lobby, who have serious disabilities themselves; people who represent the arts world, who have long track records in the arts; and people who represent the business world, who have long track records in business. The expertise in the other place brings something significant to our parliamentary system, even though sometimes the two Houses disagree over issues, as we do currently.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Given the delays that a number of my constituents have faced in receiving their basic farm payments this year, may we have a debate on the process for issuing payments to farmers whose land crosses the English-Welsh border or the English-Scottish border so that such delays are not repeated next year? Those farmers always appear to be at the back of the queue.

Chris Grayling: That remains an issue. I have spoken to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about it. It is true that across the country the vast majority of payments have been made, but I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes. I will ensure that the Secretary of State is aware of his concerns. She will be here next week and will be able to respond to him fully.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware of the emerging crisis at the yard on the Clyde tasked with building the Type 26 frigate. A late start to the project and uncertainty over the future workflow threatens hundreds of jobs at Govan and Scotstoun. May we therefore have a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss in depth the future of the Clyde shipbuilding industry and give a voice to those workers who are unsure of their future?

Chris Grayling: The Clyde shipbuilding industry has a strong future for two reasons—first, because it remains part of the United Kingdom and therefore benefits from United Kingdom defence spending, and secondly, because this Government have committed to the 2% spending level as part of our commitment to NATO. If those things were not happening, the future of course would be much more uncertain, but I am convinced that the Clyde shipyards have a strong future. They are an essential part of our defence and we need to ensure that they continue to flourish in the years to come.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May we have a statement on the treatment by the House of public petitions that attract a large number of signatures? As the Leader of the House knows, there will be a debate on 9 May about the petition to stop the Government spending public money on pro-remain propaganda in the EU referendum. As of a few moments ago, 217,072 people had signed the petition, but the debate on it, like others of a similar nature, will be held in Westminster Hall, where no vote can be held. Should it not be possible for the Backbench Business Committee to hold such debates in the main Chamber? Otherwise, petitioners will be disappointed to find that, although their concerns are debated, the House is unable to vote on them.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which relates to not only this subject but others. I would encourage discourse between the two hon. Members who chair the Petitions Committee and the Backbench
Business Committee so that they can see how, when a petition reaches a certain number of signatures and clearly commands overwhelming public support, a debate can be brought to the Floor of the House.

Mr Speaker: For what it is worth, perhaps I can say from the Chair that I think that would be a very, very good thing. I would not dream of taking sides on the issues, but in terms of the link between Parliament and the people, it is very important that it be not just tangible but meaningful, and there is real scope for progress there, so I very much appreciate what the Leader of the House has said.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On the topic of democracy and having votes, the House voted 278 to 0 last week on a motion to ask the Government to bring to the UN Security Council the issue of the genocide against Christians, Yazidis and others. What will the Leader of the House do to bring the Government to account and to ensure they respect the democracy of this place by doing what they have been asked to do and taking these crimes to the UN Security Council so that action is taken?

Chris Grayling: To reiterate, the Government’s position is one of shock, horror and condemnation regarding what has taken place—that is an unreserved statement. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is taking careful note of the view of the House, as expressed in the debate the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I recently had cause to write to the President of the European Commission to ask what role he saw it playing in our EU referendum. I have had no answer, but given that the Commission spent £560 million directly promoting itself in 2014 and that it interfered in the Irish referendum in 2009, may we have a statement from the Government on whether European Commission interference in this referendum is welcome? As I understand it, the Electoral Commission has no powers whatever to prevent the EU from being an unwelcome active participant in our democratic process.

Chris Grayling: I can indeed confirm that that is the case. However, I am sure there will be different opinions in the House on whether such an intervention would be helpful or unhelpful to either side of the argument.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): A former Minister, who spoke from the Dispatch Box less than a year ago, is now employed by industry in China—presumably using his insider knowledge—whose firms are in competition with British firms. Some 70% of former senior civil servants who worked on income tax are now working in the tax avoidance industry. When we debate the need to euthanise the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which should be a fierce Roettweiler watchdog, but which is nothing but a poodle without teeth or claws, bark or bite, and is totally and utterly useless?

Mr Speaker: I do wish the hon. Gentleman would learn to tell us what he really thinks.

Chris Grayling: I am not sure if my memory is correct, Mr Speaker—you may correct me otherwise—but if I remember rightly, the Committee to which the hon. Gentleman referred was set up by the party of which he is part. I remind him that it was a senior member of his own party who described himself after leaving office, and while in pursuit of commercial opportunities, as a “taxi for hire”.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I have had the privilege of visiting the Rugby young carers project, which is based at Hill Street youth and community centre in my constituency, under the inspirational leadership of Annette Collier. It is for amazing young people who play a part in the care of family members. I was deeply concerned to learn that Warwickshire’s young carers project faces losing funding that will affect those under eight years old, as that will have an impact in Rugby. May we have a debate about the importance of properly supporting these young people?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. One of the most invisible groups of heroes in our society are our young carers. Until we come across them at first hand, none of us really understands how a child can be left, in effect, as a full-time or semi-full-time carer of a parent. I have a young carers group in my constituency that does enormously valuable work. His local group clearly plays a really important role, and I know that he will do everything he can to make sure that its future is guaranteed because it is important to the communities he represents.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am becoming increasingly concerned about the discriminatory language that has been used in the Chamber recently. The Education Secretary recently called us—the Opposition—“deaf”, using deafness as a pejorative term, which is unacceptable. Yesterday the Prime Minister used the word “poncey”, which many people take to be homophobic. May we have a statement about our duty under the Equality Act 2010, which includes the language that we use in this Chamber?

Chris Grayling: I think that people will hear in words what they want to hear. The one thing that nobody could accuse my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister of is homophobia. The man who brought to this House and saw through same-sex marriage is not somebody who could ever be described as homophobic.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This morning there has been a very thorough Committee hearing on the UK steel industry, but will the Leader of the House organise a statement next week so that all Members are able to put questions to Ministers on behalf of our steel towns? Despite the commercial sensitivities, it is very important that we and our constituents know exactly what is happening and what progress is being made to secure the future of the industry.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and Opposition Members who represent steel towns have done a really important job in recent weeks of reminding us of the importance of this industry. I commend him, and them, for that. I am happy to say that I can lay on just such
Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Hot off the press this morning is early-day motion 1432.

Chris Grayling: That this House notes last week’s by-election in the House of Lords, which saw Viscount Thurso elected to the other place following the sad death of Lord Avebury; further notes the size of the electorate was only three; calls into question the legitimacy of this by-election; believes now is the time for the abolition of the remaining 92 hereditary peers’ right to vote and speak in the House of Lords; and agrees to bring forward the second stage of reform following the House of Lords Reform Act 1999.

That backs up the Bill I introduced on Tuesday to abolish the right of hereditary peers to vote and to speak in the House of Lords. Given that there are currently the same number of Members on the Government Front Bench as voted in the election of a hereditary peer last week, is it not time that we had a debate on ending this farcical process?

Chris Grayling: What always slightly puzzles me is that although Labour was in power for 13 years and brought through House of Lords reform, it did not address the issue on which Labour Members are calling for change. I think we all admit that there was something curiously quaint about the Liberal Democrat electorate of three, but of course one has to cut them a bit of slack because there are so few of them these days. My view is that there are pressing issues facing this country, and dealing with the Lib Dem electorate of three is probably not at the top of the list.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): May we have a debate on the London licensed taxi trade? Black cab drivers in my constituency offer a lot more to London and their community than Uber does.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, in a free market London taxi drivers do face challenges, but I believe they are the best in the world and bring something of immense value to our city. I do not believe that in anything that any of us does in politics, at this level or at a London level, would we ever wish to jeopardise their future.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Given statements made in the Back-Bench business debate in this House a couple of weeks ago, I presume that last week the Government received for security review the Chilcot report. Will the Leader of the House update us on progress and when we can expect a debate in the House?

Chris Grayling: The report is now going through an opportunity, because next week we have Business, Innovation and Skills questions and he will be able to put his point to the Secretary of State then.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): May we have a debate on making it easier for metropolitan councils to switch to all-out elections or elections by halves so that councils such as Dudley can cut the cost of local politics?

Chris Grayling: That is an important issue and, of course, local councils have the freedom to do it: it is for them to decide whether they have elections in thirds, halves or individually. My personal view is that it is a real hike for a local council to be doing elections every year and I prefer all-out elections, but it is, of course, a matter for local decision making.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Every year on the Sunday closest to St George’s day, Enfield scouts and guides organise and take part in a St George’s day parade through Enfield town. I usually accompany them and it is a fantastic day. I pay tribute to the scouts and the guides, particularly to all the volunteer leaders for the good job they do in enabling scouts and guides to happen every week for our young people. I am very concerned that youth services are severely at risk from the cuts that the Government are passing down to local authorities, so may we have a debate in Government time to consider the problem, which is affecting our young people and their families?

Chris Grayling: May I start by paying tribute to the right hon. Lady for what she said about anti-Semitism in her party? The comments that she and the shadow Leader of the House have made are to their credit.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady about the role played by the scouts and the guides, but what they represent is the best of our voluntary sector. Sometimes we depend too much on Government and the public sector for the best work. That work is happening without any Government involvement, as it has done over the century since the scouts and guides movements were formed, and long may that continue.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Jewish community has a history with Scotland going back beyond 200 years. I know that Members of this House will want to send a message that we value the Jewish community and the contribution it has made not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom. With that in mind, and given this week’s events, may we have a debate on the valuable contribution that the Jewish community has made to civil society in this country and, equally important, on how we root out anti-Semitism in this country’s political discourse?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, whose sentiments will be shared across most of this House. We have heard some important contributions on the subject today. It might also be appropriate to say that this is not just about anti-Semitism—it is also about Islamophobia and prejudice against other groups in our society. There is no place in our society for racial prejudice. It should not be tolerated and we should unreservedly condemn it whenever we find it.
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In the light of the changes to the railways suggested by the Hendy and Shaw reports, may we have a debate on how community groups such as mine in Bury can drive forward local ownership of railway assets that are to be disposed of, so that local people get a say in what happens in their locality?

Chris Grayling: That is a very important point. We have to be careful about disposing of rail assets, for two reasons, one of which my hon. Friend has just given. The other is that local authorities often have a vision to bring back into use transport corridors for the future, but if they are simply sold off for development, that option is taken away. I am proud that, over the past 15 years, this country has seen the reopening of railway lines and rail corridors. A new service was recently opened from Oxford to London Marylebone and it runs across previously disused lines that have been brought back into operation under Chiltern Railways. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because had it been decided to dispose of some of those facilities, that route would not have been possible. In reopening the line from Oxford to Cambridge, we are already seeing that there are barriers as a result of a previous development. My hon. Friend makes an important point about her own constituency, but it is one that should be learned right across the country.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Last month in business questions I raised the case of my constituent who took the drug sodium valproate, which is an effective treatment for epilepsy but which left her children with birth defects. The Leader of the House recommended that I try to raise the matter at Health questions, but unfortunately I was not successful. Does he have any advice for me on how I can raise the issue of sodium valproate and birth defects?

Chris Grayling: The Minister for Community and Social Care has just arrived in the Chamber, so he probably heard what the hon. Lady said. I will raise the issue directly with the Department of Health for her at the end of this sitting, and I will ask the appropriate Minister to respond to her. She makes an important point, and we have to be enormously careful about it. There are many drugs that make a big difference to our society, but where unexpected side effects cause the kinds of problems she refers to, it is right and proper that that is looked at enormously carefully.

Mr Speaker: I am most anxious that the Minister for Community and Social Care should have the opportunity to regain his breath. He is a very welcome arrival. [Interruption.] He has just run the marathon; that might be why he is out of breath.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May we have a debate on the crazy situation I face in Bexhill and Battle? Our local authority is one of only 17 in which parking enforcement is still the responsibility of the police, who have stated that they can no longer do it because—fairly enough—they are required to look after policing matters. The local authority refuses to take it on. The situation is driving our residents and business people absolutely mad. Would it be possible to have a debate on whether the Government should step in and end this madness?

Chris Grayling: Before I answer my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to the Minister for Community and Social Care, who has just arrived, and to all the Members of this House who ran the marathon last weekend and emerged intact, with medals around their necks—

Chris Bryant: And in the past.

Chris Grayling: And in the past, but I will celebrate this year, if I may. The hon. Gentleman always wants to jump in and have his say, but I want to commend all those who ran this year for the valuable work that they have done to raise funds for charity and raise awareness of charities. They deserve a collective pat on the back from people in this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is right. It is an extraordinary position where nobody wants to enforce parking, and I can understand the frustration of local businesses. I urge him simply to redouble the pressure on the local authority. If he has enough people behind him on what he wants to achieve, in the end, the local authority will have to give way.

Mr Speaker: I join the Leader of the House in congratulating the Minister for Community and Social Care on running the marathon again and congratulating all other participants in the marathon. What the Leader of the House has said is both right and greatly appreciated by colleagues.

We now come to the first of our two debates under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. The precise timings have yet to be determined, but there is a very sharp imbalance in favour of the first debate, as against the second. A lot more people want to take part in this debate, and that will influence the judgment of the Chair as to how long this debate should be allowed to run. In short, there will be an allocation of time for the second debate, but it will, very properly, be a much lesser allocation of time.
Backbench Business

World Autism Awareness Week

12.13 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House notes that World Autism Awareness Week was held from 2 to 8 April; believes that there is a lack of understanding of the needs of autistic people and their families; and calls on the Government to improve diagnosis waiting time and support a public awareness campaign so that people can make the changes that will help the UK become autism-friendly.

We were on recess during World Autism Awareness Week. I want to put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, which has granted this debate, and to you, Mr Speaker, for indicating that you may be willing to extend the debate because of the demand from people who want to speak in it. I know that there are conflicting Committees going on in other parts of the House, which will cause some problems for people who want to speak in the debate.

I also put on record my thanks, as chairman of the all-party group on autism, for the genuine cross-party view on the subject, and for the help and support I have received from Members of all parties. It is commendable that the House should work in such a way. It is nice to record that the all-party group on autism is, I think, one of the all-party groups that has the largest number of members. That shows the significance of this topic.

In 2015 the National Autistic Society carried out a YouGov poll and found that more than 99.5% of people in the UK had heard of autism. That means that, more or less, we are all aware of autism, which is a jolly good thing. However, just 16% of autistic people and their families whom the National Autistic Society spoke to as part of its recent research said that the public had a meaningful understanding of autism. Despite all the progress that has been made, there remains an enormous gulf between awareness and understanding. The key point here is that although more understanding may seem like a soft issue that everyone across the House can easily get behind without much thought, it is understanding that goes to the core of what people and families who live with autism every day have to deal with.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on all the work that she has done over the years on this crucial subject. She mentioned the National Autistic Society, and I praise it for its wonderful work. Does she agree that stigma around autism among the general public, in educational institutions and among many employers still holds all of society back?

Mrs Gillan: That is true to an extent, but I want to balance that by saying that in some areas, many people who are on the autism spectrum are welcomed into the world of work, by GCHQ and other organisations that can take advantage of their unique capabilities. The hon. Lady is right in many areas, however, hence the debate.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for the work that she does. I also thank the Minister, who met some constituents of mine this week; they do not wish to be named in public. The right hon. Lady raised the question of awareness. Does she agree that it is important to have such awareness in our criminal justice system? Adults with autism, in particular, sometimes come into contact with the criminal justice system, and there is an inappropriate level of understanding of issues that may have led to that happening.

Mrs Gillan: That is an astute observation. Later in my speech, I will come to the criminal justice system. I hope to set the scene across a range of areas, because there is not a part of government that autism does not touch. There are a range of implications, particularly in the criminal justice system, in which I believe people with autism are disproportionately represented in many areas.

For people and families who live with autism every day, improving understanding is fundamental to ensuring good levels of health and wellbeing and an ability to participate in society. The implications are all too real. The National Autistic Society survey that I mentioned found that 79% of autistic people feel socially isolated; half of autistic people and families sometimes do not go out because they are worried about how the public will react to them; and 28% of autistic people have been asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism.

To help to address the lack of understanding and tackle social isolation, the NAS has, as many Members know, launched a three-year campaign called “Too Much Information”, during this year’s World Autism Awareness Week. I was glad to support the launch of that campaign in Parliament. The cornerstone of the campaign is a short film, shot from the point of view of a child with autism, which tries to give the viewer some sense of what it is like to live in the overwhelming world that someone with autism lives in every day. Many parliamentary colleagues joined me for the event, and I am glad to report—that, to date, the video has been viewed online more than 50 million times. That film marks only the start of the campaign, however, and there is clearly much more that must be done to help tackle social isolation among the nearly 80% of people on the spectrum who say that they feel isolated.

Over the years, Government have shown huge leadership on the awareness of other issues, with more than £2.3 million spent on dementia awareness and £20 million on mental health awareness. [Interruption.] Thank you so much. I wish it was gin.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) rose—

Mrs Gillan: At last—the relief of Mafeking.

Mr Walker: While my right hon. Friend avails herself of a relieving glass of water, may I ask her whether she agrees that organisations, such as ASPIE in my constituency, that help people with Asperger’s and people on the spectrum to socialise play a really important role in helping to build their confidence and ensure they have the support they need to go into what can often be a very threatening world?
Mrs Gillan: I am doubly grateful to my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that the achievements of such organisations and programmes should be congratulated by all of us in the House.

Action is needed for the 700,000 people in the UK who are on the autism spectrum and their families. I am aware that the Government have invested £325,000 on autism awareness work, but that is a drop in the ocean if our aim is to ensure, as I believe it should be, that this generation of autistic children grows up in a world that understands them.

At this point, I want to pay tribute to the Minister. Quite honestly, he has attended every autism meeting and function that I have asked him to attend. He shows a great deal of understanding of this area, so I am looking forward to a really meaningful response from him when he winds up the debate at the end of the afternoon. More leadership is definitely needed from the Government.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for the work she does on this really important subject. Does she agree that it is extremely worrying that only 15% of adults suffering with autism are in full-time employment? Would it be right and proper for the Government to support the work of organisations, such as Ambitious about Autism, to help them in the transition into work that could be so crucial for so many?

Mrs Gillan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will mention some of the organisations involved at the end of my speech. Ambitious about Autism is just one of the many organisations that are trying to help people with autism into employment. I want to mention that later as well, because it is very important.

To build on the intervention on the criminal justice system by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), I should say that I recently visited Her Majesty’s young offenders institution in Feltham to see at first hand how a deeper understanding of the issues and how some adjustments in the physical environment can help people on the spectrum. The prison recently underwent accreditation from the NAS, and the prison staff’s enthusiasm in, and dedication to, helping the young people in their charge is absolutely admirable and really wonderful to see. I very much hope that members of the all-party group will go there on a visit to see exactly what Feltham has done. Custody can be a really traumatic experience for anyone, but without specific adjustments for those with autism, it is much harder for them to engage in their own rehabilitation. Familiarising staff with autism, allowing prisoners to use communal areas at quieter times, and reducing posters and notices to prevent over-stimulation are just some of the small things that can make a significant difference to the experience of autistic prisoners in custody.

I now want to pay tribute to the Minister for prisons, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who wrote to every prison in this country asking them to undertake autism accreditation. Currently, over 20 have been in touch with the NAS and its accreditation team and, alongside Feltham, four are going through the process. We want this kind of Government leadership and we want such leadership to be sustained. When I ask the Government to do more on the awareness and understanding of autism, I expect to get this type of response. Far more could be done in the criminal justice system, particular in the Courts Service.

Following the example of Feltham, the public sector can and should do much more to make sure all its services and buildings are more accessible to autistic people, so that they and their families can feel confident that they can visit public buildings and use public services in the same way as everyone else. For example, I was very pleased at the weekend to read that Asda is piloting a “quiet hour” in one of its stores in Manchester, when it will turn off escalators, screens and music for an hour to create a more comfortable shopping experience for those with autism. That is to be commended.

At this point, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Parliament is itself working, under the leadership of Mr Speaker, towards an autism access award and to make sure that autistic visitors to our place of work feel confident that they will be understood and treated well right across the board. In the light of this positive work on the parliamentary estate, I hope the Minister will meet me and representatives from the all-party group and the NAS to discuss how, together, we can build on the early successes of the “Too Much Information” campaign and ensure that all public buildings become accessible to people on the spectrum.

I want to turn to one of the biggest issues facing people with autism and their families, which is the time it takes to get a diagnosis in the first place. I can see from the nods that that rings a bell with everyone in the Chamber. Recent research suggests that, on average, adults have to wait more than two years for a diagnosis. For children, the figure stands at 3.6 years. An autism diagnosis can be life-changing, explain years of feeling different and help to unlock professional advice and support. Government guidelines say that a diagnosis should not be a barrier to putting in place the right support, but 58% of people on the spectrum have told the NAS that a diagnosis led directly to getting new or more support. How can the right support be identified without the clarity of a diagnosis?

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is fabulous that we are having this debate today. I want to back up my right hon. Friend on her point about the delay in diagnosis. I have spoken to many families in my constituency who have waited for months for a diagnosis for a child, while the child could and should have been receiving help for their enormous difficulties, but months if not years have been wasted. Yet we cannot even get the data about diagnosis from either the county council or the NHS. Not only are there delays, but there is a lack of transparency about waiting times for a diagnosis.

Mrs Gillan: Absolutely. It is clear that, despite the best intentions of the Government, getting such a diagnosis is still crucial, as my hon. Friend says.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Gillan: I will give way for the last time, because I must make some progress.
Norman Lamb: May I join in with the overwhelming tributes that have been made to the right hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this incredibly important subject? I do not know whether she saw the in-depth report in The Economist a couple of weeks ago. It reported that a Swedish study has found that the cost of lifelong care for someone with autism could be cut by two thirds with early diagnosis and treatment. Again, the moral case and the economic case for this are overwhelming.

Mrs Gillan: I agree. NHS England should collect, publish and monitor key information on how long people are waiting for diagnosis, and how many people are known by their GP to have autism. It should also ensure that waiting times standards on mental health, which are currently in development, reflect national guidance that no one should wait longer than three months between referral and being seen for diagnosis. The Government must share this commitment and ensure that NHS England meets its aims. Timely access to an autism diagnosis should be written into the Government’s mandate to NHS England.

I want to touch on autism and mortality. A recent Autistica report highlighted distressing findings from research in Sweden. The research found that autistic people, taking the population as a whole, have a lower life expectancy than the overall average. The research from Sweden shows that autistic people are at risk of dying younger from almost every cause of death. On average, this is 18 years earlier than the general population. For autistic people with a learning disability, the gap is even larger. The research shows that autistic people with a learning disability in that country die on average 30 years before their time. It also shows that autistic people who also have a learning disability are more likely to die early from epilepsy, and that those without a learning disability are at greater risk of suicide. It is worth remembering that the Swedish healthcare system is different from ours, but given the seriousness of those research findings, it is vital to find out whether they also apply in the UK, and if so, to understand the reasons for that. The Autistica report calls for this to be investigated as a matter of urgency, and I urge the Government to heed that call.

I want to comment briefly about the autism hospital passport, which has been endorsed by the Department of Health. The passport is designed to help people on the autism spectrum to communicate their needs to doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. It has been developed by Baroness Angela Browning in collaboration with the NAS. The motivations for starting the project were simple: when it comes to healthcare, the passport enables people on the spectrum and their families to have a much better experience of their interaction with the health service and to gain better, more timely and more fitting healthcare at the right time and in the right place.

I want to touch on various areas that I hope other Members will pick up, so I now turn to education. In specialist schools—the NAS is about to open a new one in the Epping forest area, supported by the Anderson Foundation—we have no fears about teachers’ ability to understand autism. But the training that teachers receive on autism has to be looked at carefully. Nearly 60% of children who responded to a survey said that the single factor that would make school better for them was if teachers understood autism. Teachers agree, and they want that training. A 2013 survey by the NASUWT found that 60% of teachers believed that they did not have enough training in autism. I am aware that work is going on to develop a new framework of core content for initial teacher training courses, but we need to make sure that no teacher enters the classroom without the tools they need to support those in their charge.

An intervention touched on employment, so I turn now to what children on the spectrum want after they leave education. They want the same things we all want out of life: stable, secure and fulfilling opportunities that allow them the same opportunities to lead independent lives. However, currently too few people on the spectrum enjoy the opportunity to find a job to help them maintain that independence. The Government have pledged to halve the disability employment gap—that was welcomed by Members on all sides of the House—and we await the Government’s White Paper, to be published soon; we also note recent assurances from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that that is a key priority for him. However, research by Scope has shown that the disability employment gap has remained static over the past year. Clearly the Government cannot rely on an improving economy alone to fix the issue. More will need to be done to close the gap.

The autism employment gap is even worse. The latest data indicate that only 15% of autistic adults are in full-time paid work at all and that 26% of graduates on the autism spectrum are unemployed, by far the highest rate of any disability group. The NAS hears from autistic people that the Government’s mainstream generic programmes do not feel relevant to them and are not addressing the specific and long-term needs of people with autism.

More autism-specific programmes are needed. Research shows them to be more successful. For example, research into one specialist support scheme found that 70% of adults found work when supported by autism professionals. The all-party parliamentary group on autism plans to return to that work later this year. In the meantime, I have several questions. Will the Government’s disability employment White Paper include proposals for ensuring that people on the autism spectrum can access specialist support? Will the Minister report on progress by condition in seeking to halve the disability employment gap, so that low employment rates of people with conditions such as autism can be specifically tackled? Crucially, will he ensure that the new work and health programme records whether someone on the programme is on the autism spectrum?

Autism touches so many areas of Government work that it is difficult to address them all today. For example, I have not discussed social care, mental health issues or benefits. I know many colleagues want to speak and so I do not want to take up too much more time. In summing up, I return to public awareness. Survey after survey of people on the spectrum tells us that better understanding of the condition among both the public and professionals would be the one thing that would help them to feel more secure and allow them to have fulfilling lives. People on the spectrum are reasonable, and do not expect an ordinary member of the public with no knowledge of the condition to be aware of technical
details about the diagnostic criteria for autism. However, they feel that just a little more understanding, compassion and awareness would make all the difference to their lives. If we see a child having a meltdown in a supermarket or an adult acting a bit differently on a train, we should stop and think for a moment. They may be autistic, and need our kindness, not our judgment.

I thank all the organisations that have contributed to the knowledge of Members here today, in particular those charities and groups with whom we work closely, including the National Autistic Society, which provides the secretariat for the APPG, Ambitious about Autism, Autistica and the Children’s Services Development Group. I also thank the many individuals who have got in touch with me, and with all other Members here, in the past week. I hope that together we can improve the lives of those with autism and make some real progress in this area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We will start with a time limit of six minutes and see how we get on.

12.34 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Last Saturday, anticipating today’s debate, and in his customary elegant way, Guardian columnist John Harris wrote an excellent summation of some of the issues around autism. He ended his piece with these words:

“Our culture still too often couches autism in terms of pity or fear as an essentially Victorian sensibility lingers on. But we are moving towards a new world in which autistic people and their families advocate for themselves. For them, the current noise about autism perhaps highlights an inevitable phase of any struggle against ignorance: the point at which you know you’ve come a long way but still have light years to go.”

When we consider the debates and the legislation passed in this House regarding autism, we understand that we, too, have come a long way, and a significant reason for that has been the work of the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). I therefore congratulate her on securing this debate and on all her work over many years in this area, not least as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism.

In my short contribution I will focus on a few issues. The first is that of diagnosis delay, something that every Member in this House will have countless examples of. It is the focus of the National Autistic Society’s brilliant campaign and is flagged up in the motion. As we have heard, for children the average diagnosis time is now some three and a half years. In my experience, from talking to parents, carers and experts, that is partly down to insufficient training among NHS people and cost pressures within the system. The reality for parents is that if they do not know where to turn and are without a diagnosis, there is not much that they can access.

Secondly, I will focus on what appears to me to be the biggest single problem, which is that people have to deal with a system of immense complexity, which is buckling under the cuts and has no single point of contact marked “autism”. For many, the system is simply bewildering and often very scary.

Finally, I want to highlight the campaign work being done by amazing people at local level, including my constituent Fay Hough, who only last week led a large demonstration outside Havering town hall demanding better services and support for autistic people and their families.

I will also make a couple of points about the nature of research into autism in the UK and how it might be developed, to help both our overall awareness and, most importantly, autistic citizens and their families. Recent figures suggest that roughly 1% of the UK population has an autism spectrum condition, a twentyfold increase in the 50 years since the first epidemiological study. Given that, we need more and better research.

We can detect a dramatic expansion in autism research, especially in the US. For example, the 2006 Combating Autism Act authorised some $950 million for autism research over a five-year period to develop screening, early diagnosis and children’s intervention strategies. It has been estimated that in 2010 alone, investment in autism research in the US exceeded $400 million.

Here in the UK, research from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education at University College London suggests that public and private funding organisations invested some £21 million into autism research between 2007 and 2011, amounting to a significant increase. The question is whether that research is focused on the correct issues and whether it tallies with the needs of autistic people and their families.

I refer to an article in Autism, “What should autism research focus upon?”, which suggested that “research activity should be broadened to reflect the priorities of the UK autism community, focusing in particular on research that helps people live with autism.”

It would appear obvious that research should maximise its impact on the life experiences of those affected—our constituents—so why might this apparently self-evident objective not be the case?

When we look at the debate about autism research, there appears to be a tension between two types of project. On the one hand, there are projects that focus on what we might call the basic science of autism—on neural and cognitive systems, genetics and other risk factors. On the other hand, there is research focused on the understanding and promotion of how families function and the services those families need. Evidence suggests that that tension has been identified in the US and that as a result there is a growing diversity in research funding, to the direct benefit of autistic citizens and their families.

In contrast, evidence from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education suggests that that diversification of funding has not occurred in the UK, and that projects in the areas of biology, the brain and cognition outstrip all other areas of autism research by a vast margin, in terms of both the numbers of projects and the total research grant. The effect is that very little research funding is directed into identifying effective services for autistic people and their families—that is, research on services, treatments, intervention and education.

Obviously, that is not just an academic issue, but relates directly to all the questions about autism awareness discussed this afternoon. Research by the Centre for Research in Autism and Education suggested that the families of autistic people value research into the underlying
causes of autism, but need a more balanced distribution that redirects attention on to their daily lives, their needs and the services afforded to them.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) on his powerful speech. Durants school is a secondary school for young people with autism in my constituency. Its governing body has written to me to express concerns that with the Government consultation on changes to the national school funding formula—including that for high needs—there will be a levelling down and funds will be drawn away from those schools, which would be very damaging.

Jon Cruddas: The issues that some of us planned to raise in the debate that was cancelled on Monday evening concerned precisely some of the pressures on the system, especially for special needs children. That takes us back to a point that I wished to raise about problems with diagnosis, entry points into the system, and the cuts that are being experienced. Those things are all linked to the research base around autism and effective public policy making, and to the concrete problems of commissioning services, the decision-making of front-line staff, and the dilemmas facing autistic people and their families—it is basically the existing evidence base for decisions on autism and public service provision.

I look forward to a reorientation of the research priorities for autism to balance out research funding and projects, as appears to have been achieved in the US. We need to balance scientific research with understanding the needs of the most effective support offered to autistic citizens and their families, as well as greater co-ordination with autistic research, which again appears to have been achieved through strategic oversight in the US. Finally, we need the involvement of autistic people and their families in those strategic decisions—basic issues of democracy are involved in this debate.

It is great that we are having this debate today, and another sign of progress. To return to the words of my friend John Harris, whose family have tried to navigate through this system for many years, we appear to be at a point at which we know we have come a long way, but we still have light years to go.

12.41 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this important debate. I realised the importance of this subject just before the last election when I met a group of parents in my constituency who were talking about the problems that they had experienced. I had previously met people with autism, but I had not understood the pressures that parents and families are put under by the diagnosis, or even by not having a diagnosis of their children’s problems.

I met people who had never received a diagnosis and did not think that they would get one because nobody seemed to recognise that their child had autism. However, it was clear from what they said that the children in question were suffering from a form of autism, although it had never been recognised. Those parents were at the end of their tether and did not know where to turn to next. It is not just mums who have this problem; there were also a lot of dads at that meeting. It is not only about children; it is often adults for whom even less support is available. Whole families are affected, and autism can cause such a big strain that it affects the parents’ marriage or partnership. Many of those situations break down when people have one, two or even three children with autism.

I want to focus on local situations in Derby and Derbyshire, where I feel that the system is failing children who need the diagnosis and help in schools. Through an active group in the area—particularly in Spondon—I have met many people who have autism or whose children have autism. Last year and this year the cathedral has been lit up blue to highlight National Autism Week and to show people that there is a problem in that area. I commend it on that.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making interesting and powerful points and has mentioned the problem that people with autism face. In my office I have employed someone on the autistic spectrum. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to change the narrative in some respects, because people on the autistic spectrum have specialist and incredible skills, and it is so important that we are positive about those people and the opportunities that they provide to society?

Pauline Latham: I completely agree. There are some incredible people with autism, but I am talking about the problems that they need to overcome to access proper education and help for themselves and their families. We must focus on the fact that it is the system, not the people, that is the problem.

In Derbyshire, families have to wait far too long between getting a referral for autism spectrum disorder and a diagnosis. Local authorities need better training for local authorities and schools regarding education, health and care plans and dealing with ASD pupils. We need a better transition from special educational needs statements to the new EHCP, and that has been badly managed in my area.

ASD behaviour and management strategies should be a mandatory part of the teaching qualification for teachers and teaching assistants. There also seems to be a lack of knowledge by parents on the legal rights and services available to them as a family dealing with autism, and we as a society need to recognise that and put out more information for those who are dealing with autism. Guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommend a maximum of three months between a referral and first appointment for an autism assessment. It has been estimated that in Derby that takes closer to 12 months, which is far too long when a child is having problems with their behaviour in school and needs help now.

The Children and Families Act 2014 mandated local authorities to move from special educational needs statements, which outlined a child’s needs and how help would be given, to an education, health and care plan for each child. It also reduced the amount of time that children with special educational needs had to wait for an education, health and care plan from 26 weeks to 20. However, in Derby city the average wait is 35 weeks, and
that is after people have already waited for 12 months. Derby local authority did not make sufficient plans to prepare itself for that change, and it has been on the back foot ever since. Until February 2016, only 12% of statements had become education, health and care plans, which is really unhelpful for families. That gap causes delays in the child’s educational development, and places additional stress on the families caring for them.

I believe that Derby city is now asking schools to complete the education, health and care plans even though they are not meant to, and the training provided to school staff on changes to the law has been labelled by some parents as “diabolical”. Admin staff at schools do not understand the difference between a special educational needs statement and education, health and care plans, because they often copy and paste them. Without an EHCP, children on the autistic spectrum disorder are managed by inexperienced staff with a fundamental lack of understanding of ASD.

Derby city local authority has to employ consultants who know what they are doing to help make changes, but they cost four times as much as usual school administrative staff. When all local authorities claim that they are short of money, although if it gets the process completed more quickly for families and children with autism, it is obviously better for them. However, that money could be better spent on mental health care for autistic children and their families.

If local authorities consistently ask schools to carry out the care plans, as is happening in Derby, we must ensure that schools are given the necessary funds and training for that. There is no obvious legal accountability if deadlines are not met. We must support the parents and siblings of children with ASD. Early diagnosis is key to avoiding the mental health problems associated with not knowing what is wrong and being able to deal with it, and we must move faster to help those children and families to deal with their problems.

12.49 pm

Brendan O’Hara: I pass on my sincere thanks to the Chair for indulging me by calling me so early in the debate. I have to return home to attend to urgent constituency business this afternoon. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this very important debate.

As we have heard, autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that no two autistic people display the same characteristics. Some people with autism live relatively independent lives, while others, at the other end of the spectrum, might need a lifetime of specialist care and support. That demands that every single person living with autism be treated as an individual and that society affords each individual the respect and dignity they deserve.

I recently met the National Autistic Society at the launch of its “Too Much Information” campaign, designed to help people recognise autistic behaviour and better understand how they should respond to it. It is an excellent report. It sometimes makes for uncomfortable reading, but I commend it to all Members. In it, the society published figures from a wide-ranging survey it had commissioned to look at public attitudes towards those living with autism. Its findings suggest that we, as a society, have a long way to go in affording people living with autism the respect and dignity they deserve.

Although almost every person in the United Kingdom had heard of, or was aware of, autism, only a fraction actually recognised what it meant. There is a chasm between public awareness and public understanding of autism. It is this lack of public understanding that causes great distress for those living with the condition and their families. The right hon. Lady has given us some of the findings, but they are worth repeating: 87% of parents had experienced people stopping and staring at their children while they were displaying autistic behaviour and 74% had experienced public expressions of disapproval at their children displaying autistic behaviour.

Jo Churchill: Would the hon. Gentleman agree that that reaction to people in our society with autism and their families leads to a fear of going out, as my constituent Maureen said, which, particularly for autistic children transitioning into adulthood, can in turn lead to social isolation for them and often their primary carer, which is not adequately recognised across the piece?

Brendan O’Hara: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct, and it is something I will touch on in a moment.

Nearly 70% of people living with autism believe that the public see them as antisocial and almost one third have been asked to leave a public place for displaying behaviour associated with their condition. As a result, they are the hon. Lady just alluded to, four in every five people living with autism in the UK feel isolated from society and half do not go out for fear of how people will react to their condition. As I said, those statistics make for pretty depressing reading and should force us all to look at our behaviour and question what we are doing, as a community, to our fellow citizens that makes them prefer social isolation to the way they are treated by the public, ourselves included.

It is not all bad news, however, as the NAS report also contains some good news. Its research shows that with greater knowledge and better understanding, the general public will behave with much greater empathy towards autistic people.

Roger Mullin: One piece of good news is that many areas of Scotland are blessed with specialist speech and language therapists who well understand the condition and give particular support in schools, for example, to those with communication challenges.

Brendan O’Hara: Thank you. Friend, who is a specialist in this area, for his intervention, and I commend the great work done throughout Scotland—and, I assume and hope, the UK—in that field.

As I say, there is much to look forward to and to be hopeful about. We have to get the key messages out to the public, and those key messages are: people with
autism might need extra time to process information and respond to people; people with autism can become anxious in social situations; people with autism can become anxious when faced with unexpected changes or unscheduled events; people with autism can often be hyper-sensitive to noise, light, smell or colour; and, you know what, when things get too much, people with autism can have a meltdown. Deal with it!

To conclude, I will quote from the Scottish Government’s autism strategy. Their vision is “that individuals on the autism spectrum are respected, accepted and valued by their communities and have confidence in services to treat them fairly so that they are able to have meaningful and satisfying lives.”

That is something around which the entire House can unite.

12.56 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on her tireless work over many years to raise awareness of autism and to start to change Government priorities around those in our country who are not neuro-typical beasts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) have described movingly some of the experiences of families and those who suffer from autism. As my right hon. Friend’s Autism Act 2009 was going through the House, I was battling to find support and a diagnosis for my eldest young son. It was evident to me that my very bright and articulate son was not like other boys of his age. He had an extraordinary level of concentration and extremely good reading skills that are evident to me that my very bright and articulate son was not like other boys of his age. He had an extraordinary level of concentration and extremely good reading skills and could converse at length with adults in a most unusual way, but he was also very anxious, fearful of noise and bright lights and unable to cope with anything unexpected in his day—the slightest change to the time we left the house, and all hell broke loose.

Once my son started his schooling, at the age of three, his adult life and day-to-day experience became increasingly more challenging, and school life, which demands conformity, became something he was entirely unable to cope with. We struggled on for several years, because no one seemed to have any ideas; teachers said nothing except, occasionally, “Well, come and pick him up early if it gets too much”, “Is it all right if I call if he’s getting difficult in class?” or “Will it be all right if I don’t feed him with everyone else because it seems to be a problem in the canteen?”. I was just a mum with a little boy who seemed to have so many talents but could not cope with daily life.

Eventually, my GP, a wonderful man, referred us to a child psychologist in Newcastle, whose failure to correctly diagnose my son as autistic was nothing short of shocking. Not only did he fail to see what was becoming obvious to our family and our friends, who were trying to support us, but he tried to medicate my son with Ritalin, claiming that he suffered from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—two behavioural traits entirely absent from my son’s behaviour. The doctor had failed to speak with my son; he had claimed that he had, before making his diagnosis, and it was only because I fought back against the medical profession’s failure that my son was not inappropriately drugged.

Thanks to huge financial support from my family, we eventually found a team of paediatric doctors based at Great Ormond Street hospital in London, 350 miles from our home in Northumberland, who quickly diagnosed my son as an Asperger’s syndrome sufferer. We received support, understanding and guidance from these wonderful specialists who empowered us, James’s parents, to challenge school rules and regulations in order to get the changes to his learning environment so that he could once again enjoy and thrive in it. We have encountered two or three teachers for whom medals would be inadequate to recognise how they have put themselves out and learned themselves what it means to be an autistic little boy so that they can help other children coming through the system afterwards. As I say, medals will never be enough for them.

Without good friends, good luck and financial support, I know that our son would have fallen out of school by the time he was six or seven. The pressures that normal life put on our autistic children should not be underestimated. No right-thinking person would ask a child with a broken leg to run up the stairs, but the invisibility of autism means that these children are asked to do things that, given their hypersensitivities or gaps in neurological connectivity, simply ask too much of them.

Pauline Latham: My hon. Friend’s son was extremely lucky because he had a mum who was prepared to fight and had the ability to fight. There are many parents like her who will fight for their children, as most parents want to do. However, some parents do not have the ability or the confidence to do that, and these are the ones that are really being let down by the system.

Mrs Trevelyan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is part of the reason I am here. I decided that advocacy was needed for those who are unable to access the system, who do not know how to fight back or who are too honest and quiet folk trying to get on with their day, muddling through it with difficult jobs and complex family environments. For such people it is too hard to fight what still today seems to be an implacable system in so many parts of our country.

The legislation of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham—the Autism Act 2009—has begun to change attitudes towards autism, and I am now 10 years on from the battles I had to fight. The general population is becoming aware, slowly, of this invisible disability. The challenge is its invisibility—until it becomes visible through a crisis.

Many of our greatest artists and scientists have been on the spectrum—men and women who see the world differently from those of us who are “neuro-typical”, as my son always refers to me—mostly as an insult, I suspect, but I take it as it is! As a nation, we should value those who offer an understanding of our world that we neuro-typical folk simply do not have. They are vital to our growth as a nation, both culturally and economically.

The genius of the great Alan Turing brought us the computer—probably the greatest leap since the steam engine—yet he was shunned and misunderstood throughout his life. We can read about his school years, which were truly awful. The damage that society inflicted on him through a lack of understanding and a blatant disregard
for his difference in character highlights what we must reverse, 70 years on, to ensure that no child on the autistic spectrum is lost to us or our nation.

Small changes to the school environment and support for families that are bringing up autistic children with day-to-day tasks, which can reduce their stresses, can lead to positive and thriving outcomes for these wonderful members of our communities. Most importantly, we need a team of paediatric experts across every part of our country who can diagnose autistic children early on, and we need councils and schools that are trained and flexible in supporting these children to fulfilling lives.

I recently met a family in my constituency with three boys, two of whom have been diagnosed. I also have in Alan Carrick, at Northumberland County Council, a passionate advocate for all our special needs children, and he is particularly interested in supporting those on the autistic spectrum. It is difficult for him to meet the needs of each and every autistic child because there is not enough flexibility for him to provide preventive and creative solutions for individual families, which would provide practical support.

If we can reduce the day-to-day pressures on parents through low-cost early interventions, we will increase the chances of these families staying together. There are obvious long-term, value-for-money arguments for investing in these families early on to stop long-term costs to the state of family breakdown if we fail these children and their families at the early stage. I call on our Government to encourage our councils to be creative and forward thinking in their support for our autistic children—most urgently of all by getting speedy diagnosis so that support can hopefully follow.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow that speech by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate and on her contribution over the years.

We have touched on autism awareness and autism understanding, but I would like to focus on something not explicitly mentioned so far—autism acceptance. As hon. Members have noted, public awareness of autism has grown dramatically in recent years, aided by a proliferation of books, media articles and not always accurate portrayals of people with autism on television and in film. This explosion of information on autistic spectrum disorders and the incorporation of individuals with autism into everyday culture has helped to familiarise people with the condition, and it is right that we celebrate that achievement.

Essential as it is, however, awareness alone has not necessarily led to greater understanding of ASDs, and it has not prevented the perpetuation of stereotypes and clichés, as even a cursory Google search would attest. Awareness alone has not keep people with autism from being abused, has not helped them find jobs and has not supported them to live independently. In short, we will not overcome ignorance and help those with autism—young and old—live independent and fulfilling lives simply by increasing awareness alone.

I am lucky enough to have in my constituency a fantastic organisation called Greenwich Parent Voice. It is a group of exceptional parents, some of whom are in the Public Gallery today, who came together to support each other and to fight for a better deal for their children, all of whom have special educational needs or disabilities ranging from the mild to the most profound and complex. They have not only helped to deepen my understanding of ASDs and the challenges faced by those with autism and their parents, but have made it clear to me, over the course of many meetings, that what is really required is acceptance of autism.

Anyone who has sat and listened to parents or carers of children with autism or adults with autism for even a short time will know that the system in place at the moment, despite some improvements, still does not work. Whether it be through the problems in transferring from a statement to education, health and care plans, the difficulties trying to secure specialist support in the care system, or the strain of supporting children with autism into adulthood, the system causes families unimaginable levels of stress and exhaustion.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In common with other speakers, my hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech about awareness and understanding. Does he agree—I thought his remarks were leading towards this—that we also need to translate such awareness into some hard practical action on service delivery, and that this applies whether it be about education or housing?

My hon. Friend, like others, has been dealing with parents of autistic children who are forced to share rooms or to live in 10th or higher storeys in tower blocks because housing policy does not reflect the needs of autistic children. We need to build on greater awareness, but also to resource it and turn it into some practical action that will really assist people.

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I have dealt with allocation cases myself, and I agree that detailed policies need to be put in place that are based on recognition of the particular needs of autistic children and their families. As I have said, having to navigate the system as it stands can cause those families unimaginable stress and anxiety.

Those who can grow the sharp elbows necessary to navigate the system often do so at great personal cost, and, as the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) said, not everyone has the ability to do that. The range of challenges faced by those with autism and their families is vast, and this is not the debate for delving into any particular one in great detail.

My sense is, however, that our collective will and readiness to do something to help people on the spectrum would be stronger if more of us were not only aware of autism and understood it, but were more accepting of it as a society. If we were, I suspect we would be compelled more urgently to address the lack of suitable childcare provision for autistic children and the fact that too many schools are still not autism-friendly and too many children are not getting the support they require. We would be compelled more urgently to address the prevalence of mental health conditions in those with autism, and the isolation that young people with autism too frequently face in school. We would be compelled to address the cliff edge in support—that is what it is—that still faces
autistic people in too many parts of the country as they transition to adulthood. We would also be compelled to address the huge challenges that still face autistic adults in terms of diagnosis, employment and housing.

I have no doubt that these challenges will be overcome in time, not least because more and more people with autism and their families, such as those who helped establish Greenwich Parent Voice in my constituency, are advocating more strongly for themselves. I believe that each of us here in this Chamber and in the wider country can hasten the process by working towards a society in which more of us are not only aware of autism and understand it, but accept those with it and indeed celebrate them and their contribution—not only as family members and friends, but as classmates, colleagues and members of our communities.

1.9 pm

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), not only on securing the debate and not only on the excellent work she does as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, but on her wonderful work in piloting the Autism Act 2009 through the House. It was ground-breaking legislation, and it has done a tremendous amount to improve the lot of adults with autism living in England. I must say in passing that it is a matter of concern to me that it has not been followed by similar legislation in Wales, but the good news is that all the parties involved in the current Welsh Assembly elections except, sadly, the Labour party have committed themselves to the introduction of a Welsh autism Bill, and I hope very much that Labour Assembly Members will work with their colleagues to bring that about.

Notwithstanding the passing of the 2009 Act, however, there is still much work to be done to ensure that people with autism and their families receive the support that they need, and, crucially, that understanding of the condition continues to develop. We must bear it in mind that autism was not formally recognised as a condition until the late 1940s, and that serious research on the condition did not begin in earnest until the 1960s. In 1970, an American study concluded that one child in 14,000 was autistic, but more recent US studies have shown that one child in 68 has some form of autism. A very recent study in Korea—the first study of an entire tranche of the school population—concluded that one child in 38 between the ages of seven and 12 had some degree of autism. It is therefore becoming increasingly clear that the condition is far more prevalent than any of us had thought.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, it is estimated that between 600,000 and 700,000 people in the United Kingdom—approximately 1% of the population—are affected by autism. That has an economic as well as a human cost. A study by the London School of Economics in 2014 estimated that the cost of autism to the British economy was approximately £32.1 billion a year. Let me put that into perspective: the economic cost of cancer is estimated to be about £12 billion a year, while the figures for heart disease and strokes are £8 billion and £5 billion respectively.

As other Members have observed, if we had greater awareness and more understanding of the condition, more of us might recognise that people with autism are a very under-utilised resource. The recent article in *The Economist* that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) pointed out that high-functioning people with autism often have a high degree of focus that enables them to spot patterns or errors in data that are not readily recognised by other people and that makes them attractive employees for software firms. Even people who are more significantly affected by autism can hold down jobs successfully. They often benefit from working in highly structured environments, sometimes thriving on jobs of a repetitive nature.

Employers need to realise that that resource can be tapped, which will often mean creating conditions in which people with autism can work. For example, they must understand the need for people with autism to require clear instruction. My right hon. Friend mentioned the excellent video produced by the National Autistic Society, “Too Much Information”, which shows a boy with autism being overcame by the general sounds that are experienced in a shopping centre. Employers should start to understand that people with autism may benefit from quieter working conditions: the sound of a telephone or chatter can prove distracting to the extent of being unendurable.

It is clear that more needs to be done to improve understanding of this condition. Since 2014, the Government have spent some £325,000 on limited awareness work, but that is a very small sum. A lack of understanding on the part of employers and potential colleagues presents autistic adults with a major barrier to finding and staying in work. It is therefore encouraging that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health have set up a joint unit to help people with autism to find and stay in work while also improving their health. Those are important initiatives, but, as I have said, more needs to be done.

More work is needed to try to identify the causes of autism, which are still not well understood. Research on twins suggests that genetic factors may be a cause, but it has also been suggested that there may be environmental causes, such as pre-natal exposure to viruses or air pollution. Continued research is essential. The United Kingdom currently spends just £4 million a year on autism research, compared with £590 million on cancer, £169 million on heart disease, and £32 million on strokes. World Autism Awareness Week gives us an opportunity to reflect on what is clearly a far more widespread condition than was previously thought, and to do more in our power to address it.

1.15 pm

**Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): Let me add my voice to those who have already congratulated the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on initiating the debate, and on the work she has done over the years to raise awareness of autism. Let me also say that it is a pleasure to follow the powerful and informative speeches that have been made by Members on both sides of the House, and, in particular, by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan).

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that there is a wide degree of variation in the way in which it affects people. Every child or adult on the autistic
spectrum has unique abilities and symptoms, and experiences various challenges. Some of the many challenges that they may face include difficulty in understanding other people’s feelings and reactions and interpreting non-verbal clues, difficulty in recognising people’s faces, and difficulty in understanding facial expressions. Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders may find it difficult to regulate their emotions or express them appropriately. For instance, they may start to shout, cry or laugh hysterically for no apparent reason. When stressed, they may exhibit disruptive or even aggressive behaviour, breaking things, hitting others or harming themselves.

The condition itself can be isolating enough without society’s reinforcing it through “othering” and stigmatisation. Society itself can disable more fully than any condition. The behaviour of people on the autistic spectrum makes it very difficult for them and their families to take part in social events, or to perform everyday tasks such as shopping or using public transport. The pressure of dealing with such situations—which were described so vividly by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara)—can be overwhelming for autistic-spectrum people and their families, and, as we have already heard, families often choose to exclude themselves from everyday life in their communities rather than put up with stares and whispered comments.

Autism is so poorly understood—even, in some cases, by health professionals—that children on the spectrum are often seen as being “naughty” or poorly parented. It is widely acknowledged that early diagnosis and therapy are critical to improving autistic-spectrum people’s chances of overcoming developmental delays, but the road to diagnosis is, all too often, very difficult and time consuming. Parents must fight for diagnosis in order to gain access to appropriate services. That places an added burden on stressed, sleep-deprived, struggling families who are already coping with extraordinary pressures and challenges to family life. On average, adults must wait two years for diagnosis and children more than three and a half years after being referred by their GPs. Although guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence say that the wait for a diagnosis should be about three months, some children and their families are having to wait for more than 10 times the recommended period. We are failing those children and families.

A rarely mentioned consequence of families’ struggles with challenging and unusual behaviour is the impact that that can have on siblings and family life. The mother of a young autistic-spectrum child in my constituency explained to me recently that if her son was struggling to deal with a birthday party, a noisy branch of McDonald’s or a busy shopping mall, the whole family had to leave.

We must aim to improve the structure, process and outcomes of care for these children and their families. Autism teams conducting assessments of children, young people or adults should be specialist, integrated teams with access to speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and clinical and educational psychologists. Systematic assessments for conditions that co-exist alongside autism should be part of the diagnostic pathway as required by the Autism Act 2009. This is particularly important because people with autism might have co-existing physical health conditions and/or mental health problems which, if they go unrecognised or untreated, could further impair their psychosocial functioning and place additional pressure on families or carers.

Because of their social communication difficulties, some people with autism may find it particularly difficult to communicate their needs and to access mainstream health and social care services. People with autism should have a personalised plan that is developed and implemented in a partnership between them—and their family and carers, if appropriate—and the autism team. People on the autistic spectrum are unique, sensitive and often highly intelligent individuals who desperately want to be part of their local and wider community. With more support and understanding, that is achievable. We can and must do better to secure better outcomes for adults and children with autism.

1.20 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It has become de rigueur in this debate to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), and I am absolutely delighted to congratulate her on initiating this debate and on her excellent work on the Autism Act 2009, which was also mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). I also congratulate her on all the work she has done with the all-party parliamentary group on autism.

I became aware of autism through a lot of activity in my constituency. Towards the north of the constituency, there is a big autism unit in the village of Chinnor. We also have facilities at Thomley Hall in the very north of the constituency, and it is a marvellous place to go to. The organised chaos there is wonderful to see, and it is a great privilege to be part of that and to see the enormous efforts being made by the staff to look after people with autism. In the south of my constituency, around Henley itself, we can see the work of Dame Stephanie Shirley and others.

I would like to pay tribute to a charity in my constituency called Music for Autism, which has spotted a link between music and autism. It is organised by the Orchestra of St John’s, many of whose members spend hours of their time, freely given, going into schools and other places and working with children with autism in order to show the calming effect of music on them and the enormous ability of music to take them forward to the next stage of their development. I pay tribute to them for doing that.

I want to make two points in the debate. They have already been made by other speakers, but I think it is worth reflecting on them and making them again. The first relates to diagnosis. The difficulty with late diagnosis is that people do not know what their situation is. The advantage of early diagnosis is that they are better able to understand the behaviour involved and how the role of partners can influence the way in which we look at people who have had the diagnosis. That is the view of people I have met in my constituency, including a couple I met in a café in Henley who told me about the difficulties they had had with a late diagnosis.

As we have heard, some people are able to lead pretty ordinary lives and manage their condition extremely well. I have met several such people over the years,
including a young man I met at the last Conservative party conference who was able to demonstrate that. I agree with the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) that public recognition of the condition is not the be all and end all in relation to people’s needs, but it is certainly a good starting point. In order to help people to live a fulfilled life, we need public recognition of the illness. The need for early diagnosis is absolutely crucial, and I urge clinical commissioning groups and NHS England to bring down waiting times in line with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines and to work with many different stakeholders to create a more responsive environment of diagnosis and support. Those words were used to describe the situation to me, and I think they do it extremely well.

A significant element is the involvement of health and social care in the care and management of adults with autism. I know that this is a broader point, but it provides a good example of an area in which we need the rapid integration of health and social care within the NHS. It will be much better when all these facilities are together under one roof.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in Northern Ireland, health and social services form a single body, making it much easier to have an integrated approach? However, we still need integration and co-operation with other groups and organisations, and with statutory agencies such as the Department of Education.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. It is absolutely essential that we achieve that level of integration. We need to start by integrating the medical activities of the NHS with social care in the community, because until they are under one roof we will not have the ability to deal with these problems in the way that will be most effective for people who suffer from this condition.

My second point relates to education. I have a wife who, for many years, taught a young man with autism and struggled to provide him with the assistance he needed. She was remarkably successful in doing that. That was done on a private basis, but the vast majority of children with autism—over 70%—are in mainstream education, and it is there that we have to focus our attention. The teacher training programme needs to include enough information on autism to enable teachers to feel empowered to recognise it and deal with it effectively. If we can do that, we will have a much better chance of purposefully dealing with people with autism.

1.27 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I have done it already, but I will do it again because everyone is doing it: I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on her leadership on this matter. What she has been involved with, and what we are all involved with as a society, is learning how to understand autism much better and recognising that we fail people badly through our ignorance of the potential and capacity of people with autism to lead fulfilling lives and to contribute massively to society. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) made the point strongly that there is much that people with autism can do in the employment sphere. They can be fantastic employees, contributing a great deal and leading fulfilling lives, but we often fail them. Also, it costs the Government and the economy a great deal when people with autism end up depending on the state because we have failed to provide them with the necessary support early on. That is the big challenge.

Mrs Gillan: I notice that we have just been joined on the Front Bench by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who was my predecessor as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. I want to pay tribute to the work that he did. I also want to stress that in bringing in the Autism Act 2009 and in securing this debate today, I was supported by many other Members across the House. It was not just me on my own; it was a real team effort.

Norman Lamb: That brings me nicely on to my next point, because I was going to say that this is not one Government’s responsibility; we all have to learn and understand more. The article in The Economist made clear the strong economic case that if we invest in diagnosis and early intervention, we will save a fortune in lifetime care. As we learn, the Government have to respond. That is the challenge. This Government, because they are here now and because new learning can lead to improvements, have a responsibility to respond.

Hannah Bardell: The Library briefing paper states that “the Government does not collect data specifically on employment rates for people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions”.

We should campaign, cross-party, to change that and work with business to get interviews that are friendly to those on the autistic spectrum.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with that. As a former Minister, I recognised during my time in the Department of Health that, whether it be mental health, autism or learning disabilities, we operate in a fog. There is an absence of data that have been analysed and understood. If we are to make the improvements of which we are capable, we have to understand the evidence, which involves the collection of data.

I want to highlight the failures of society and the extent to which we treat people with autism as second-class citizens by referring to two cases. The case of Connor Sparrowhawk, who tragically lost his life through drowning in July 2013, has been much documented recently, and his mother, Sara Ryan, has been an amazing campaigner, fighting for justice. The Oxford Mail reported this morning about a recently leaked report, produced for the NHS trust some 11 months before Connor lost his life, that demonstrated failures of care in his unit. The article states:

“The report found Slade House was particularly poor, flagging up issues with a ‘lack of clarity of care plans’, ‘no clear understanding of a ‘locked door policy’ and so on. What is the point of commissioning reports at enormous expense if their conclusions and recommendations are ignored?”

There has been great focus this week on the importance of the accountability of public bodies following the
shocking conclusion of the inquest into the Hillsborough tragedy, but that importance stretches across all public bodies and into healthcare. It is important that organisations recognise their responsibility to involve the families of those who lose their lives in investigations and to have an open and learning culture, rather than a closed culture that excludes families. The trust’s treatment of Sara Ryan in the investigation of Connor’s death has been truly shocking. There must be accountability and a willingness to learn from mistakes and to take account of any recommendations.

As we try to get people out of assessment and treatment units, where they are often left for too long, the Health & Social Care Information Centre has found that 15% of the transforming care cohort, of which the Minister will be aware, have autism and no learning disability and that 23% have autism and a learning disability. When looking at the transforming care partnership plans and the outcomes for individuals, it is important that the Department ensures that the specific needs of autistic people are included and addressed.

Finally, I want to refer to the case of an extraordinary constituent of mine. A nine-year-old boy wrote a letter for his parents to take to a meeting that I had on his behalf with the authorities at Norfolk County Council, and he ended up being interviewed—at the age of nine—on the “Today” programme, and it was a remarkable interview. He movingly wrote in his letter:

“I normally say to myself you have to keep on going. I normally also say ’is it worth it’. I could just kill myself. I wouldn’t have to face today.”

That comes from a nine-year-old boy. His family has been left waiting some two years for a diagnosis without any real support. They have been told that he does not meet the threshold for care from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Other hon. Members have highlighted similar cases, with the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) talking movingly about her experience, for example. The family, by borrowing from relatives, have managed to pay for some support for their little boy, but what about all those families who cannot afford it? It is intolerable. We cannot justify a society in which children get help if they have articulate parents or parents with money, but where those without go without.

As we seek to implement maximum waiting time standards in mental health, something which I have made my mission, my plea to the Minister is that we include autism and follow the NICE guidelines that the first diagnostic assessment should start no later than three months after GP referral—not 36 months, as I am told is sometimes the case in Norfolk, or 24 months, as in many other parts of the country. The result will be that society and the Government will save money in the long run if we make the investment in diagnosis and treatment at an early stage.

1.36 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who made the point about the need for earlier diagnosis more powerfully than I possibly could; it is certainly one that I support in today’s motion. I also want to join in the many congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and all those from both sides of the House who were involved in securing the Autism Act 2009. It was the beginning of a journey that continues with today’s debate.

I echo the concerns that were powerfully raised by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) about the risks of social isolation for people with autism, and I want to pay tribute to a couple of organisations in my constituency that have made great strides in reducing that isolation. The inspirational Monday Night Club was founded by Laura Gill, a constituent of mine with learning difficulties, and provides a forum for people with all sorts of learning difficulties, including a large number of people with autism, to come together, to socialise and to feel normal in a social setting.

Another organisation is ASPIE, the charity that I mentioned earlier, which was set up by Sarah Micklewright, an inspirational constituent who was on the autism spectrum. Tragically, and illustrating the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham made about the lower life expectancy of people on the spectrum, she died two years ago next week aged only 38, but she has left a remarkable legacy in Worcester. A house was bought by her parents for people on the spectrum to come together, socialise and share ideas. I have been privileged to visit on several occasions and have been teased for my neurotypical behaviour and for my inaccurate birthday cake-cutting, among other things. It is a fantastic organisation that has played a part in not only helping to reduce the risk of social isolation, but inspiring people to come together and believe in themselves and in their capacity to work and to create businesses for people on the spectrum.

Many hon. Members have made powerful points about the talents of people on the spectrum and the need to unleash them, and we heard about the evidence in the article in The Economist. I pay tribute to the founders of an organisation called Wits End Wizardry, a web design company that was launched out of ASPIE in Worcester and entirely staffed by people on the autism spectrum. It discovered that the software programming skills of people on the spectrum are incredibly powerful and that with the right guidance and support and with the right people working with them to provide front-end customer service, they can deliver fantastic websites for all types of businesses and charities. I believe that it has done some important work for various organisations, including Ambitious about Autism, which shows the contribution that people on the spectrum can make.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to use these great talents—this concentration and extraordinary ability to see the world in different ways? In the north-east, a business called Autism Works is taking on mathematical PhD autistic young men—they are all men—to challenge the big boys in the provision of that scientific and tech support. I think this is the future for our country.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and I pay tribute to her for her fantastic speech.
earlier. She is on to something here; we are seeing this happening in the north-east and in the midlands, as our increasing cyber-security cluster is looking to take on more people with autism. We heard earlier about the incredible contribution of Bletchley Park, and many of the people who contributed to that work were probably on the spectrum. In cyber-security, businesses such as Titania in Worcester are actively going out to recruit people with autism. I want to see more businesses making that effort and creating opportunities for people. As Ambitious about Autism has shown, we need to do things differently. People cannot just be invited in for interview, because the whole process of interview is set up to work with neurotypical people. We need to create an autism-friendly job application process in order to make sure we are making the most of the talents of these people. I pay tribute to the businesses that are making the effort to do that.

I recently held a Disability Confident jobs fair in Worcester and I was very impressed to see Malvern Instruments, another major employer in our area, recruiting. One of the people representing it in its recruitment was somebody whom I had previously met at ASPIE and who is on the autism spectrum. I wish to pay tribute to Justin McKeon who will be running the Worcester 10k to raise funds for ASPIE, and if anyone in the Chamber wants to join me in supporting him after this debate, I would be delighted.

The Government have many programmes to help people to work. We are talking about halving the disability employment gap, and autism is a big area we should be hitting on to try to make sure that that happens. We also have the apprenticeships programme, many aspects of which can be tailored to support people with autism. I have spoken to my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills about this, and I know he answered a question about this during Education questions this week. I am delighted about this, and I know he answered a question about the apprenticeships programme, many aspects of which can be tailored to support people with autism. I have the apprenticeships programme, many aspects of which can be tailored to support people with autism. I wish to pay tribute to Justin McKeon who will be running the Worcester 10k to raise funds for ASPIE, and if anyone in the Chamber wants to join me in supporting him after this debate, I would be delighted.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. A great many people still wish to speak, so I am afraid I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

1.42 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I will try to reduce my speech to below five minutes to give others a chance to speak in this excellent debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you.

John Woodcock: You are welcome.

We have heard erudite contributions in the debate so far, and I just wish to make two main points. The first is on understanding the scale of the problem. People have talked at length about this, giving some excellent examples, but I want to go further on the fact that we are still far from seeing the true scale of the autism problem in our country. This is partly because although recognition is growing, it remains insufficient among members of the community. It is also because of the number of worrying ways in which the true extent of the lack of capacity in local services is being hidden, and I hope the Minister will take up that point; the extent to which people are being denied is also being masked. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) talked about the long referral times, way beyond the recommended limits. In Cumbria, the time taken is even longer than the average, which shows the problems.

I wish to relate some of the concerns that parents of autistic children consistently raise in their local support group, and when talking with charities and directly to me. They suggest that even the acknowledged level of deficiency of the service does not reflect the true picture. They tell of their repeated frustration at contact just being ignored and how difficult it can be to get service practitioners even to pick up the phone. That is not properly documented. If people cannot even get on the waiting list to be seen, or they cannot get their request to be acknowledged because their contact is not being acknowledged, the problem is even bigger than is stated. Particularly worryingly, parents have a strong sense that people will tell them orally that the service is not sufficient for them but will refuse to put it in writing in a way that could allow them then to escalate it through the system. I would like the Minister to reflect on that and say whether he believes that that is a genuine problem and whether it is a wider problem.

My second point is about my pride in what my constituency has been able to contribute to the wider awareness debate. First, I should mention “The A Word”, which many hon. Members doubtless watch, as it is filmed in Broughton-in-Furness, in the north of my constituency. As Members will see from the programme, it is a fabulous place to go. I commend all involved in that programme for doing important work in a mainstream, prime-time BBC programme that is getting the message out in a really effective way.

I have delayed my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), but I thank her for the way in which she has engaged with my constituent Deborah Brownson, who has produced an excellent book. It is a children’s guide to autism called “He’s Not Naughty”, which she is trying to get into every school she can. I want to thank the Mayor of Barrow, who has financially facilitated, just yesterday, getting it to all the schools in the borough. Ministers on the Front Bench are asking for personal copies, and I would be delighted to help in doing that. I ask anybody listening to this debate who can contribute to her financial costs covered. It is an excellent illustrated guide that will explain to children just what is going on in the minds of autistic—[Interruption.] I am afraid that I have completely failed in my task and I am on my last five seconds.

1.47 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and all the team that she talked about earlier.
In the short time I have been in this place, numerous families have come to my surgery despairing about the time it is taking to get an autism diagnosis for their child. The diagnosis is obvious to those individual parents, and to many of their friends and family, but without the clinical diagnosis these children are trapped. One very moving case recently involved a seven-year-old boy. Almost two years ago now, he was referred to the community paediatrician. His first appointment took nine months to materialise, when he was diagnosed with ADHD. In January this year, he was referred for a communication assessment, and in March his parents received a letter saying there will be a further seven-month delay in accessing this assessment. This little boy’s behaviour means he is excluded from school for more time than he is at school, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) can relate to the story I am telling. The school has tried to support him—it has done its best—but of course it has a duty of care to other children. He is about to move from infant school to junior school, and that in itself is causing a problem. The school he should naturally be going to has refused to take him, as it just cannot cope with his behaviour, yet until he has received that autism diagnosis he is unable to access a special needs school—so this is a Catch-22 situation. This is just one of a number of cases I could highlight, and I am sure it mirrors cases that people from across the Chamber have encountered.

To help another child stuck in the system, I wrote to the Health Minister last July to highlight the unacceptable delays. I got a comprehensive response, but, sadly, nine months on, nothing seems to have changed in Derbyshire. I get the same message from officials time and again that they are still recruiting a community paediatrician and are looking to implement new pathways. I know that the pathways and the services are determined locally, but I ask the Minister to do whatever he can to ensure that the children of Erewash, and indeed of the whole of Derbyshire—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) has also highlighted the issue—get a timely diagnosis for their autism spectrum disorder.

In advance of this debate, I was contacted by a number of constituents. One parent carer of a young man with autism asked me to relay her story. She movingly described how repeatedly being requested to prove that he is autistic and to fill out form after form with his behaviour, yet until he has received that autism diagnosis he is unable to access a special needs school—so this is a Catch-22 situation. This is just one of a number of cases I could highlight, and I am sure it mirrors cases that people from across the Chamber have encountered.

The Government have committed to replacing the current Work programme with a new Work and Health Programme for people with health conditions and disabilities. That presents us with an important opportunity to do more to support autistic people to find and to stay in work.
In relation to the new Work and Health Programme, can the Minister tell me on what date the tender document will be published, and from what date the programme will be operational? Will the specification for the programme require that the conditions of the claimants, including autism, be recorded by both providers and Jobcentre Plus, and what discussions has he had about the conditions that will be recorded?

On awareness funding, my constituent Janeen told me that people often think that people with autism have a “genius talent”. She said that they do not really understand the “meltdown” in someone’s behaviour. It is just used to describe any kind of naughty behaviour. The Government should take a lead in tackling this lack of understanding.

Half of all people on the autistic spectrum tell the NAS that they do not go out because they are worried about people’s reactions to their autism. A quarter of them have been asked to leave a public place because of the behaviour associated with their autism. How do parents cope with that? They respond by not taking their children to places where they do not feel they will be accepted, which makes their children’s world a little bit small. They cannot enjoy the public space that we all take for granted—the parks, the museums and the shopping centres.

The NAS video, which has had 50 million views online, has a fantastic way of describing just how difficult it is for parents of an autistic child. The Government can do a lot more. Around 800,000 people in this country are affected by dementia, and the Government have shown great bravery in trying to change public attitudes by spending more than £2 million on awareness campaigns. The same work needs to be done for people on the autistic spectrum. I am aware of the Government’s £340,000 programme in this area, and I am looking forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks, telling us more about the scope of this project. With programmes such as “The A Word” on the BBC and the books and articles that are out there, now is the time for the Government to turn this awareness of autism into a true understanding.

1.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Although I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) is not in her place, I start by thanking her for her work in this area. I am aware from my constituents that she has bestowed so many rights on them through legislation and that she has started this whole chain. I pay tribute to her and give her my thanks on behalf of my constituents.

I was elected only 12 months ago. Before the election, I had no direct experience of autism. On being selected, a group of mothers who had autistic children or children with Asperger’s reached out to me and explained how difficult their lives were, what they needed and how hard it was to navigate through the system. I made a pledge to do all I could to help people with very special children.

On election, I was faced with one of my first cases. A mother told me how she had applied to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for a blue badge because her child, who was six, had such a difficult condition. Whenever he saw anybody in the street, he just collapsed on to the floor. As a result, she had to carry her child everywhere. She applied for a blue badge, but because the DVLA’s tick-box system did not register any physical disability her application was turned down. We had to fight on her behalf. We were fortunate to be able to go in at a higher level and get somebody to understand the complex needs of her child. That taught me that those with autism, who have such unique and differing needs, do not fit into the tick-box system. I ask the Minister whether he can find some way of ensuring that anybody who works in a tick-box employment system—or a Q and A system—has autism training. It is often impossible for the families of autistic children to navigate the system.

Since then, I have dealt with more cases, and I have been involved in some very special groups dealing with autism in my constituency of Bexhill and Battle. I have two points on which I wish to focus: education and the workplace.

I am fortunate that in Bexhill we have two very special schools that cater for those with autism, as well as those with other conditions. The first is Glyne Gap School, a day school which is rated “outstanding” in all areas. The Ofsted report in 2015 referred to “the inspirational leadership of the headteacher and assistant headteachers”, with the result that “all staff have an uncompromising focus on the quality of learning for all pupils.”

Surely that must be the goal of every school that looks after children with autism.

The second school is St Mary’s, also in Bexhill, where young people do not just learn, but live. The school has had a difficult time owing to a crisis of confidence in the chief executive. I visited the school the day the chief executive left and I was amazed at how caring, supportive and dedicated those teachers were to children with incredibly difficult and challenging conditions. I take my hat off to all who work in that environment. The school still requires improvement, but I believe that better times are ahead.

Constituents have raised with me a number of points in respect of schools. I have two very good schools but, as I mentioned, autistic children have individual and different needs and often need a different school to cater for them, but my council, East Sussex County Council, tends to favour just one school. As a result, it is very difficult for parents to get their choice of school.

I would like to see more freedom. I welcome the fact that we have trained 90,000 teachers in autism, but another comment that I have had is that a child was felt by their parents to have been isolated and restrained, rather than experiencing positive handling strategies, which Team Teach and other strategies provide.

As has been mentioned, my constituents struggle because of the long time it takes to get a diagnosis.

I have only 30 seconds left, but I want to mention employment. Tomorrow I have a jobs and apprenticeships fair, and I am delighted that St Mary’s in Bexhill will be bringing its young people down so that we can try and get them apprenticeships. I am fortunate to have in my constituency an organisation called Little Gate Farm, which helps people find employment opportunities. It tries to bridge the gap between school and employment
in rural communities. I salute what that organisation does, and I salute what everybody does in my constituency for those very special and gifted people.

2.2 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Two weeks ago I would not have been able to speak in this debate, but because of a pressing constituency issue I have found myself suddenly having to read up and listen, and I have learned so much today about autism. My only previous experience was teaching some autistic young men who passed through my hands when I was a further education lecturer.

I have become more and more aware of the crying need to raise awareness of autism at all levels—in the general public as well as in public authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned the Scottish Government’s plans for autism and their strategy. As part of that strategy, they opened six centres across Scotland to provide a one-stop shop experience for parents and people with autism. The one-stop shop in Motherwell will probably close in June this year. Since that has been announced, I have had innumerable emails from people in my constituency and outwith it, because the shop covers the whole of Lanarkshire. There are two local authorities involved—North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council—which will no longer fund those services. As hon. Members can imagine, that is a devastating blow to my constituents and people across Lanarkshire.

The one-stop shop provides workshops, training for parents and professionals, and support services for those who have autism. Those services are available even before diagnosis: anyone who thinks there may be an issue can go there and get advice. The shop was planning to run further courses for girls with autism, which is a very important area, and it was hoping also to run other specific and technical courses for parents and professionals.

My local authority, North Lanarkshire Council, has indicated that it will continue to fund an organisation called HOPE for Autism, which does good work with families in North Lanarkshire. However, the organisation’s services can be accessed only after diagnosis and its work focuses mainly on socialising and is for children only. There is also an annual fee per child for parents who join.

The reduction in services is devastating news. I do not want to stand in this place and denigrate anything that HOPE for Autism in North Lanarkshire has done and will continue to do, but it does not provide a range of services that parents can access at present. That is causing great distress.

I was unable to attend a meeting at the one-stop shop on Monday, but my office manager went and came back almost in tears at some of the stories that she heard. She said she found it most moving when parents said that they almost wished that their children had a visible disability, or they wished their children had something else, because then they would get more help and more hope and people would understand what was happening with their children. That heartfelt wish brought home to my office manager how little she knew about autism.

I do not think for one moment that North Lanarkshire Council’s motives are bad. I know that there are funding difficulties all over the UK, but I do not think the council understands what the one-stop shop provided. I have a list of some of the wonderful work that it has done. It ran workshops on visual issues and autism, workshops on sleep strategies by Sleep Scotland, workshops on support for young carers, on autism and diet by NHS Lanarkshire, and on autism and play by a Scottish Autism support team, a workshop on demand avoidant behaviour by the paediatric autism consultancy team, and a safe talk autism awareness training workshop by the Richmond Fellowship. All that will be lost in my area.

Mrs Gillan: I hope I am buying the hon. Lady an extra minute. What she is saying is very important. Does she think there is any possibility of that decision being reversed, as she is making such a powerful case for keeping the one-stop shop open for her constituents and people beyond her constituency?

Marion Fellows: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention and the time it may buy me. As she can imagine, the parents are fighting hard to retain the shop and to convince both North and South Lanarkshire Councils that the service must be funded, because of the great work that it does and the benefit that it brings to anyone in North or South Lanarkshire who is affected by autism. Some of the emails that I have had are heart-wrenching, telling of social isolation and nine-year-old children trying to kill themselves. Those emails are full of praise for the help that has been received, the work that has been done and the staff in the one-stop shop, two of whom are seconded from Scottish Autism and two of whom will lose their jobs. I will go on and fight for that very valuable shop in Motherwell.

2.8 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am proud to be a governor at Halesbury School, which has become a specialist autism school where more than a third of pupils have autism, many undiagnosed when they join the school. I am grateful to the deputy head, Amanda Appleby-Payne, for the insight she offered ahead of this debate.

Two special schools in my constituency are doing excellent work for children with autism. The Brier School provides an incredible level of education, care and support for children with very severe and complex special needs. I was pleased to open its new post-16 facility last autumn, which means that more young people with autism will be able to access further and vocational education.

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects people very differently. It affects how they communicate and how they make sense of the world around them. While many people live a life full of anxiety, depression, mental health issues and sensory sensitivities that make it extremely difficult for them to function or to access the normal situations and public services we take for granted.
A 2012 study found that about 1.1% of adults were on the autistic spectrum, and a later study found a similar prevalence among children. If this House is representative of the population at large, therefore, we would expect at least seven Members to be on the autistic spectrum.

Unfortunately, the excellent support and education provided to children with autism at Halesbury, The Bridge and Belch Meadow are not always reflected in the education system as a whole. There are 120,000 school-age children in England on the autistic spectrum, more than 70% of whom are in mainstream education. The implication is that many teachers in mainstream schools are likely to have children with autism in their classes—if they do not at the moment, they almost certainly will at some stage during their careers.

I pay tribute to the NASUWT for the valuable work it has done on this issue and particularly for the report my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) referred to, which showed that 60% of teachers do not believe they have enough training to meet the needs of pupils with ASD.

Mrs Gillan: My hon. Friend is making some powerful points about the education of young people with autism. Is he aware of the work being done by Ambitious about Autism, which shows that the number of special educational needs appeals at tribunals went up from over 1,000 in 1995 to over 4,000 in 2014? Among the most common types of appeal are those involving autism.

Mike Wood: Having met Ambitious about Autism and discussed that very point, I certainly recognise the challenge to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Difficulties in the classroom and for families of children with autism often arise because of a lack of knowledge and understanding about the condition. Children on the autistic spectrum often get chastised for not behaving in exactly the same way as other children. Their exclusion rates are extremely high, and figures from the Department for Education show that autistic pupils are four times more likely to be excluded than pupils with no special educational needs.

Teacher training must equip teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to provide all pupils with the best possible support throughout their time in education. That is why I support the call by Ambitious about Autism and the National Autistic Society for autism to be included in the new teacher training framework.

If I may, I will conclude with the words of Mr and Mrs Whitmore, the parents of a pupil at Halesbury:

“We want our son to be accepted—and for him to be accepted equally as a citizen of this country, as his peers are...Autism is only a small fraction of our son; it is not everything he is. Will is so much more than the label society has given him.”

It is for people such as Will and the families who are working to make sure their children and everybody affected by autism can have the best possible chance to fulfil their full potential, whether that is in the workplace or in society as a whole, that we are having this debate. This debate is a huge and positive step forward, and we have seen the quality of the contributions that have been made. I therefore look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

2.14 pm Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I too pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for securing it and for her long-standing commitment and hard work on this issue.

Over the past year, I have been contacted by several parents of children with autism—parents who are proud of their children’s abilities and who, like any parent, simply want their children to receive the support they need to live the best life possible.

I have been contacted by enough parents to be able to see what some of the problems and challenges are—they are many, and they cut across different areas of public sector responsibility. I have represented parents of autistic children who are struggling to get a diagnosis for their son or daughter, which is a significant problem. Just as worrying, however, are the families whose child has a diagnosis but who are still struggling to secure the additional resources and support they need, whether that is support in the classroom, transport to get to and from school, help to access housing that is appropriate to their needs, or help with the welfare system or healthcare.

Across the public sector, there is a lack of understanding of autism and its impact on families. Families face stigma and stereotyping. The complexity of autism is not understood, and that results in parents facing weekly and sometimes daily battles on behalf of their children, just to secure the basics.

Earlier this year, I was privileged to meet Isabelle and Robin Garnett, whose 15-year-old son Matthew has autism. Isabelle came to see me at my surgery to tell me about the terrible experiences Matthew was having because of his mental health needs. I would like to focus today on the particular problems of people with autism who also have mental health needs.

Last summer, Matthew Garnett’s behaviour and level of distress deteriorated, and his family were finding it more and more difficult to cope. Eventually, Matthew assaulted his father, resulting in his parents calling the police—an absolutely heart-breaking situation for any family. Matthew was sectioned under the Mental Health Act and taken to a psychiatric intensive care unit in Woking, many miles from his south London home.

Psychiatric intensive care units are for short-term assessment; they are designed to diagnose a patient and to determine the treatment and support they need, and then to make an onward referral within six to eight weeks. Matthew’s doctors quickly identified that the most appropriate place for him was a unit at St Andrew’s, Northampton. St Andrew’s accepted the referral, but to Isabelle and Robin’s great distress, Matthew remained in Woking for a further six months, moving to Northampton only after a persistent campaign by his family, and after I had repeatedly raised the case in Parliament and with the Minister.

I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me and Matthew’s family, for recognising the extent of their suffering and the many serious issues with Matthew’s care, and for initiating a review of his case. I look forward to seeing the results of the review and to discussing it with the Minister.
One of the most troubling aspects of Matthew Garnett’s situation was the absolute absence of autism awareness or specialism from the care he received while he was in Woking for six months. There was no recognition of his need for routine and structure, of the impact of his diet on his condition or of the detrimental impact of too much screen time on his mood and level of anxiety. As a consequence, his physical and mental condition deteriorated while he was in Woking. He gained weight, became more withdrawn and broke his wrist; his social skills and reading ability regressed; and he became more anxious and frightened.

Matthew’s parents launched a brave campaign to get him the treatment he needed. In doing so, they engaged with many other parents of children with autism and mental health needs. Working with the National Autistic Society, they launched a questionnaire for parents of children with autism and mental health needs. Within a few days, more than 800 parents had filled out the questionnaire, and the results are very troubling. Almost half the respondents said that, prior to their child being admitted to hospital, they had received no support in the community for autism or mental health needs. Some 85% of those whose child had been admitted to hospital said they had received no autism-specific support. Almost half said they did not feel consulted about, or involved in, decisions about their child’s care when they were in hospital. Finally, 61% said that, after their child was discharged, no arrangements at all were made for suitable support back in the community.

Children with autism, and their parents and carers, deserve better than this. While I am grateful to the Minister for his engagement with Matthew Garnett’s family to date, I urge him to pick up the wider set of issues and challenges in the mental health care system and across other areas of the public sector and to ensure we have a fairer deal for families who face these daily, heart-breaking struggles and appropriate resourcing of the support they need.

2.19 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is said that a society is judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable. Among our most vulnerable are children with special educational needs, including those on the autism spectrum. I therefore want to give a voice to just a few of the many parents who have come to me over the past six years, including the Middlewich parents and carers support group, to describe their challenges in trying to get appropriate support for their autistic children. The situation is described by far too many with these words: “every day feels like a fight.”

Time prevents me from quoting all the material I have available to describe their struggles of seeking often inadequate, slow or no diagnoses; of insufficient teacher training; of a feeling as parents that they have little voice or are inadequate, or worse, not believed; of struggles with bureaucracy, with too many different organisations; of, as one said, being pushed from pillar to post; of funding and resource frustrations; and of being, as another said, “at a loss as to what to do.” We need to do better for them.

One says:
“We have two children who have autism and face huge challenges getting the understanding and support they need.”

Another says,
“teachers in my child’s school in charge of special educational needs do not have sufficiently specialised training.”

Another says:
“Teachers are given…very little training. Many teachers have had only half a day’s training to cover all SEN.”

One said that more training is needed so teachers can help older children in secondary school to understand themselves when there may be an onset of distress and how to get help early. Another said:
“my son has had difficulties in school, and what hasn’t helped is that…the educational psychologist and the school, I am being told I should not say he is autistic spectrum…rather…he is a ‘complex child with complex needs’. The letter from the community paediatrician says he has a diagnosis of ASD”.

One mother, like a number of parents, says:
“all the experts in the field of ASD would tell you that children can hold in their anxieties and control their behaviour at school, in order to ‘fit in’; but when they come home to an environment where they can be themselves, they act completely differently.”

Another said:
“I had three uniforms for him. These were all ripped when he returned home due to what had gone on during the day.”

Yet doctors often listen more to the opinion of teachers than parents. Another parent said that parents are made to feel that they are not believed—that they are “bad parents and trouble makers. Yet what parents would want to go to so much effort to ‘pretend’ that their child has a disability?”

Another said that, as we have heard:
“The diagnosis process is not working…waiting times for diagnosis are too long…some children are being deliberated over for too long or even discharged, when there is clearly an issue which requires diagnosis.”

Another said that too much attention is paid to the opinion of teachers and not enough to parents. One mother told me she has spent three years trying to get her son statemented, but because they did not have a statement they could not get any support at primary school because money comes with the statement. He is now 12, at senior school, and has ASD as diagnosed by a paediatrician but is still not statemented.

Tom Elliott: One line from one of the parents the hon. Lady has mentioned has captured what this debate is about:
“every day feels like a fight.”

We have talked about this for so long. Surely there should be more progress to try to get more co-operation between the statutory agencies and Government Departments to ensure that every day is not a fight for parents and for those affected.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is correct. As long ago as 2009, following the Autism Act 2009, the Department for Health published an autism strategy that focused on five core areas of activity, one of which was the importance of “developing a clear, consistent pathway for diagnosis in every area, which is followed by the offer of a personalised needs assessment.”

That was for adults. How much more important is it that this happens for children, and at the earliest possible
age and stage? Waiting times for assessment should follow the NICE guidelines of three months. That is a long time in a childhood; three years is an eternity.

One parent wrote that when diagnosis occurs there needs to be a greater understanding of the different ways in which autism presents itself between girls and boys. She said that “there is not enough knowledge about girls on the spectrum... It is now recognised there are far more girls with ASD than previously thought. Girls develop the ability to mask their condition much more effectively. However, this knowledge is not being passed through the system. Far more training is needed for... professionals in the field, to ensure that our girls get equal access to assessment and diagnosis... my son was diagnosed locally by the paediatrician, yet the same doctor had quite evidently decided my daughter was not on the spectrum, without really investigating the possibility... So I had to take my daughter privately to a psychologist who was much more well informed... this needs to be addressed... we are doing our girls a disservice at present.”

Another said that autism is a spectrum of conditions and every one requires an individual solution, particularly as autism can be accompanied by another condition. As we have heard, a further problem arises when, as parents tell me, their child reaches late teens and falls between child and adult care. One mother told me that children with autism have an adolescence lasting 10 years longer than anyone else, but at 16 to 18 schools and colleges stop talking to you, but your child still needs support for a very long time. Another said:

“there are so many stumbling blocks on the way”

that it is no wonder that some of the children end up in the juvenile justice system, or self-harm.

Then there is the problem of employment. A mother told me of the struggles she is having trying to find employment for her son with mild Asperger’s syndrome. There is no support available and there are huge levels of ignorance among potential employers.

Given the right help, appropriate support can be really effective. Surely, we want for every child, including those with autism, the best start in life, and it can be achieved.

2.26 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I speak as a mother currently on the long waiting list for diagnosis. I thank everybody for their comments today.

I am delighted to speak in this debate. Like everybody else, I commend the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), who is a tireless campaigner on this issue—a subject incredibly close to my heart. So many misconceptions about autistic people get thrown around, such as “Everyone is somewhere on the spectrum”, which I am sure we hear a lot in this place, or my favourite, which is that people with people with autism have some sort of superpower or special gift. I can tell everyone now that they do not.

Last Friday, I watched the newly released DVD of “Star Wars: the Force Awakens” with my sons and their lovely autistic friend. Between us we decided that what appeared as the teenage tantrums of the new Dark Lord, Kylo Ren, was perhaps just him needing a bit of a “time out”. We concluded that perhaps he was autistic and just could not fit into the world he found himself in. Perhaps the new Death Star was just too noisy and made him feel stressed out. We thought he might wear the mask because he did not like eye contact. I am not sure that this was the film-maker’s intention, but it softened us to him. The group of people I was with “get” autism and ASD—they live with it every day—so they can see how a person’s behaviour might alter if things start to kick off. To all of us, it is not the person with autism who has the problem—it is the rest of the world. We have to think differently about people who think differently.

On every street I visit in Yardley, I meet families struggling with autism in adulthood or in their children. My postbag is full of heart-breaking cases of how much autistic people are struggling. In my constituency there is an amazing autism support group called Spectrum, where every meeting is packed with parents who want a break. This is not a minority issue—it is a growing issue, and we are not keeping pace with our provision, our awareness or our attitudes.

Today I want to focus on how the world needs to think differently about employment for people with autism. Only 15% of working-age people with autism are currently in work, according to the National Autistic Society. For any parent with a child with autism, this presents a heart-breaking and bleak future—but it does not need to be. Ambitious about Autism has identified that in fact 99% of young people with autism want to work.

So what can we do? The Department for Work and Pensions has made some impressive commitments over the past few years in saying that Jobcentre Plus will implement autism awareness and autism networks. I welcome all this, but in reality it is not what people in my constituency are experiencing. One constituent told me: “I do not blame the staff, but it comes down to a lack of understanding of autism. The support the jobcentre claim to be providing is not there. I was treated as though I had no disability and left to my own devices. That is the problem of having an invisible disability.”

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): At a meeting last week, somebody raised the issue of jobcentres specifically regarding the personal independence payment and self-assessment of people with autism or Asperger’s as being incredibly difficult. Why does that continue to be part of the process?

Jess Phillips: I could not agree more. Another of my constituents told me just this week how the jobcentre had failed to recognise the need for his mother to be able to attend meetings about his PIP arrangements and to change his benefits. That has resulted in frequent incidents of faltering benefits, which has made him incredibly vulnerable and left him with totally insecure finances.

On another occasion I heard of a mother who wanted to access a bus pass from the local authority for a home-to-school scheme, in order to get her son travel-ready for when he leaves school in a few years’ time so that he will be able to go on the bus on his own. She was given a “computer says no” answer and told to come back in the few years when it would actually matter. However, because she is a mum with an autistic child, she knows it is going to take time and training.

We have got to be bold and flexible. We have got to think differently about how we make our services and the world’s jobs available to people on the autistic
spectrum. Although things are not perfect, we have
come a long way from the days when a person in a
wheelchair could not have a job because they could not
access the building. Autistic people may not face a
physical barrier like a staircase, but the barrier effect is
equally the same.

Not providing fair and equal access to these people is
not only wrong; it is also illegal, and we have got to
make sure that employers know that. We need employers
to understand how an interview might feel to somebody
with autism. It is terrifying enough for somebody who is
neuro-typical, so I ask Members to imagine for a second
that they do not want to look someone in the eye, find
talking in front of strangers impossible, or find it impossible
if two people speak over each other.

Ambitious about Autism has just launched its “Employ
Autism” campaign to transform the employability of
young people with autism. I ask everyone in this place
to do as I have done and offer to provide work experience
to young people with autism. I imagine that I will learn
as much as my placement, possibly more. I also encourage
Members to ask our local business improvement districts,
chambers, local enterprise partnerships and businesses
to offer tailored work placements and apprenticeships.
That will help us all to think differently.

I want to stand here and say with confidence to every
young person with autism and every parent with a child
on the autistic spectrum: you can do anything. I want to
say: your future is bright. I want to say it to myself, for
my son. I want to say it to my son’s “Star Wars” fan
friend. But I can’t. I don’t know what the future will be
like for them. So let’s try to change it. Let’s think
differently.

2.32 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the right
hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan)
for bringing forward this debate. I am grateful for the
opportunity to speak in it and to put my full support
behind the motion.

As I prepared my speaking notes, it became obvious
that, while Members in this Chamber have an important
role to play in raising awareness of autism, the most
valuable insights will always come from those with
direct experience of the condition. They are the ones
who know whether services are working effectively and
they know through experience what changes we should
make to create a more autism-friendly society. It is,
therefore, appropriate to make sure that their voices are
heard in the House of Commons today. There are two
people in particular that I will highlight. The first is a
constituent of mine whose son has autism, and the
second is Vicki McCarthy, the founder of Reach for
Autism, which was established in Inverclyde by
Vicki McCarthy. Reach for Autism offers a wide range
of support, from teacher training to mentoring programmes.
It currently supports more than 60 autistic people,
including 44 children, eight young adults, four volunteers
and a member of staff. It is difficult to overstate the
importance of those services, not only for autistic people,
but for their families. Lifeline services such as those
established by Vicki can transform people’s lives.

If we invest in people with autism from a young age,
we can decrease the chances of autistic people suffering
from mental health problems as a result of social isolation
or low self-esteem. That investment ensures that people
with autism feel valued and respected, are prepared for
employment and can live more independent lives.

Yet establishing and maintaining that support has
been difficult. Reach for Autism has no core funding,
and running costs are met entirely through donations and
its own fundraising. The organisation and its vital
services simply would not exist without the energetic
support of volunteers and the determined efforts of
Vicki. Whether it is individuals and their families or
organisations themselves, those touched by autism are
faced with the same obstacles: a lack of funding; a lack
of certainty over future support; and a lack of public
understanding of the condition.

I hope that other Members will join me in declaring
that people with autism, their families and the organisations
that support them deserve better than this never-ending
uphill struggle. All people, including those with autism,
deserve the chance to realise their full potential, and by
increasing awareness we can take important steps towards
becoming a more autism-friendly society. I know that I
am better for my increased knowledge and would like to
thank Vicki and all those who have raised my awareness
and understanding.

2.36 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):
I, too, would like to add my voice to the clamour—the
chorus—of appreciation to the right hon. Member for
Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) not just for
securing this debate, but for all the work she has done in
this area over the years.
This subject is very close to my heart. I speak as a former teacher of English for more than 20 years who witnessed at first hand some of the challenges and obstacles that young people living with autism face. This debate is important not just because of the challenges that those living with autism have to cope with, but because of the isolation and the sometimes bullying and judgmental attitudes they face from a society that too often simply does not comprehend the condition. That is why we all—there is consensus on this—need to work hard to raise not just awareness of the condition, but understanding of it. In the long term, society’s lack of understanding can leave an individual with autism emotionally scarred, and in the longer term it can lead to difficulties accessing employment and the means to a fulfilling life.

The scale of those affected by the condition is significant. It is thought that more than one person in every 100 may be autistic, and behind each individual case, as we have heard, are families, loved ones and friends who also live with the condition. A study in 2008 revealed that as many as 71% of children with autism also live with a mental health condition, such as anxiety, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services found that 26% of graduates on the autism spectrum are unemployed. That is by far the highest rate of any disability group and more than double the average unemployment rate for disabled adults. Although figures are hard to establish, it is important not just because of the challenges that those affected by them, and loneliness is considered to be as damaging to health as smoking. That brings into sharp focus the importance of such work.

Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to the work that is being done in my constituency. During the Easter recess, I attended an event in Grimsby forum—which people with autism and their families come together to share stories about the challenges that they face and the coping strategies that they use. I pay tribute to Suzanne Fernando, who organises those events and does so much to promote understanding of autism. I am quite proud of the work that is going on in Scotland. The Scottish Government have launched the Scottish strategy for autism, through which they have put the issue on the agenda, raised awareness of it and put resources into it. When children, young people and adults with autism lose out, they are a loss to our society, and we need to be more inclusive and mindful of that.

2.42 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I join in the congratulations to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on her work on this issue. Last week, I was invited to Grimsby autism forum, which was held at Open Door. It is a fantastic group that helps to give people with autism and their families a voice in the many different systems that they find themselves thrust into.

I would like to raise some of the issues that were shared with me at the forum. There seem to be two main areas of concern: problems with diagnosing autism and Asperger’s, and a lack of post-diagnosis support and subsequent pathways. From speaking to the parents, I got the impression that diagnosis was seen as something of a golden ticket to the support and help that they are desperate for, but they really have to work for it. It sounds as though there is a hurdle every step of the way.

There is the fundamental problem, at least in Grimsby, that no one knows who is responsible for diagnosis. There is no clear division of responsibility between the clinical commissioning group and the child and adolescent mental health services. The issue is particularly acute for 16 to 18-year-olds. As a support worker put it to me, “If you are 16 to 18, you can forget about being diagnosed”. I would be grateful to the Minister if he clarified which body has the legal responsibility for diagnosis for people between those ages, and if he explained why they are not currently being diagnosed.

Many parents feel that schools, the local authority and the clinical commissioning group are reluctant to statement children, which prevents them from accessing
the additional services they need. Does the Minister believe that there may be an issue in that councils and schools are not as proactive as they could be in diagnosing children? Some people have complained about assessments being done out of area. If long journeys are likely to exacerbate the worst symptoms of the condition, some people simply will not take their children, who will therefore miss out on the help they so desperately need.

Autism and Asperger’s on their own can be difficult conditions for people and their carers to cope with, but as was said by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is no longer in her place, comorbidity is very common and can make diagnosis even less likely. It is a real frustration for carers when people receive help for ADHD or anxiety depression, for example, before they even receive a diagnosis for what they feel is the core problem. Obviously, help for co-existing conditions is welcome and necessary, but when it supersedes autism or Asperger’s support, it is simply seen as messing around at the edges.

Whether or not children have been successfully diagnosed with autism or Asperger’s, they are still held back in their education and find it difficult to break into the jobs market. Too often autistic children are put in the naughty box at school. NASUWT research shows that most teachers do not feel they have had adequate training to teach children with autism, which is worrying given that 70% of autistic children are educated in mainstream schools. I believe that children with autism can absolutely succeed at school, but if teachers are not properly equipped to help them, they are too often simply written off. I find it shocking that, as the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) mentioned, the majority of school exclusions are for children with special educational needs, yet they account for only 15% of all students. How can that be compatible with section 85 of the Equality Act 2010, which specifically prohibits discrimination against a pupil “by excluding the pupil from the school”?

On leaving school, young people with Asperger’s and autism often struggle to maintain long-term employment, or even to get a job in the first place. Navigo, a charity in Grimsby, runs shops and garden centres that provide opportunities for work and training for people with mental health conditions. It is a really valuable scheme, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned, I would like more employers from outside the charity sector to do the same. I am sure there is plenty that the Government could do to promote employment for people with mental health conditions in the public sector, as well as to incentivise private sector firms to do so.

Of course, some employers already do a lot to encourage disabled people to apply for jobs with them—for instance, by including the “Positive about Disabled People” symbol in their job adverts. Although disabled people are advised to look for that symbol in adverts, I do not understand why jobcentres do not hold lists of employers in the local area that are so certified. Surely that would be a relatively simple and helpful diagnosis, on provision of healthcare, and on mental healthcare provision in particular, the challenge we face is to make our society more autism-friendly.

Overall, there needs to be a better understanding of autism and Asperger’s across society, diagnosis needs to be much more common and the process for parents who are seeking a diagnosis needs to be made much easier.
There are some brilliant people who are doing that in this country. I commend the work of the National Autistic Society and its recent campaign, “Too Much Information”, which I believe is its most powerful yet. I was touched by the film shot entirely from the perspective of a child with autism walking through a shopping centre, which gives in about a minute an insight into the discomfort, sensory overload and claustrophobia that are normal for many people with autism. When the child ultimately has a meltdown the viewer understands why. There are many other organisations I would like to have had the time to talk about, including Ambitious about Autism, and Autistica and the work it funds in medical research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment of autism.

I see tremendous work in this country not just from the third sector but from companies. The example of Asda has been given. Many cinema chains are now embracing autism-friendly screenings, which I find absolutely fantastic. My own beloved football club, Sunderland, has built a new sensory room in the stadium for autistic fans, so something may now available to me that never had been before, that feeling of taking my son to a football match. I will probably wait until next season before I take advantage of that.

Another company leading the way is Manchester Airports Group. It now fast-tracks families with autistic children through the stressful environment of airport security. It has created videos and booklets that help prepare people for what they expect from their airport experience. Its thoughtfulness is literally helping to open up access to a much wider world for people with autism in Greater Manchester and beyond.

That brings me to my final point, which I will not quite have the time to go into. Greater Manchester is already performing well in the national NHS strategy for autism. My hope is that, with the devolution of health provision, we can make Greater Manchester the world’s first autism-friendly city region. I want to see more of our public spaces accessible to people with autism, more of our public servants empowered as autism champions and an ambitious strategy for education and employability. I want Greater Manchester to be a beacon of best practice for autism across the world. I hope that the Minister will share that ambition.

2.53 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting this debate, and the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing it and on being an autism champion. As a clinical psychologist I have worked with many people who have autistic spectrum disorder. I put on the record that it is a privilege to be a member of the all-party parliamentary group on autism and to be a co-sponsor of the debate.

Autistic spectrum disorder is a pervasive lifelong developmental disorder that affects people’s social interactions. It impacts on how people communicate with others, how they relate to people and how they experience the world around them. Being a professional is one thing, but for me it is very clear that the greatest insights come from those who have autistic spectrum disorder and their families. We must listen very carefully to what they tell us.

We know that how we interact with individuals with ASD and their families can have a huge impact on their quality of life. Negative public reactions can encourage people and their families to avoid interactions and social contact, leading to their becoming socially isolated and experiencing mental health difficulties.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The debate has covered a lot of the structural and supportive things that need to be done, but does it not also throw down the gauntlet to us about the need to change our view? We think of people with autism as finding it difficult to see the world as we see it. We actually need to see the world as they see it.

Dr Cameron: As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We must focus not on the difficulties faced by those with autistic spectrum disorders but on their full potential, and we should have greater awareness of the world as they view it.

Research indicates that 66% of autistic people, and 68% of their families, have reported feeling socially isolated, and 70% of autistic individuals are reported to have mental health disorders such as anxiety or depression. Autistic adults have been reported to be nine times more likely to die from suicide. There is a clear need to address comorbidity, and particularly mental health difficulties.

One constituent who contacted me advised that the “Too Much Information” video and campaign, which must be commended, had resonated with her. Her eight-year-old daughter has autism, and she shared with me some of her personal experiences. Her daughter is extremely vulnerable and sensitive to everyday sights, sounds, touches and smells, which cause her anxiety, panic or obsessive worries and despair. She cannot cope with changes to her environment, and she is prone to becoming distressed in public. As a result, she has experienced negative community responses, including from school peers. Her reaction has been reluctance to go back to school, and withdrawal from her extracurricular activities. Sadly, that means that she is at risk of becoming further isolated, and it is clear from this story—such stories were common among those who contacted me—that we all need to do more in many areas.

I recently attended Milton Primary School in my constituency, where the lack of understanding about pupils with autism among peers and their parents was highlighted to me. The headteacher is now engaged in good work to increase understanding through planned awareness sessions, and I commend her on that fantastic local development. Again, that highlights how teacher training and awareness in schools is key.

As has been mentioned, we must raise awareness and understanding among employers to help support people with autism into employment. Having a job is about earning a living, but it also contributes to psychological wellbeing. It can provide people with a sense of belonging and purpose, and build confidence and self-esteem. The autism employment gap is even bigger than the general disability employment gap, and only 15% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time work. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services has reported that 26% of graduates on the autistic spectrum are unemployed. Mainstream employment programmes currently on offer are failing to capitalise on the potential
of those with autism. I urge the Minister to ensure appropriate support for people with autism, and for that to be covered by proposals in the disability and employment White Paper.

In 2011 the SNP Scottish Government launched the Scottish strategy for autism, and declared that autism is a national priority. That strategy attempts to improve diagnosis and assessment, and to create consistent service standards. It also helped to establish one-stop shops. We must continue to support that issue, and I offer my full co-operation and involvement with my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) to save our local one-stop shop.

We must all be champions of autism, and I ask the Minister to support an awareness campaign, promote training for teachers and local authority staff, tackle issues raised in the White Paper, ensure that more clinicians are trained, and consider waiting time guidelines. Society must not continue to fail people with autistic spectrum disorder, so let us do all that we can together to ensure that we succeed.

2.59 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be the final Back-Bench speaker in this fantastic debate. I have been here for the whole of it, and I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for their amazingly personal speeches, which brought home to everybody what it is like being the parent of an autistic child. It would be remiss of me not to thank also the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for securing the debate and for all her brilliant work.

I could not help but compare the incidence of autism to that of dementia. The figures are very similar: an estimated 800,000 people live with dementia in the UK, compared to an estimated 700,000 on the autistic spectrum. While I would not wish to play one off against the other, it is significant that the Government spend on autism awareness is £325,000, whereas the spend on dementia awareness, at £2.3 million, is significantly more—although campaigners would probably say it is not enough. I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society, which has done fantastic work to raise awareness of autism, and, like many hon. Members, I welcome the “Too Much Information” campaign.

Many Members have mentioned waiting times for diagnosis, which is a really important part of dealing with autism as it helps people to take control of their lives and to unlock barriers to essential support and services, and it enables families to better understand their child and to explain to them their many years of feeling different. We have talked about how long adults and children have to wait for a diagnosis. The NICE quality standard on autism is clear that, once referred, people should wait no longer than three months for their first diagnostic appointment, but that is clearly not being consistently met across the country. The NAS calls on the Government and NHS England to prioritise reducing waiting times for autism diagnoses, which would also help the NHS to reach its own goals of preventing mental illness. Will the Minister task NHS England with monitoring diagnosis waiting times for each clinical commissioning group, in order to reduce health inequalities for autistic people in line with NHS England’s mandate?

I will touch on teacher training, although much of what I wanted to say has been said. The vast majority of autistic children—over 70%—are in mainstream education, meaning that every teacher is likely to have children with autism in their classes during their career. A constituent of mine, Julie Atkins, got in touch when she heard I was taking part in the debate. She said:

“My son attends mainstream secondary school...and although he has a certain level of good support, there are a number of teachers who do not ‘get him’. Every child on the spectrum is different and an hour’s ASD training does not give people the understanding they need. There is no rule book and more empathy and understanding of sensory issues would help teachers to understand why my son may be fine one day and not the next.”

I support the call for autism awareness training to be included in the new teacher training framework. The words of my constituent explain why it is necessary.

I was pleased to see the initiative at the Asda store in my neighbouring constituency of Blackley and Broughton. The store manager, Simon Lea, said he wanted to help, having seen a boy with autism struggling to cope in the shop. On Saturday 7 May, therefore, in order to help autistic and disabled shoppers, the store will open an hour early, with no electronic distractions, such as escalators, music and televisions, and the public address system will not be used for announcements. I might well go there myself.

3.4 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate. Like the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), I want to add the perspective of a parent of a child with autism.

My younger daughter, now in her 20s, is autistic, with associated learning and communication difficulties. I, too, went to the launch of the booklet, “Too Much Information”; it is excellent and I recognise much of what appears in it. There are two telling statistics on page 2: 87% of families living with autism say that people stare at their child’s autistic behaviour; and 74% say people tut and make disapproving noises. Over the years, I have experienced both of these. Like many parents, I developed a very thick skin. I know one parent who said that the worst thing for her was that people who she knew and spoke to regularly would ignore her when they met her and she was accompanied by her autistic son. How hurtful can that be?

One of my constituents, Karen, contacted me ahead of this debate and asked me to say something about her experience. This is what she said:

“I have two children with autism who find going out overwhelming. I have one that will try and hide while the other will shout, become aggressive or laugh hysterically. We are stared at by the public and comments are made regarding my ability to parent or that my children are spoiled. My eldest is becoming aware of these comments and this causes her psychological distress.”

Many parents will recognise that.
As parents we find different strategies to deal with our children's behaviour. It is often the unexpected that hits us. Our daughter was, and still is, fascinated by Disney cartoons. When she was younger, her favourite was “Cinderella”, especially the mice that were Cinderella's friends, Jaq, Gus and Suzy. She has soft toys from the Disney store, and she carries them everywhere. We took her on holiday to Disneyland Paris. On the first day there, Cinderella was out and about, and we took her to meet her and her friends—but, of course, the mice she met were not the small characters she expected. They were bigger than her, and she simply could not cope with that—it was not what she expected. Like other families, we spent the rest of the holidays checking where the characters would be on each day—but they to go and meet them, us to discover ways and routes to avoid meeting them.

We face a similar problem every year with summer fairs, coffee mornings and similar events, now that so many have face painting for children. Our daughter simply cannot comprehend what is happening when children have their faces painted to look like a tiger, a cat or some other animal, and she will freak out if she sees it. We have to carefully avoid taking her to such events.

My daughter still loves her cartoons, particularly “Thomas the Tank Engine”, which she watches on video so she can pause, rewind and watch repeatedly small sections that appeal to her. Frankly, after 20 years of this, I could cheerfully strangle the Fat Controller, but I also live in fear of the day when the video machine finally gives up the ghost, because such machines are not so easy to get hold of these days.

In many ways we are lucky: we live in a small town and most people know us; our daughter is well known in the local shops and particularly in the charity shops throughout Angus where she hunts for videos. She is accepted, and no one really bats an eyelid at her sometimes seemingly odd behaviour. In common with many autistic people, my daughter needs the comfort of routine. When we go shopping, we go round the shops in a specific order. It may not be a logical order to anyone else, but that is the order in which it must be done. If it is not, there will be trouble.

If we are going to do something different from our usual routine, we need to lay the groundwork well in advance, explain what we are doing, when we are doing it and why, and let our daughter think through it and mull it over for some time, discussing the implications with her. Sometimes we can manage to do that.

I am conscious of the fact that this may all sound a little depressing, but as with any child, there are joys as well as challenges. One of the things my daughter's school did was to take her to Riding for the Disabled—and she took to it like a duck to water. Neither I nor my wife had any background with horses, but our daughter was captivated and formed a real bond with the horse. It is quite incredible and joyful to see her on a horse, concentrating on what she is doing and on the direction of the instructor as she guides a horse around the course, making it trot and being very much in charge. I remember going up to the stable on one occasion to find her being given a frightening-looking instrument to hoick stones out of the hooves of a horse. My daughter was cheerfully doing that—something I would never have attempted.

I was a practising solicitor at the time, and my wife—rather ironically, perhaps—had been a teacher of children with special educational needs, yet we had difficulty. Negotiating the system and securing education that was suitable for our daughter. We first had to obtain a record of needs, which, at that time, was a passport to the provision of the educational resources required. It sounds easy, but we faced the apparent reluctance of professionals to give a clear diagnosis of what was wrong with our daughter. That is an experience that many other Members have described. The education department involved said that a child should not be labelled; the cynic in me wonders whether that was because once a record of needs had been granted, the facilities would have to be put in place and costs incurred.

After that, we needed to find a suitable school. We looked at many before we found one that we felt understood the difficulties and offered a way forward. It was not within our local authority area, although it was close to our home, and we had to negotiate around that to ensure that funding was available. A deal was done, which required us to arrange transport to the school ourselves. That school made a great difference to our daughter. It was a small school attended by other children with special needs, and it had an excellent speech therapist. Our daughter flourished, and, as I said earlier, it was there that she got into horse-riding.

Are things better today? Yes, I think they are. Are they perfect? No, of course they are not: there is a huge amount still to be done. As some of my hon. Friends have pointed out, the Scottish Government have a strategy for autism, which is a real attempt to bring services together and ensure that autistic people are given the assistance that they need. That does not apply only in the public sector, but I should mention that in Arbroath we now have a fantastic community dentist. We had great difficulty in persuading anyone to look at our daughter’s teeth, although not because it was thought that she might bite them if they tried! The community dentist, however, had been trained in providing dental care for autistic people. Our daughter was introduced to the dentist’s surgery gradually: she was taken into the waiting room first, and was taken gradually onwards. The dentist managed to look at her teeth, and they were fine, which is just as well.

As I have said, however, the Scottish Government’s strategy does not involve just the public sector. A few years ago Aberdeen airport introduced a similar scheme, allowing autistic people to visit the airport and become used to it before their first flight. Cinemas and theatres are now putting on special shows for autistic people: the sound is lowered and the lighting increased to make the experience easier. However, difficulties remain, and many other Members have spoken of them.

In my experience, the transition from education to life after education is very difficult. In many instances, there are not many facilities for autistic people. It can be very difficult, especially in rural areas, to find somewhere to move on to after school, and the future is uncertain when it comes to such matters as housing. At our age, our thoughts begin to turn to what will happen when we are gone. What housing and other help are available to people like my daughter, who will never be able to lead an independent life? All authorities must consider that growing problem.
If there is one thing that I would ask of those who are watching the debate, or who will read the report of it, I would ask them to get hold of the National Autistic Society’s excellent booklet. The next time they see a child being loud or inappropriate, or a parent having difficulty controlling a child, they should not assume that it is a case of bad parenting or bad behaviour, as my constituent Karen said. Something else may be going on, and it could well be autism.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), and the other sponsors of the debate, on enabling the House to discuss the important issue of autism. Let me echo a remark that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We have heard many excellent speeches, but I am particularly grateful for the contributions of Members who have shared their experiences as parents of children with autism. That added greatly to our discussion.

I welcome one of the central calls in the motion, the call for an enhanced national awareness campaign. Raising the profile and public understanding of autism would break down some of the stigma, tackle the prejudices, and make it easier to explain autism to those who remain unaware of the realities of the condition. I pay tribute to the charities working in this field, including the National Autistic Society, Autistica, and Ambitious about Autism, which are fighting for people with autism and their families. They are campaigning for proper diagnosis, decent treatment, social acceptance and full, productive and dignified lives for people with autism. I also commend the many organisations, campaigns, towns and cities that are doing so much to raise awareness. There have been many contributors to the debate, but I have only eight minutes so I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I do not mention them all.

The National Autistic Society has brought some important survey evidence to our attention. It has already been mentioned in the debate, but it is worth reiterating that although almost the entire population of this country has heard of autism, only 16% have any real understanding of the condition. That reveals a huge gulf between awareness and understanding, which is why a national campaign to develop better awareness of the realities of autism would be a welcome development. It should be led by, and involve fully, people with autism and their families, so that the campaign can be authentic and focus on the issues that really matter. Research by Ambitious about Autism has highlighted two specific audiences for such a campaign: teachers—40% of whom say that they lack the knowledge they need—and employers and jobcentres. While 99% of young people with autism say that they want to work, only 15% of adults with autism are in employment.

It is clear that people with autism and their families face terrible prejudice and stigma. The figures in the National Autistic Society survey show that too many people with autism and their families feel socially isolated or do not go out because they are worried about how the public will react to their autism. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) shared the fact that people do not understand what a meltdown is. People are sometimes asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism. This paints a picture of social isolation and daily humiliation. Autism is a condition in which people have difficulty interpreting the world around them, and that is compounded by the reactions and hostility of other people.

It is obvious that we are a long way from having public spaces that are safe for all people with autism. I welcome the fact that my own city, Liverpool, has started a bid to become one of the first autism-friendly cities, but we need to become an autism-friendly nation.

Luciana Berger: The second substantive part of the motion relates to the Department of Health. Will the Minister tell us what efforts individual Departments and agencies beyond the Department of Health are making to support people with autism and which Departments and agencies have an up-to-date strategy for dealing with autism? What commitment will he make today to ensure that any that do not have such a strategy will adopt one?

The second substantive part of the motion relates to the length of time it takes to diagnose someone with autism. Many Members on both sides of the House have talked about this today. Autism requires an early diagnosis to enable individuals with autism and their families to be properly supported. As we have heard, however, adults are having to wait more than two years for a diagnosis, and for children, the figure now stands at 3.6 years. On my weekly visits across the country, I hear many of the stories that have been echoed in the Chamber today. In my own city, Liverpool, there are no fewer than 700 families waiting for an assessment. That is totally unacceptable; it is far too long. The long wait compounds the condition and makes a bad situation worse.

I have heard at first hand from the Liverpool Autistic Children’s Alliance, a parent support group that meets in my constituency, the difficulties experienced while waiting for a diagnosis, particularly in relation to education. The parents talk about not getting an education, health and care plan and therefore having no access to training to help them to support their children. They also speak of challenges in accessing appropriate education. We have heard that the NICE quality standard on autism makes it clear that people should wait no longer than three months, once referred, for their first diagnostic appointment. That standard is clearly not being met across the country, meaning that thousands of people are being let down. Given the importance of prompt, accurate diagnosis, I hope that the Minister will commit to asking NHS England to report on autism diagnosis waiting times for every clinical commissioning group in
the country and then to hold them to account when the waits are too long. I hope that he will also ensure that NHS England’s new autism care pathway includes and reduces those diagnostic waiting times.

Research presented by Autistica and drawn up by the London School of Economics shows that the costs associated with autism are more than those of cancer, heart disease and stroke combined. They are at least £32 billion a year and include expenditure on hospital services, home healthcare, special educational facilities and respite care and lost earnings for both people with autism and their parents. Despite the costs, the outcomes for people with autism remain so poor. We heard during the debate about co-morbidities, extremely high rates of mental illness, poor physical health, social exclusion, lack of opportunities for employment and education, and, tragically, early deaths. Several contributions discussed the amount spent on awareness, but research also has the power to improve all those poor outcomes. Research spending on autism remains incredibly low at just £3 million a year, which is paltry given the scale of the challenge.

As shadow mental health Minister, I am aware that mental illness is also a huge challenge for people with autism, who are far more likely to have at least one mental health condition. The burden of anxiety and depression on people with autism is vast, about which we heard many personal accounts during today’s debate and which I hope the Minister will address in his remarks.

I will conclude on an important point about the fact that too many people with autism in our country are dying too young. The figures are startling. If we look at the research that was in the press only a few months ago, we see that people on the autistic spectrum die on average 18 years earlier than the general population.

For autistic people with a learning disability, that figure rises to 30 years. That cannot be acceptable in this country in 2016. People with learning disabilities are at greater risk of suicide, and the most disturbing statistic is that the risk of people with autism committing suicide is nine times higher than that for the typical population, which is a scandal. I raise it during this debate because, as we have heard in some contributions, it is a particularly specific and pertinent issue that needs addressing, particularly in the light of the fact that suicide prevention organisations are not providing autism-appropriate services. From representations from many autism organisations, I know that phone lines for those who might be having suicidal thoughts are not appropriate for someone with autism. I hope that the Minister will address suicide prevention strategies and ensure that they are appropriate for people with autism.

I welcome today’s debate and its many superb, thoughtful speeches. I hope that the families listening to our discussions will feel that we are addressing their many concerns. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

3.23 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): It is just about 24 years since I first walked into Richmond House as Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the then Department of Social Security. In that time, I have had the privilege of being involved in many debates that belie the common view outside this place that we either know nothing about a subject or are not personally involved and do not care. I would put this debate right up there with the very best that demonstrate that neither of those things is true.

We have heard remarkable speeches, including 25 Back-Bench contributions, which is a tribute both to colleagues and to the Chair. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned, it is impossible to cover everything, or even everyone’s speech, as we normally do, but the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Angus (Mike Weir) were particularly noteworthy in giving a sense of what things must be like. We are indebted to all of them for being able to say what they said in the way that they did.

I want to mention a couple of other speeches, such as that of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I am trying to do something about the fog, and I will mention that a little later, and many of us heard the moving and difficult story of the nine-year-old boy. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) talked about the media response, and both the programme and the book he mentioned will make a significant contribution. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for the way in which she brought the young man’s case to me, and I assure her that it is not all done and dusted yet. Some very difficult aspects of that case worried me hugely, and we will be talking about it further. I made absolutely certain that the parents were involved in the case review, because, as she and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, all too often people are not involved and are somehow excluded, and that has got to stop. It is vital that people will be thoroughly engaged.

I wish to start by commending the Member who moved the motion—I cannot remember who that was now. [Laughter.] Let me add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on the extraordinary work she has done over the years in this area. We really are all indebted to her. In a recent Adjournment debate, I recognised the need for a fuller discussion and mentioned that we could do with this debate, and I am grateful that we have had that opportunity today.

A number of hon. Members have highlighted the importance of recognising that autism is not a person’s defining characteristic. Many colleagues, particularly those with children, made moving points about the qualities that autistic people have, and that is very important. In a couple of weeks’ time, I am going to the Hitchin LEGO club, which was started by parents of a child whose particular skills related to detail and the bits and pieces the club does. I am looking forward to going to see that. It is important that we do not just define people in this way, and the changes we make every day to attitudes, services and facilities can mean the difference between ambition thwarted and opportunity fulfilled. The best campaigns, at least those intended for the benefit of the common good, are led not from the top or from some central point of government, but by people on the ground.

Autism awareness is being addressed directly by the National Autistic Society in its excellent new campaign, which was launched during world autism awareness
week and to which I gave my support. I went to see not only the little boy who is the subject of the film, but his family, because there are often siblings of those who have autism and they need to be cared for and valued as well. Sometimes issues can arise in that regard. It was nice to see the whole family and it is a remarkable piece of film. I also wish to highlight the work the Department of Health has taken forward with the Autism Alliance UK, a large network of autism charities, on the “Connect to Autism” project, which encourages local organisations, services and companies to become autism champions by training staff in autism awareness—there is a lot more to do.

I have no time to deal with all the subjects that have been raised, but in accordance with what has become my usual practice, because I seem to speak in vastly oversubscribed debates, I will pick out the questions that colleagues have raised and answer them by letter. If colleagues do not mind, I will answer them in the same letter and then put a copy in the Library, so that everybody will get a chance to see all the answers to the various questions that have been raised, which my hard-working team have noted. Let me just say a couple of things in answer on the key issues of what the Government are doing, and of diagnosis and data.

First, although it is easy sometimes to be overwhelmed by what there is still to do, it is important to recognise where we have come from—many Members made that point—and to realise what we are doing on a day-to-day basis. I commend to the House the “Progress Report on Think Autism: the updated strategy for adults with autism in England” which was published in January. I put that together along with the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), the Minister for Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who deals with prisons, probation, rehabilitation and sentencing. It sets out progress across 33 of the “Think Autism” actions and describes some of the work going on across government, because it absolutely involves education, employment and all sorts of other things. The report details case studies and it demonstrates what is being done in different places around the country.

Let me come straight to the challenge of diagnosis, which is so important to many Members. There is no doubt that, in some parts of the country, the demand placed on services—it is often the sheer weight of numbers—means that the NHS and its partners can struggle to meet the standards set out by NICE. The Department of Health’s mandate to NHS England for 2016-17 calls on the NHS to reduce health inequality for people with autism. Waiting too long for a diagnosis can be one of the health inequalities that autistic people face. The mandate has already got that, and it is very important that it relates to autism.

Clinical commissioning groups and NHS England are working to bring down the waits in line with NICE guidance. What is happening is that the Department of Health and NHS England, supported by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, have initiated a series of visits to CCGs and local authorities. The visits aim to develop a better strategic oversight of the challenges in securing timely diagnosis across all ages and to share good practice. In essence, that means that we should look at the variability in diagnosis times and do something about it. Sometimes there is an issue of capacity. It is not a question of just pulling a lever and the waiting times will come down. For waiting times to make any sense, we must recognise the capacity to deal with them. NHS England is trying to understand the difference in variation in order to do something about it.

NHS England will complete its work this month and then report to the cross-Government Adult Autism Programme Board in June. That report and the discussion at the board will be made public. The Department of Health is also funding the University of York to report on the type of support that is available after a diagnosis.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) asked that NHS England should collect, publish and monitor key information on how long people are waiting for diagnosis and how many people are known to their GP to have autism. She said that waiting times standards on mental health, which are currently in development, should reflect national guidance that no one waits longer than three months between referral and being seen for diagnosis. I can assure Members that I am keen to ensure that we collect more data and that the data are made public. I am keen that the NHS collects what is known locally and finds a way in which we can use that nationally. New datasets have been put in place—I will say something about them in a minute—but it is important that we acquire more data. I have been made aware of that matter and I am trying to do something about it.

Norman Lamb rose—

Alistair Burt: I will take just this one intervention, because I am on a tight timetable.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister consider setting a maximum waiting time standard of three months to enter diagnosis? We all know that once we set a standard, the system responds to it, and we need that for anything to change.

Alistair Burt: I do understand that, but, equally, the capacity has to be there to do the job. It is a fine balance. To set a waiting time limit as some sort of token, knowing that it cannot be reached, would not work. Equally, the pressure on the system through collecting data, asking for data, and seeking transparency has its effect as well. There is a real sense in the Department that we have to meet that challenge, and I am looking at what data can best be collected, what data need not be collected centrally, but can be handled locally, and how we make the difference and how that is transparent and made known.

The Department of Health does not set out how NHS England should monitor waiting times. How NHS England holds commissioners to account is for it to determine, though it will need to demonstrate effectiveness in meeting the mandate requirement through which we expect NHS England to strive to reduce the health gap between people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism and the population as a whole.
Even now, in the configuration of the NHS, the NHS does not directly report to me on this particular issue. I am really interested in how the NHS ensures that CCGs are doing their job, and I suspect that Members of the House are very interested, too. I can use that concern and interest and make sure that that monitoring job is done and that it is transparent.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned GPs. GPs already maintain a register of people with learning disabilities, which may include patients on their lists who also have autism where this has been diagnosed. As a number of Members mentioned, autism may not be the only condition that an individual may have.

The Royal College of General Practitioners’ autism initiative, part-funded by my Department, is looking at the idea of an autism indicator in general practice. That work is at an early stage. I hope that is helpful to my right hon. Friend. As recommended by the independent Mental Health Taskforce, the Department of Health is developing a five-year plan for the development of mental health data, to be published by the end of this year. The plan will set out future data requirements and timings for developing data to inform pathways of care, which will include data requirements for autism. This will be of great interest to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree, and I will make sure that she keeps up to date with data, as she keeps me up to date with data requests.

This has been a terrific debate which has covered many different aspects. To sum up, autism should never be a barrier to enjoying the access and opportunity afforded to others. The National Autistic Society, the Autism Alliance, the all-party parliamentary group on autism and many other charities are doing great work, helping more of us realise that sometimes we are the barrier, beyond legislation. It is only through empathy and understanding that true progress can be made and sustained.

Finally, there are two quotes that everyone should take from this debate—first, “Everybody feels like it’s a fight.” I have heard that too often, as too many of us have. Everything the Department does must make that sense of fight a little easier, until no one needs to fight because their needs are taken for granted. Secondly, “Think differently about thinking differently”—absolutely. That is what we should all do. I hope that that is a message from a very consensual House of Commons this afternoon.

3.36 pm

Mrs Gillan: The debate has had an instant effect. A green card was brought to me with the message, “Thank you so much, but please don’t let it just be kids, kids, kids. Don’t forget the older adults.”

This debate has brought out the best in Parliament and in parliamentarians across the board. There have been important contributions and some amazing personal testimony from Members who are clearly concerned about the subject and about what is happening to their constituents. There is no doubt that progress has been made, but the theme of the debate has been that there is not enough support and understanding. That has come across only too clearly.

I thank all the colleagues who have participated in the debate. I know that the Government are listening. I raised with a Cabinet Minister the lack of people on the autistic spectrum being put forward for public appointments. Yesterday I received a letter saying that he had asked the Centre for Public Appointments to work with Departments across Whitehall to improve diversity and the representation of autistic candidates. That means that people on the autism spectrum can achieve right to the top of our system.

I thank the Minister particularly for his assurances on data collection. I look forward to reading his letter, which he is placing in the Library for all of us. I thank him for the work that he has done but, more importantly, I thank him for the work that is yet to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that World Autism Awareness Week was held from 2 to 8 April; believes that there is a lack of understanding of the needs of autistic people and their families; and calls on the Government to improve diagnosis waiting time and support a public awareness campaign so that people can make the changes that will help the UK become autism-friendly.
HMRC: Building our Future Plan

3.38 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs’ (HMRC) plan Building our Future which will close most of its offices and make substantial staffing reductions; is concerned that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes the plans were issued by the Customs, rather than via a ministerial statement; and that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes that these plans were issued by the Customs, rather than via a ministerial statement; and that these plans were issued by the Customs, rather than via a ministerial statement.

On 12 November 2015 Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs published departmental plans for the future structure of HMRC, entitled “Building our Future”. It is important to note that the plans were issued by the Department, rather than via a ministerial statement. That is unsatisfactory, given their impact, which includes the closure of 70% of the office network and thousands of staffing reductions.

In 2005, HMRC employed approximately 105,000 staff; in 2016, the figure stands at approximately 58,000—an almost 50% reduction. The Building our Future plan seeks to close almost all the 160-plus HMRC offices and to move to 13 regional hubs and four specialist sites. It seeks to make further job cuts to bring the headcount down by 8,000, to 50,000, although some information suggests the intention is to reduce staffing levels to 41,000.

The timeline for the proposals is in two phases: in the first phase, HMRC proposes that 21 offices are to be vacated up to March 2017; in the second phase, 27 office closures are to take place between June 2017 and March 2018. HMRC will in future be based at 13 large offices and four specialist sites, where 95% of the staff who remain after the cuts will work.

On 16 February, HMRC issued compulsory redundancy notices to 152 members of staff, 70% of whom are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union. That is the biggest number of compulsory notices issued in a single instance by any UK civil service department.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): My hon. Friend will be aware that 11 of the compulsory redundancy notices have been imposed on constituents of mine who work at the Glenrothes HMRC office, which is scheduled to close in June. When the closure was announced, staff got the same assurances that are being given to current members of staff, but the PCS told me that, in practice, their members—many of whom had given 30 or 40 years of dedicated service to the public—were made to feel they just did not matter. Part-time workers were asked to accept relocations that would have meant they spent longer commuting than at work. Employees with care commitments were expected to work more than two hours away from their home, where they might be called to an emergency. It was even claimed that the distance they were told they would have to travel between Glenrothes and Edinburgh was based on a straight line, but it was impossible for them to take that route unless they swam across the firth of Forth. Has my hon. Friend any reason to believe that employees who are currently being threatened with redeployment or redundancy will be treated any better than my constituents have been?

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—[Interruption.] Well, we will call it an intervention. He is right to be concerned about some of the practices we are hearing about from trade union members and staff members based in HMRC. People are being called into one-to-one meetings where they are denied trade union representation. If an employee is having a meeting with a manager to discuss their job prospects, I would expect the trade unions to have access to that meeting, but they do not. Perhaps the Minister can deal with that. I will come later to the issue of travel times.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is my understanding from my experience as a trade union rep that it is compulsory to consult the trade unions when redundancies are announced, and that members of staff are entitled to have representation.

Chris Stephens: That is also my experience from when I was a trade union rep. We need to clarify that point, and I hope the Minister will do that.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that some people are receiving redundancy notices by email—not even face to face?

Chris Stephens: That is an interesting point, given that we had a debate yesterday about e-balloting and trade unions’ right to access email for a ballot. It seems it is okay to issue a compulsory redundancy notice by electronic means. Perhaps the Government will take that into account when they discuss the Trade Union Bill.

We believe that HMRC and the Government want to send a signal using the 152 staff facing compulsory redundancy to demonstrate exactly how they will go about the mass office closure arising from the Building our Future plan. We find this to be unacceptable and not acting in good faith.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend and others on securing this debate. Does he share my concern that a number of the arguments we were given in 2014 for Scotland remaining in the Union are beginning to unravel? We were told that
separation shuts shipyards; that our heavy industry, such as the steel industry, would be at risk; and that a major benefit to the Union was having the civil service employees in the United Kingdom and Scotland. Now it seems that the case is unravelling on all those points.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend raises a fair point in that some workforces were told that offices would close if they voted for independence. To be fair, in my experience, workers in the shipyards and at HMRC came to an individual choice on the referendum. I do not think those scare stories were necessarily accepted by many parts of the workforce. However, again we hear the use of rhetoric around the constitution to say that places will close. We will find that it is not an independent Scotland that is closing those offices but a Tory Government.

In preparing for this debate, I came across a debate on the then Inland Revenue from over 30 years ago in the other place. A contribution by Baron Houghton of Sowerby, a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and chair of the Inland Revenue Staff Association, stood out:

"the human factor is the ultimate right...and there is no substitute for it. No computers will deal with taxpayers who require consideration and attention, and to whom some measure of discretion or of consideration may be due."—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 July 1983; Vol. 443, c. 1199]

Those words are as appropriate today as they were in 1983. They seem to me to be part of an ethos that all of us, across parties, should endorse as a cornerstone of public services. Sadly, those behind HMRC’s Building our Future plan are taking the wrecking ball to those foundations and not just demolishing the future of HMRC’s buildings but hammering the staff, the taxpayer, and the public. If they are allowed to proceed, towns and cities across these isles will be at the forefront of yet more ideological austerity. Hard-working and conscientious staff will once again be expected to clean up the mess, and taxpayers will foot the bill for the short-sightedness and short-termism of successive governments and Treasury Ministers. HMRC is not building a future—it is destroying it.

Fifteen years ago, the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise combined had 701 offices across the country. Today we are being asked to accept that the 13 centres proposed by HMRC can possibly replicate that kind of coverage. Is there anyone who believes that the citizens of Penrith can better be served from Redruth, compared with Carlisle; those in Portlethen who invent catchphrase after catchphrase on regional policy—from the northern powerhouse to the midlands engine—are intent on such a centralising agenda. They may well ask why they are being shunted into sidings, rather than providing an express service to their communities.

I am sure that colleagues will touch later on the impact the closures will have on their constituencies, so I will not dwell too long on the specific towns and cities that will be hit, or on how hard they will be hit.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of service will not only be geographic? Specific services are being abandoned. For example, HMRC has recently announced the abandonment of its valuation check service for small and medium-sized enterprises, thus completely compromising employee share ownership schemes.

Chris Stephens: I am aware of that and I hope to touch on it later. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Middlesbrough has the third highest unemployment rate in England, and nearly 3,000 people are already on the dole in Bootle, while Derry has the highest unemployment rate of any constituency. To see those places on a list guaranteed to create job losses at HMRC and in the wider community is to see a plan that will, in the words of the Public and Commercial Services Union, “consciously increase unemployment in areas which are already employment blackspots.”

I suspect that the word “Mapeley” will come up in the course of this debate, so let me touch on it. I referred earlier to the more than 700 offices formerly used by HMRC. Mapeley Estates snapped up more than 130 of them for its offshore property portfolio after loading itself up with debt in order to front up its side of this rotten charade with the then Government: 84% of the funding that Mapeley obtained to acquire that lucrative contract came in the form of loans. That shabby deal with a shabby company comes to an end in 2021. For the privilege of renting publicly built offices sold off for a song, HMRC will have the “right to occupy buildings, with leases based on market terms” after that date. That is very generous of Mapeley.

In truth, a look at the latest staff satisfaction survey from HMRC unfortunately makes this all too easy to believe. It would make some informative bedtime reading for those behind this closure programme. Fully 2% of staff strongly agree with the statements “I feel change is managed well in HMRC” and “When changes are made in HMRC they are usually for the better”, while 6% strongly agree that “I would recommend HMRC as a great place to work”, and 3% strongly agree that “HMRC as a whole is managed well”. On measure after measure, time after time, staff at HMRC are shown to be demoralised, demotivated, and depressed.

What other outcome in staff morale could result from the shuttering of office after office around the country? How enthused would anyone be knowing that, in a matter of months, their workplace is to be closed and that they and their friends and colleagues are to be relocated miles away? I suspect that if those behind this scheme were to be told tomorrow that their palatial offices were to be shuffed off from London to Norwich, Peterborough or Harwich—a journey that staff in these offices will be expected to do in reverse from next year—a murmur or two of discontent may well escape from their lips. Staff are entitled to ask exactly why a Government who invent catchphrase after catchphrase on regional policy—from the northern powerhouse to the midlands engine—are intent on such a centralising agenda. They may well ask why they are being shunted into sidings, rather than providing an express service to their communities.

I am sure that colleagues will touch later on the impact the closures will have on their constituencies, so I will not dwell too long on the specific towns and cities that will be hit, or on how hard they will be hit.
[Chris Stephens]

I commend the National Audit Office on its 2009 report on the deal. It is redolent with phrases such as, “the Department has not achieved value for money...The Department did not fully appreciate the risks...The Department has not had strong processes to monitor the overall cost of the contract and whether it is achieving value for money”.

The Exchequer Secretary admitted to this House last year that the end life of the Mapeley contracts represented a “one-off opportunity to make this change to the estate footprint.” — [Official Report, 24 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1300.]

That is part of the truth behind the closures—a private finance initiative deal worth billions from the public purse, used to enrich a Bermuda-domiciled corporate entity, with the public left with nothing at the end of 20 years, except the right to sign a commercial lease.

I will end with the words of a PCS member and HMRC employee, my constituent Bobby Young, who is chair of the PCS Revenue and Customs branch:

“Whilst my branch welcomes the news of a slight increase of jobs in Glasgow, we absolutely oppose it if it comes at the cost of jobs elsewhere. Communities from Bathgate to Bootle will be devastated by these closures—that is not a price worth paying for jobs elsewhere. Communities from Bathgate to Bootle will be devastated by these closures—that is not a price worth paying for jobs elsewhere.

If anyone should know about prices, it is an employee of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Sadly, it seems that their superiors know very little about value.

3.54 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow——

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Could I just suggest that we try to aim for between five and six minutes, in order to give everybody the same amount of time?

Valerie Vaz: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assume that that was an intervention, so I will get an extra minute! I thank the hon. Member for Walsall South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this Backbench Business debate, and, of course, the Backbench Business Committee.

This is an important debate. The Government can raise money in three ways: create it, borrow it or raise taxes. The main purpose of HMRC, the subject of the debate, is to collect taxes. That enables the Government to take back what they have spent on public services. I want to focus on whether HMRC works, where it is going and what can be done to change it to make it more accountable.

The governance arrangements are quite bizarre, for a democracy. Given HMRC’s importance in collecting taxes, the fact that it is a non-ministerial Department is incongruous. There is no Minister to hold to account on behalf of the people for whom it ostensibly works. It is governed by a board, on which four out of five non-execs are from big business. There is no representation from pay-as-you-earn taxpayers, of which there are 31 million, or even from small businesses. There appears to be no accountability and no acting in the public interest. That needs to change.

From the Occupy movement at St Paul’s in 2011 to the Panama papers, the public are becoming more aware of what happens to the tax people pay—or, in fact, do not pay. They are becoming more aware of the fact that after a few lunches, large corporations can get the light-touch treatment. Google paid the equivalent of 3% in corporation tax. In 2011, Starbucks paid no corporation tax. Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you know the joke about people who wanted to raise awareness about the fact that Starbucks was not paying tax. They would go in, ask for a coffee and say that their name was “no tax”, so that the barista who came back with their coffee would call out, “Coffee for no tax!” That has had a huge effect on making people aware that Starbucks was not paying any money.

It has been pointed out by the International Business Times that Shell, British American Tobacco, Lloyds banking group and Vodafone all paid nothing in corporation tax. You will remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the former head, David Hartnett, had 10 lunches with KPMG, and it had its tax liability reduced. It even has a non-executive representative on the board.

Where is HMRC going now? As the hon. Member for Glasgow South West suggested, the document is called “Building our Future”, but its subtitle should be “Tearing it down”. I concur with him. The future of the country really depends on the amount of tax that is put back into the economy in Britain. Instead of investing in people who have skills, expertise, a commitment to public service and institutional memory, HMRC is reducing that capacity. In 2005, it had 105,000 members of staff, but in 2016 it has only 58,000. That is a reduction of nearly 50%.

HMRC is closing 170 offices, presumably to sell off the public estate to developers, and replacing them with 13 regional tax centres; actually, they are call centres. It plans to save £100 million, but it could recoup that if it closed the tax gap. I do not know whether you know this, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the tax gap is the difference between the tax owed and the tax collected. In 2013-14, it amounted to about £34 billion, and I think the current figure is about £25 billion. That is a lot of money.

Since 2010, only 11 people have been prosecuted by HMRC, despite the fact that it was given a list of 3,600 British people who hid their money in Switzerland. Revenue and Customs has not quite worked out that if it has more staff, it can collect more tax; and that the more people it employs, the more tax they pay and contribute to the economy. No wonder the wealthy—the 1%—are laughing all the way to the Cayman Islands.

The closure of the offices is having a direct impact on my constituency. Walsall faces the closure of its HMRC office, with the loss of 60 staff. My constituent Sahin Kathawala has said that she may not even qualify for one of the relocated jobs. If they are lucky, staff will have to go to Birmingham, where rents are higher so it will be more expensive to live there. It will be more expensive for staff to travel to Birmingham, so they will incur certain costs. My local people in Walsall South will have to telephone a call centre, rather than being lucky enough to have face-to-face contact like that between Dave Hartnett and KPMG. The Public Accounts Committee said in 2013 that the telephone services were absolutely abysmal, and The Telegraph reported that half of all calls to HMRC were not answered. The impact of that could be millions of people paying the wrong amount of tax.
This week in Walsall, we have had the news that BHS might close, and who knows what will happen to our local BHS. With the closure of the HMRC office, nearly £1 million will be lost from the local economy, which Walsall cannot afford to lose.

PCS says that the plan is designed not to maximise tax collection, but to reduce spending, which is the opposite of what HMRC’s main objective should be.

What can be done? I do not know if you have read “The Joy of Tax” by Richard Murphy, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is very much worth reading. I think it should be required reading for everyone, including sixth-formers. In his books on making economics easy, which we should all read, Ha-Joon Chang says that people do not need to be economists to understand economics. Richard Murphy has said that HMRC should become a Government Department in its own right, subject to proper parliamentary scrutiny and to independent review.

We need to retain our local tax offices with local staff who have information about the local economy; stop the relocation until an equality impact assessment has been done; and invest in more staff. HMRC must reduce the tax gap, not the workforce. In that way, we can stop the outflow of capital and give back to the public purse all it is owed. After all, it is the Government who put in the investment in education, skills and infrastructure that enable communities, companies and the workforce to thrive.

4.1 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for bringing forward this debate. The issue of tax avoidance has obviously been highlighted in the House by the recent publicity over the Panama papers. It is beyond doubt that powerful individuals in the UK have been shamefully implicated in those documents. These people want to keep their offshore tax affairs a secret. Let us be quite clear: both rich individuals and organisations are using trusts and shell companies in places such as Panama and the British Virgin Islands for one purpose and one purpose only—they hide their financial assets from the tax authorities of the countries where they actually live and do business. It then becomes extremely difficult or, indeed, even impossible for tax collection agencies such as HMRC to collect accurate levels of tax on their wealth.

To be effective, HMRC requires the recruitment, training and retention of skilled and experienced tax professionals. They are the very people who make sure that the Government have enough money to pay for schools, hospitals and pensions. It is in this context that the current misguided reorganisation of HMRC needs to be understood.

Since the Government came to power in 2010, they have invested vastly greater resources in pursuing benefit fraud than in going after the real villains—those who funnel billions of pounds out of our country. Figures show that 10 times more Government inspectors are employed to investigate benefit misuse by the poorest in decades of loyal service—are being abandoned by an organisation to which they dedicated their whole careers. At Caledonian House in Dundee alone, there are 10 couples affected by those compulsory redundancies. We should be doing all we can to support them and stand up for their jobs.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Offices in my constituency are going to be moved to Edinburgh, as are many others in West Lothian. I am sure he will share my concern that the number of redundancies in February was the biggest ever across the civil service, and that carers and people with disabilities are being disproportionately affected by those compulsory redundancies. We should be doing all we can to support them and stand up for their jobs.

Chris Law: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. At a time when this is still in consultation, the forced redundancies coming through are an absolute shame and embarrassment for all of us in this House.

Relocating HMRC to regional centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh will mean not only job losses in Dundee, but a loss of boots on the ground, and will diminish the capacity for public contact anywhere north. For example, Aberdeen has paid more than £300 billion from its oil resources into this Government, yet there is not going to be an HMRC office there, and the largest growing city in Europe, Inverness, will not have any representation—not to mention the rural areas in between. It is essential for HMRC to offer its clients access to skilled,
trained staff based in the local area. Speaking from previous business experience, I know what a struggle it can be getting through to HMRC on the phone; what sort of business will we come to expect? I have to share a story I have heard just in the past 10 minutes: one of my colleagues has tried eight times to pay a bill that is due and still cannot get through.

No one in their right mind would argue that it would make sense to have just two huge hospitals in Scotland, one in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow. If the NHS can maintain internationally recognised standards of service in thousands of clinics and hospitals around the country, surely it is possible for HMRC to do the same in a network of fewer than 200 local offices.

To return to my earlier point, the Panama papers have dramatically drawn attention to a fact that has been emphasised over and over again in this House, by colleagues from all parties, namely that sufficient resources need to be dedicated to HMRC so that it can scrutinise sources of income to ensure that the tax due is paid. It is clear that to do this we need HMRC offices all over the UK, staffed by experienced tax officers with local knowledge. No one would ridicule the Government for making a U-turn on HMRC’s Building our Future plan.

HMRC has the potential to become a paradigm of self-sufficiency, a public service that pays for itself. That idea is certainly less far-fetched and counter-intuitive than the measures currently set to be put in place, which are designed to boost, yet again, the income of companies based in offshore tax havens.

4.8 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for bringing this issue before us today.

For my constituency of Bootle these proposals are little short of disastrous—although I do not think they are proposals, as I fear that the Government have already made up their mind. At the same time, they have simply washed their hands of the matter, on the grounds that the reorganisation of HMRC has nothing to do with them. They want us to believe that HMRC is a sort of offshore haven, outside the Government’s control. I know that HMRC collects taxes on their behalf, but that is stretching the notion of a tax haven just a bit too far even for this Government.

Not only are the Government completely uninterested in what they cannot control, but they now seem to be in the business of being uninterested in what they can. They have put up a firewall between themselves and any decisions about the reorganisation, on the grounds that it is not a matter for them to interfere with. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) alluded to that. The Government believe that the HMRC board should be allowed to get on with things, unbridled by any political considerations that it might fall foul of. To put it another way, the Government have reached for the Treasury’s bargepole and are pushing this issue away from themselves.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman agree it is extremely ironic that at the same time as the Government want to maintain an arm’s-length relationship between the client and HMRC, the relationship between HMRC and big businesses—including big, tax-dodging advisory businesses—is at a very short arm’s length?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman’s point is spot on, and in future we must try forensically to consider those connections.

I previously used the word “pusillanimous” to describe the Government’s past actions, and given the circumstances I thought that was a reasonable way of describing their approach to this issue. This issue affects the lives of thousands of dedicated civil servants up and down the country, but the Government’s claim that it has nothing to do with them rings hollow. On one hand the Government feel that the operation and reorganisation of HMRC is its business, and that they should not interfere as a matter of principle—in other words, senior civil servants and the board can just get on and do what they want, and the Government will remain silent. That is disingenuous at the very least. In short, the Government are ducking their responsibilities again.

On the other hand, like a medieval baron, the Government want to interfere in all sorts of matters that take their fancy. Only yesterday they decided that their attempts to interfere in the running of trade unions was a mistake, which led to a retreat to save the Prime Minister’s bacon and get trade union support in the referendum. The Government also feel able to interfere in the organisation of schools, how they are run, and who will or will not run them at a very local level—almost school by school. However, on a major issue to do with tax raising revenue in this country, they are silent because that is for someone else to deal with. That is not acceptable. The “nothing to do with us” old chestnut will not wash.

These proposals directly affect my constituency. HMRC has been sited in Bootle since the 1960s. There are a number of offices, with other Departments in situ employing more than 3,000 staff. That number is falling day by day. In 2005, HMRC employed 105,000 members of staff, but that number continues to fall. The so-called Building Our Future programme—a misnomer if ever there was one—seeks to close almost 160 HMRC offices and relocate them. A more accurate description would be “Demolishing our Future”.

Apparently, HMRC has criteria by which it chooses which offices are to close, but no account is taken of the impact of those closures on local communities like mine, which have thousands of jobs dependent on the service, the wider impact on the community’s social cohesion, or the effect on the many local businesses that serve those offices. I had a meeting with senior HMRC staff, for which I thank them. However, the criteria that they indicated had been used to inform the closure decisions did not on the whole stand up to much scrutiny for the offices in my constituency.

Let me give some examples. The HMRC staff talked about transport links needing to be available and robust. The Bootle office is three miles from Liverpool city centre where the new office is to be sited—I am not sure whether that site is even available yet. Bootle has excellent bus links across the city region. Indeed, there is a main bus interchange literally 200 yards from one of the main offices, and just a few hundred yards from another one. Both main sites are similarly close to five stations on the Northern and Ormskirk lines. Those stations have excellent
cross-city region links, and are no more than 10 to 15 minutes ride from Lime Street station in the city centre, where apparently the office is to go. We are close to the city centre, yet the Government are saying that transport links are essential and therefore the office must be in the city centre.

No discussions have been held with the passenger transport authority in Merseyside, or with the Cheshire or Welsh transport authorities. I mention the Cheshire and Welsh authorities simply because if a substantial part of the decision is based on transport links—among other things that I do not have time to touch on now—the fact that we have not even discussed those links with the area’s transport authorities throws into doubt the robustness of the plan. Consultants were paid a huge amount for this plan, and we should get our money back from them because they pinched it from the taxpayer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. With three speakers left, if Members stick to exactly five minutes each, we will get everybody in.

4.15 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I will certainly stick to five minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate. I heard the intervention from his colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), about Scottish independence. He will forgive me if I do not agree with him, but that is a debate for another day.

It is difficult to follow the logic of the Government’s decision to close HMRC offices. In Northern Ireland, six offices are to close and everything is to be centralised in one office in Belfast. The office in my constituency is in Enniskillen. To anyone who thinks that people could easily relocate to Belfast from Enniskillen or surrounding areas, I point out that it is at least an 80-mile journey—in some cases, a 100-mile journey—to the office in Belfast. It is impractical, even impossible, for relocation.

I cannot follow the logic, particularly given that Northern Ireland is the one area of the UK with a land border with another EU state. HMRC is vital, especially in places such as Northern Ireland, where the smuggling of illegal fuel is a huge business. That major issue cannot be dealt with from just one office. We have to look at this in a more practical and sensible way. The end result of the closures will be a loss of jobs and services to the community. HMRC, not the Police Service of Northern Ireland, has the lead in dealing with smuggled and laundered fuel in Northern Ireland. How will it do that away from the border areas it is supposed to work in?

Another significant impact will be the loss of help desks—some offices have already lost them. It is a major blow to communities. I will cite one example, around foster and kinship carers, who now must register as self-employed. These people, providing a vital service to our community, do not want to be tied up with form filling and filling in tax returns every year. They might have a few accounts here but I do not have to tell Members the prices they charge. These people do not need that. Yes, the service is available online, but not everyone can use it online.

We hear about the telephone help desk. The Minister tells me that HMRC’s telephone communication service is an increasing choice for inquiries. Well, why would it not be, if it is the only choice? He also tells me that HMRC is improving the telephone service and that it now answers 80% of calls. What happened to the other 20%? He also tells me that the average queue time is 12 minutes, so I guess that some people wait 20 minutes, and probably some of them hang up. If that is the best we can do, for a front-line service, it is extremely poor and makes the argument, which I and my colleagues are making, that we should keep the offices and the front-line desks to help and support the community.

4.19 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and others on securing this debate. I am proud to have added my name to the motion.

HMRC has been dismantling its services in Wales for over 15 years. Where there were previously 21 tax offices in towns and cities across the country, it is now proposed there will only be one, in south-east Wales.

HMRC’s Porthmadog office in my constituency is one of those threatened by the latest round of closures. This is the home of the Tax Office’s Welsh language unit and of needs enhanced service staff. It is well placed to contact and retain fluent Welsh-speaking staff, and offers a naturally Welsh-speaking workplace. Needs enhanced service staff, by the nature of their work, have to be close to the clients whom they need to visit in their own homes. This service and, of course, the Welsh language unit serves the region of Wales where demand for Welsh language services is at its highest.

As one of the users, I would urge every Welsh speaker, even those who lack confidence to use the language to discuss financial matters, to take advantage of these services, because English words can always be dropped in as well. This is good not only for the good of the language, but particularly because the Porthmadog staff are excellent at their job.

Beyond Porthmadog’s limited Welsh language remit, HMRC’s commitment falls far short of the statutory requirement to treat the Welsh and English languages as equal when providing public services in Wales, particularly as regards the opportunity for businesses and charities such as chapels to have access to services in Welsh, as is their right. To be honest, the proposal that the service can be maintained just as well in Cardiff needs to be questioned. The county of Gwynedd is home to 77,000 Welsh speakers, 65.4% of the county’s population. Cardiff has fewer than half that number of Welsh speakers and, of course, is a capital city where those speakers are not so concentrated. HMRC is intent on moving the service from a rural region where Welsh is the language of everyday life and civic administration, to an urban centre, 150 miles and over four hours’ drive away—about as far from the great majority of its Welsh-speaking users as it would be physically possible to go and still be in Wales.

If the Porthmadog office building itself—Mapeley’s Ty Moelyn, I might add—is the problem, I would strongly urge the Government to look at alternative sites in that area and to urge HMRC to do the same.
I have corresponded with the Financial Secretary on a number of occasions, requesting that this be done. Porthmadog county councillor Selwyn Griffiths and Town Councillor Alwyn Gruffydd have met the Under-Secretary for Wales, following a public meeting and petition earlier this year. Discussions have been held with HMRC’s regional implementation lead officer, and I am—I hope—right to be quietly optimistic.

The DWP office in the same town is perfectly suitable to house the Porthmadog HMRC staff, as is the Gwynedd Council-owned canolfan galw Gwynedd, nearby in Minffordd. Both these offices are excellent Welsh-language workplaces, ideally placed to attract and retain experienced Welsh-speakers in the area where Welsh is both a community and professional language. This is an important point. Although Cardiff might look like an ideal centre for Wales, if we want to keep good staff, who are used to working in the Welsh medium and want to work in Welsh-speaking workplaces, this is the ideal place to locate and keep them. Simply closing these offices will also be a body blow to plans to devolve tax powers to Wales.

On the one hand, the Tory Government extol the virtue of Wales taking more control over our taxes—something that Plaid Cymru, of course, warmly welcomes, as we have done for years—yet on the other hand, the means of administering these powers is being systematically reduced. The level of reorganisation proposed should be subject to proper public and parliamentary scrutiny at the UK level, and I welcome today’s debate, but there are specific issues unique to Wales that must be addressed before any final decisions are reached.

First, we must recognise that increasing Wales’s fiscal powers will require increasing staff capacity, as opposed to moving jobs across the border and centralising down in south-east Wales. Secondly, an independent economic assessment of the impact of moving HMRC’s Welsh language unit and needs enhanced service jobs from Porthmadog to Cardiff must be undertaken. Thirdly, HMRC must work with the Welsh Language Commissioner to undertake a language assessment of the impact of moving these jobs from a Welsh-speaking community in terms of their effect on the rights of Welsh-speaking taxpayers and Welsh-speaking staff. Finally and most importantly, HMRC officers must consider alternative locations in the Porthmadog area, including co-location with Gwynedd Council or the Department for Work and Pensions, in order to agree a cost-effective solution to retain jobs in the area.

I urge the Government to commit to reconsidering the impact of HMRC proposals on their services in Wales, their services to Welsh speakers, their services to the nation as a whole in the light of the devolution agenda and the significance of well-paid public sector jobs to a low-wage economy such as Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

My constituency is home to one of Scotland’s best-known tax offices, Centre 1. My home town of East Kilbride is synonymous with personal tax affairs, which, indeed, are part of its identity. My own grandmother worked for the tax office there 30 years ago. HMRC is a major employer, and the movement of thousands of jobs from my town would be a massive blow to the local economy. The announcement of the planned closures of three sites has created anxiety and uncertainty. Only last month it was announced that the archive site at Hawbank Road would close by 2017; the Plaza Tower is to close by 2021, and Centre 1 by 2026.

The closure of the Hawbank Road site is particularly distressing given the timing of the announcement, and there are also real fears that the process of closures may be speeded up if lease terms cannot be agreed at what will be the last remaining site in East Kilbride in 2026. Despite reassurances from the Government, I have not been kept up to date on the status of the lease negotiations, and, again, I ask the Minister for that information.

Staff members to whom I have spoken have voiced their concern about the closures. They worry about the impact of a further staffing reductions on their ability to do their jobs well. They worry about having to travel to a new, unknown site, and about the difficulty of finding suitable childcare, given increased time away from home. They are significantly concerned about the lack of consultation, and about the effect of the proposed changes in the civil service compensation scheme if they lose their jobs. Thousands of those people both live and work in East Kilbride. They are integral to our economy—they spend money in local shops during their lunch breaks and after work—and their families are part of our community. If we are to promote economic growth in my constituency, we need to encourage companies and services to move to East Kilbride, not to leave it. “East Kilbride, here for business” is one of my main mottos. The Government must understand that if the site is closed, our local economy will be at real risk.

A few weeks ago, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland to conduct an impact assessment of the closures. He assured me that no action would be taken without full consultation of all those involved, but that does little to allay the fears of those who will be affected, or to give any hope that the areas that will lose such vast work forces will be supported. What we require is a full impact assessment.

The staff at HMRC are specialists in their field and take pride in their roles, but decisions such as these have a detrimental impact on morale. They create staff stress and anxiety. HMRC staff should be supported so that they can do the vital work of ensuring that tax income is maximised to pay for our essential public services, rather than being left to worry about their jobs and their future while plans are put together that jeopardise their ability to do their jobs well.

HMRC’s Building our Future Plan seeks to uproot staff from their established bases and communities, and to centralise them in the already well-equipped population centres around the country. The plan has been subjected to no robust parliamentary scrutiny or comprehensive consultation. My constituency can ill afford such a blow. I urge the Minister and HMRC to suspend the plan, to work with the dedicated staff at HMRC sites across the country to ensure that any proposals that are
presented in the future address the revenue collection needs of the country, to conduct impact assessments, and to engage in comprehensive consultation and scrutiny.

Let me paraphrase the words of Oscar Wilde. To lose one site would be unfortunate, but, under this Conservative Government, to lose two or three sites in my constituency is nothing but extreme carelessness.

4.29 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate. There have been plenty of thoughtful and, indeed, robust contributions so far, with Members—notably all on this side of the House—doing their best to scrutinise the general principles behind HMRC’s proposals as well as individual local proposals. I shall add my tuppence-worth in a moment. What shines through in this debate is the frustration, which I share, at not having enough information or attempts at justification to enable us to do our job of scrutinising the proposals thoroughly at a strategic and local level.

Whatever view people might take of these proposals, they are certainly radical. As we have heard, thousands of jobs could be lost and a 93% cut in the number of HMRC offices could be implemented. This is not tinkering around the edges in any way, shape or form. It is therefore not only right but imperative to ask questions about how such cuts and closures will impact on HMRC’s ability to collect taxes and tackle tax dodging, particularly at a time of huge public concern over that issue in the light of the Panama papers. It is right that we should ask about the consequences for the towns and cities in which tax offices are marked for closure. It is also absolutely right that we should pose some of the many questions that the hard-working, dedicated and expert staff in our constituencies have raised.

Perhaps the Minister will be able to answer some of our questions today, but I must emphasise that debates alone will not be enough. We need the people behind the proposals to come here to explain them directly to Parliament. That would allow Members to get stuck into the nuts and bolts and to get behind the management-speak and buzzwords that are too often passed off as answers. If that does not happen, staff and taxpayers will be left questioning whether HMRC is really “building our future”, as the glossy brochure states, or whether this is in fact a question of buildings forcing our future. It has already been pointed out that this is taking place in the context of the expiry of the extraordinary contracts that were entered into in 2001, when 600 or so properties were sold to the offshore company, Mapeley Steps, and then leased back, PFI-style, to HMRC. Those contracts expire in the years leading up to 2021. In the absence of answers to our questions, many will conclude that this is more about digging HMRC out of the hole that it jumped into in 2001, rather than being about any kind of strategy. That is the only conclusion open to us.

The remaining questions are many and varied, but I shall get down to the basics of the issue. Why is 13 the magic number? Why are 13 offices preferable to 30 or 50? Why is the sensible range of hub sizes calculated at 1,200 to 6,000 staff? And if that size of office is perfectly reasonable, why should offices such as Cumbernauld, which are within that range, have to close? Does the proposed configuration take suitable account of the expertise and local knowledge that can be built up by having a presence across the country? For example, the offices in Aberdeen and Inverness have experts in oil and fishing. And does it take into account the expertise that will be lost through employees being unable to travel to new locations?

The brochures and press releases tell us that saving £100 million a year by 2025 is apparently the goal. We are told: “Moving more of HMRC’s work out of central London, which has some of the world’s most expensive office space, will enable HMRC to make substantial savings.”

How has that figure been calculated, particularly when HMRC does not know exactly where the new hubs will be? And how is the idea of moving out of expensive city centre locations consistent with closing offices in Cumbernauld, East Kilbride and Bathgate, for example, and centralising them in big prime city centre sites in Glasgow and Edinburgh? Can we see the sums?

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. On the specific issue of centralisation, virtually no work has been done in my constituency of Livingston to assess the impact of the proposals in relation to transport and travel. The distance between Livingston and Edinburgh is relatively short, but what about the people in Dundee who will be expected to travel? Is it not clear that this is an ill-conceived and ill-thought-out proposal?

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely.

We want to see the sums and the justifications for the proposals. Will each of these local decisions be revisited if the sums do not add up? Has the effect on local communities been factored into HMRC’s considerations? Does it feature at all? I have had a similar experience to that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), in that when I asked the Minister about this, his written answer stated simply that HMRC “will undertake all necessary consultations and impact assessment work to inform” its plans. No one is suggesting that any town or city where a public sector office is based can assume that the office will be there forever, but it is far from unreasonable to say that the local economic impact of office closures will be a significant factor in decision making, so what weight has been attached to that?

Most important to me and many MPs here are the questions of our constituents—the dedicated, skilled staff in the tax offices. They want to know whether jobs are moving with them or whether they are moving to new roles in a new location. HMRC claims that people will be better able to develop careers up to senior level, but my constituents fear that their good-quality roles will be replaced with poorer-quality work. How did HMRC calculate that 90% of employees will be within reasonable daily travel? Not only does it not know where offices will be, but reasonableness of travel does not just depend on distance but transport links, parking spaces, and accessibility. Will those issues be assessed on an individual basis?

For other staff, including a good number in my constituency, challenges arise through disabilities and care commitments. Why has HMRC not undertaken a
proper equality impact assessment of its proposals? Why did HMRC change its HR policy in February 2016, particularly when redundancies were on the horizon, so that union members, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West mentioned, were no longer entitled to take a trade union rep to one-to-one discussions?

Most concerning are the questions around the 152 compulsory redundancy notices that have been served. How can they be genuine redundancies given that the work that the employees are doing is continuing, that there are no immediate plans to close the offices, and that the Department has recruited over 1,000 new staff in other locations at the same grades? What is the explanation for that? Why will HMRC’s chief executive not meet the Public and Commercial Services Union about alternatives to compulsory redundancy? How can all that be happening while HMRC is apparently spending £1 million a month on overtime to mask staffing shortfalls?

Mark Durkan: At Foyle House in my constituency, staff are being made compulsorily redundant while other staff are being moved in from other locations, with it supposedly being used as a stepping-stone office. Those who have been told that they are being made redundant are being told that redundancies will happen on a workstream, rather than whole-office, basis. People are getting word week by week. HMRC calls that a plan, but it cannot tell people where they stand from week to week.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree. That emphasises that the sums do not appear to add up and the plan is not any sort of plan, but a desperate attempt to get out of the hole that HMRC got itself in back in 2001.

The debate has been helpful and provided another opportunity to raise questions, but it also highlighted that much more scrutiny and consultation are required if we are to understand properly what the plan means for HMRC, for taxpayers, for towns and cities where offices are situated and for hard-working employees. The case for cuts and closures has not been made. We no longer need glossy brochures and buzzwords, but hard facts, detailed scrutiny and genuine consultation.

4.37 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Well, Minister, it’s all a bit of mess, isn’t it? I congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) quite rightly mentioned the imbalance of resources devoted to benefit fraud versus tax evasion. To sum up what my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said movingly about his constituency: the Government are indeed uninterested.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) mentioned geography and spoke about foster carers as an example of people trying to help their community who need face-to-face access. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) mentioned the difficulty that Welsh speakers are likely to have with the relocation to Cardiff. Finally, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) quite properly pointed out the lack of an impact assessment.

The context of this is that HMRC is embarked on something called “Making tax digital”. The Chartered Institute of Taxation says that that promises significant potential benefits but that HMRC’s resources should not be cut further “before the full cost-savings that digitisation promises are being delivered.”

There is the rub. We see that under “Making tax digital” businesses will be required to update HMRC quarterly, via digital tax accounts. As the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, said in a letter to the Financial Secretary this week: “I understand that HMRC has recently clarified, for the first time, that businesses would be required not just to submit information to HMRC online once a quarter, but that they would also be required to do all their record keeping in a prescribed digital format.”

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—I suspect a similar situations pertains in Scotland and in Northern Ireland—found in its survey that 75% of all businesses and 82% of sole traders would need to change their record-keeping systems to comply with the Government’s new proposals for making tax digital.

As far as I can tell, HMRC is a mixed blessing on this—there is a mixed picture on digitisation. In a written answer to me on 1 February, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said: “HMRC’s Business Plan for 2016-17 is currently being finalised and will be published by the end of March 2016 on GOV.UK.”

That is an online publication, but unfortunately neither I, nor my excellent researcher, nor indeed the House of Commons Library, can find that document online. So if it is there, it is buried—not very good on digitisation there.

The office closures have been spoken about movingly today. They are happening all over the country and will make access for individuals much worse. We know that access by telephone has been appalling, although, to be fair to the Minister, with extra resources and extra staff, because of pressure from Opposition Members, that has improved somewhat. Again, the context of this is that we are trying to tackle tax avoidance, which we see in the Panama papers. HMRC staff are rushed off their feet now, so how are they going to deal with the fallout from the Panama papers? They are just not going to be able to do that. I would like the Minister to refer to that when he replies, because a similar situation applies in respect of the general anti-abuse rule that we hope we
are going to have to implement. I laud the Government on that, but staff will be required to enforce it; we do not have the enforcement if we do not have the staff.

The Office for Budget Responsibility made the following comments about the tax yield loss from Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man:

“HMRC is also now less optimistic about how much of the lost yield can be recouped through additional compliance activity, on the basis that they are unlikely to be able to work the higher number of additional cases on top of existing workloads.”

The OBR estimates that HMRC will now recoup £530 million, which is down from a previous estimate of £1.05 billion. Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face: cutting the number of staff and not being able to work the extra cases to get in the revenue. The staff would pay for themselves, and there are many, many studies to that effect.

All this comes coupled with a Government who have increased the size of the tax code by 50%. I understand that, as all Oppositions talk about simplifying taxation—it is the holy grail—but I am not aware of it happening in the 15 years since I first entered this Parliament. “Tolley’s Tax Guide” now runs to 1,500 odd pages, whereas it had 1,000 in 2010, so it is 50% longer. I am not saying to the Minister that we therefore need 50% more staff, but I think that most people would say, “If we are having more complexity rather than more simplification in tax, we probably need at least the same number of staff, with their expertise.” As it is, the number of staff in HMRC has plummeted in the past six years—some of this is a result of efficiency and some is because of digitisation.

Like all hon. Members, I suspect, I received a very helpful briefing from the Public and Commercial Services Union—PCS. I declare an interest, in that I am a member of the Unite trade union, and I am proud to be one. PCS represents more than 35,000 workers in HMRC, which is well over half the workforce, so I think PCS has some idea of what it is talking about. One thing it highlights is the lack of an equality impact assessment, which should have been done. There is anecdotal evidence—I stress that it is anecdotal—from London and the south-east of England that 40% of those being targeted who will not be able to transfer under this centralisation have disabilities. That may or may not be the case, but without that equality impact assessment we do just not know. Many staff with disabilities or with childcare or care for the elderly responsibilities will be disproportionately affected because the additional travel occasioned by centralisation—even if it is geographically possible which it is not in some parts of the country—will not be possible for them.

According to the PCS briefing, HMRC is not prepared to discuss the planned office closures with a recognised trade union, but it will discuss how those closures will be implemented. If that is the case, it is unacceptable. If that is really the Government’s view, they should put their money where their mouth is—I do not advise them to do this because it will be a lot more expensive in the long run—and de-recognise the trade union that represents more than half their staff, or they should comply with the spirit of the law and engage properly with a recognised trade union. They should have the one-to-one discussions, which were initially promised, but which are now being withdrawn in terms of having a union representative present. That is part of what union recognition is about—a person can have their union rep there when they have difficulties at work. The Government should be telling HMRC to do that.

HMRC is broadly going in the wrong direction. It is putting the cart before the horse. It is cutting staff—or proposing to cut staff—before there is any demonstration that digitisation is working smoothly. It should get it to work smoothly before it cuts staff.

Furthermore, making tax digital will increase costs for businesses, as they will have to put in information four times a year on new software and that will have a disproportionate effect on small businesses. With fewer staff, there is a reduced likelihood of success on tax avoidance and tax evasion, which, to be fair, the Government have done a lot about in the past six years, but they do need to do a lot more. These cuts will further restrict access to HMRC services for individuals and they will be further demoralising for a highly skilled workforce.

I say to the Government that there is a contradiction in what they are trying to do. Quite rightly, they are trying to make HMRC and its operations more efficient by using computers more. At the same time, they are saying that they need to centralise their offices. If computerisation works smoothly, they do not need to centralise geographically; they can do it in a dispersed manner, as is the case with the offices that we currently have, which the Government are proposing to close. I urge the Minister to think again.

4.48 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Back in November, HMRC announced important changes to how it would operate. Its aim was simple: to create a modern, efficient organisation that would continue to protect this country’s tax revenues, while, at the same time, providing better value to the taxpayer. HMRC is determined to make sure that it is better able to focus on its core priority—to bring in more revenue by tackling tax evasion and avoidance.

Since 2010, it has made real progress. For example, it has driven down the tax gap—the difference between what HMRC should theoretically bring in, and what it actually collects—from 7.3% in 2009-10 to 6.4% in 2013-14. That is one of the lowest rates in the world. To make the importance of that clear, let me put it this way: if the Government and HMRC had not taken action to achieve that, we would have collected £14.5 billion less in tax.

We are determined to transform HMRC into a more efficient, more highly skilled organisation, which offers the digital services people expect in the 21st century. That is why, in the spending review of 2015, we made the commitment to invest £1.3 billion in transforming the digital capabilities of HMRC. In this year’s Budget we allocated a further £71 million to help HMRC improve its customer services. By the end of this Parliament that will bring the change we need to make it quicker and easier for taxpayers to report and pay their taxes online. It will deliver a seven-day-a-week service, improved telephone services and reduced call waiting times, as well as dedicated phone lines for new businesses. This investment will pay off. By 2020, we expect HMRC to be saving £700 million a year, as well as delivering an additional £1 billion in revenue in 2020-21.
[Mr David Gauke]

The next stage of the plan to bolster HMRC and help it deliver more for less is to transform the estate through which it works. In 2010 we challenged HMRC to make savings. We asked it to reduce costs by a quarter and reinvest £917 million of those savings in making sure that more businesses and people paid the tax that they should, bringing in an additional £7 billion a year in 2014-15. HMRC delivered, making savings of £991 million, including reducing the cost of the estate. At the same time, it kept up progress in cutting the tax gap and improving customer service. So far from endangering our plans to clamp down on tax avoidance and improve customer service, as some have suggested today, these plans are crucial to those aims.

Let me remind the House that HMRC’s plans will generate estate savings of £100 million a year by 2025.

Patrick Grady: Will the Financial Secretary give way?

Mr Gauke: I have many points to get through, but if I have time I will give way.

When HMRC was formed in 2005, it had around 570 offices spread out all over the country—an inefficient way of doing business in the 21st century. Reorganising this network of offices was a priority even then, which is why, following a number of reorganisations, that number was reduced to around 390 in 2010. It now stands at around 170 offices, ranging in size from 5,700 people to fewer than 10. That is a start, but it is not efficient enough. The changes that we announced in November represent the next stage of HMRC’s estate transformation programme.

Over the next 10 years, the department will bring its employees together in large, modern offices in 13 locations equipped with the digital infrastructure and training facilities they need to work effectively. These new high-quality regional centres will serve each and every region and nation in the United Kingdom, creating high-quality, skilled jobs and promotion opportunities in Birmingham, Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Croydon, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Stratford.

There are significant advantages to such a system: the new offices will have the capacity to encourage people working in different roles, at different levels, to work more closely together, as well as providing more opportunities for them to develop their careers. The offices will be in locations with strong transport links and with colleges and universities nearby, to ensure a ready talent pool close by. In short, they represent the way business is done in the 21st century. HMRC expects the first centre to open by 2017, with the others opening over the following four years.

On the point about consulting HMRC staff, HMRC fully recognises that its most valuable asset is its people. HMRC can only do what it does thanks to its dedicated members of staff who bring in the money that funds our essential public services, as well as helping hard-working families with the benefits they need. That is why HMRC has kept its workforce fully abreast of all its plans to change how it operates, which were first announced internally two years ago. Since then, HMRC has held around 2,000 events across the United Kingdom, talking to colleagues about these changes. Everyone working for HMRC will have the opportunity to discuss their personal circumstances with their manager ahead of any office closures or moves.

I should remind the House that this is about changing the locations, not cutting staff. Indeed, the department’s policy is to keep any redundancies to an absolute minimum. HMRC’s analysis indicates most employees are within reasonable daily travel of a new centre, although that is subject to the one-to-one discussions which every member of staff will have about a year before any planned closure.

Let me pick up the point about trade union representation. One-to-one meetings are an opportunity for managers and staff to discuss how the proposals will affect staff, and HMRC will consult every one of its staff. Once decisions are taken, staff will of course have the opportunity to have representation. This is not a change of approach; these are fact-finding discussions with all members of staff to understand their personal circumstances. Trade union reps have never been in such meetings, but they will be involved, as they would normally, at a later stage.

Chris Stephens: My understanding is that, once there is an outcome at the one-to-one meetings, there is an appeal mechanism, but the trade union will not have access to that either. Will the Minister clarify that?

Mr Gauke: The purpose of the one-to-one meetings is to ascertain the particular circumstances of each individual likely to be affected by the proposals. From that, further proposals will come forward, and the usual trade union representation will be available to members of staff.

Since announcing its decision on the locations of its new offices in November, HMRC has been busy negotiating with suppliers, designing the look and feel of buildings, and planning how it will move its existing workforce. That has included one-to-one meetings with almost 2,500 members of staff who are most immediately affected, to look at their individual needs.

I stress that those are operational changes, decided at an operational, rather than a political level. Making changes to how HMRC offices are organised is an integral part of the Government hubs programme. It is essential to make the organisation fit to deliver better customer service, as well as to make it harder for the dishonest minority to cheat the system—and all at a lower cost to the taxpayer. That has the Government’s full support.

On staff engagement, HMRC staff are currently spread across about 170 offices across the country, many of which are a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, lack modern facilities and technology support, and do not reflect new ways of working. The current state of the estate is undoubtedly a factor in the levels of engagement from staff, many of whom look forward to working in new, modern, fit-for-purpose offices—the type of workplaces that will also help HMRC to attract and retain the skilled workforce it will require in the future.

There has been much comment about the Mapley contract entered into by the previous Government, and I for one am certainly not going to defend it. It is not a
good contract for the taxpayer, which is precisely why HMRC wants to get out of it. If we do not get out of it now, HMRC will be fixed in it for years to come.

On customer service standards, call handling last week was at 90%, and the average wait was six minutes, but we invested more money at the Budget to improve that.

On Welsh-speaking services, HMRC is committed to maintaining services in Welsh for its Welsh-speaking customers. The quality of those services must continue to be high, and HMRC is actively exploring the ways it can best achieve that.

If we want HMRC to do its job effectively, we must ensure that it is fit for the challenges it faces. We have to be willing to modernise, find efficiencies, target resources, and make long-term strategic decisions. That is precisely what HMRC is doing: transforming itself into a smaller, more highly skilled organisation with modern, digital services and a data-driven compliance operation that will deliver more for the taxpayer at lower cost. That is what HMRC is doing: transforming itself into a smaller, more highly skilled organisation with modern, digital services and a data-driven compliance operation that will deliver more for the taxpayer at lower cost. That is the policy it has embarked on, and I hope it will have the support of the House.

4.58 pm

Chris Stephens: I thank all those who contributed to the debate. They represented all the nations of the United Kingdom, because this issue affects all the nations of the United Kingdom. We heard some excellent points, particularly on HMRC offices being the largest employer in an area in many instances.

Let me say to the Minister that it is cavalier to suggest that employees dragged into one-to-one meetings are denied trade union representation, and he really should look at that. I would also say to him that the lack of parliamentary scrutiny on this issue has been shocking, and many of us in the House will continue to hold the Government to account on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs’ (HMRC) plan Building our Future which will close most of its offices and make substantial staffing reductions; is concerned that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes the plan should have been subjected to parliamentary scrutiny; and calls on the Government to ensure that Building our Future is suspended until a comprehensive consultation and review has been undertaken.

4.59 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity of this debate on this very serious subject. I am pleased to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who stands with me on this debate and also wants to speak about our mental health services in Haringey.

Let me state from the outset that I have the utmost respect for and gratitude towards all the staff working within Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust, who tirelessly care for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Not least among those is the trust’s chief executive, Maria Kane, who has been recognised by the Health Service Journal as a top NHS chief executive who was shown to be doing a stellar job in the recent BBC “Panorama” film, “Britain’s Mental Health Crisis”. They have all been asked to do, frankly, an impossible job in the constituency and in the London borough of Haringey, which has 12 of the most deprived wards in the country where 2,284 people are receiving personal independence payments, over 270 different languages are spoken, 1,334 people have had their benefits sanctioned, and 826 households have found themselves homeless in the past year. Social tensions are high, funds are tight, and there is an ever-increasing need for urgent help, from mental health services for children and young people to dementia services for the old.

I bring this debate to the House today because it is unacceptable that, despite the fact that mental health problems cost the economy £100 billion per year, three out of every four people with mental health problems in England receive little or no help for their condition. I suspect that that figure is far higher in my constituency, given the high level of need. Today in this country mental health problems are not just some form of rare disease. The truth is that one in every four people will suffer from mental health problems during the course of this year.

For the most greatly affected, mental health problems are fatal. It simply cannot be right that in our country in 2016 those who suffer from the most severe mental illnesses die, on average, 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population. I have already brought to the attention of this House the fact that, on average, an adult male in my constituency can expect to live to just under 75 years of age. It is a sobering picture, then, that the average age of a male suffering from a severe mental health problem in my constituency may be under 55. But premature death is not the only complication for my constituents suffering from mental health problems. The Mental Health Taskforce commissioned by NHS England in February this year found that men of African and Caribbean heritage are up to 6.6 times more likely to be admitted as in-patients or detained under the Mental Health Act 1983, indicating a systemic failure to provide effective crisis care for these groups. The taskforce’s draft report also revealed that men from these groups are, on average, detained for five times longer.
As mental health problems affect so many lives, 23% of the UK’s burden of disease is mental health. That figure is higher than the burden of disease in cancer or in cardiovascular disease, which stands at 16.2%. Why then do mental health services receive only 11% of the NHS’s budget? It is clear that institutional bias against providing proper care for people suffering from mental health problems persists in 2016.

It was as far back as February 2011 that the coalition Government published their strategy for improving the nation’s mental health, which stated the now much-trumpeted concept of parity of esteem—an idea that began with a Lords amendment from Labour peers in the other place. Then, the very first section of the coalition Government’s infamous Health and Social Care Act 2012, which contained the central duty imposed on the Secretary of State in relation to our treasured national health service, was amended to put these services on an apparently equal footing. However, the reality already facing mental health patients across the country in 2014 was something different: mental health funding was cut for the first time in 10 years, and there were fewer services for children and young people, fewer beds, and more people on acute psychiatric wards.

Many other strategies and documents were published, promising an improvement in services and repeating the mantra of parity of esteem, until the Prime Minister himself returned to the issue at the beginning of the year and finally announced some funding. However, given that the budget had previously been cut, I find it difficult to see how it was a net increase, not least given the pressures of an ageing population. The Prime Minister announced that those particular funds would be targeted towards helping new and expectant mothers with poor mental health and towards liaison between mental health services, A&E departments and crisis teams, but that is not what I am seeing on the ground.

As demonstrated so vividly in BBC’s “Panorama”, the truth on the ground could not be more different. Far from the level of funding being equal between physical and mental health services, or the gap decreasing, mental health hospitals have had far deeper cuts imposed on them. The reality is that 3,000 mental health beds have been cut across the country in the past five to six years.

However bleak the national picture, it does not get anywhere close to the gaping holes in funding for mental health services that face the patients of Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust. Despite the obvious and ever-increasing need, that trust, on top of the vast inequality between physical and mental health services, receives a lower share of income proportionately than any other mental health provider in London. It is hard to understand how an area that includes Tottenham and Haringey Mental Health Services: Haringey is that patients are condemned to treatment in a hospital that was designed to meet the needs of 19th-century fever patients, long before the discovery of antibiotics, rather than the delivery of therapeutic interventions appropriate to current patients’ needs.

Indeed, the most recent Care Quality Commission inspection found that “the physical environment of the three inpatient…wards” on the St Ann’s site was “not fit for purpose due to its age and layout. This impacts on the trusts ability to deliver safe services within this environment.” That is a problem that the site has tried to resolve on the 28-acre St Ann’s site over the last decade.

Finally, the trust submitted plans to develop the site last year. It hopes to fund a new hospital and other health services on one third of the site by building homes on the remaining land. I have to say that I oppose those proposals, because they include only 14% affordable housing, even though London has a housing crisis. Despite my objections, the trust was granted planning permission in March last year.

There is an alternative proposal—it is a great proposal, which needs support—to build a community land trust. That is exactly what successive Mayors of London have said they want to see. It would result in affordable homes being built on the site, it would be holistic and it would fit with the mental health plan. I hope that the Minister might take an interest in it and that the next Mayor of London, whoever that is, will also take an interest.

The trust’s plan would not require any capital from NHS England. I have to ask why, on this site and in this constituency, and given the circumstances in which the
trust finds itself, no capital is forthcoming from NHS England. It seems that the decision about whether to build a new hospital has, once again, been pushed by the Government into the long grass, and we have been given no date at all.

This debate about mental health comes on the back of a debate that I secured about the situation of primary care in the borough. I have raised both those subjects because I am seriously worried about health in the London borough of Haringey and in my constituency. Despite myriad problems, only 16 months ago the independent Carnell Farrar review of the affordability of mental health services provided by the trust found that there was no compelling evidence to support merging the trust with any other organisation; that the trust is relatively efficient; and that there is a clear case for clinical commissioning groups to invest in it.

I had hoped that that would mark the end of the speculation about the trust’s future, but the CQC report, published in March this year, of the routine inspection conducted in December 2015 gave the trust an overall rating of “requires improvement”. It is no surprise to me that that is the case, despite the efforts of staff and leadership, when funding is so tight and the level of need is so high. The CQC report stated that out of 11 areas, five required improvement, five were good and one was outstanding.

The report concluded that mental health admission wards for adults required improvement, community-based mental health services required improvement, child and adolescent mental health required improvement, specialist community health services for children and young people required improvement and crisis mental health, including home treatment teams, required improvement. Many detailed recommendations have been made by the CQC to improve services, but no extra money has been put on the table to enable the trust to comply.

I am grateful to the Minister for last week agreeing to my November request for a cross-party delegation of local MPs to come and discuss our concerns about the trust. Let me put on record what I call on him to do to help the trust, to ensure that the services that it provides are safe and that work begins to ensure true equality between physical and mental health services in Haringey. The context is important, not just because of the suicide rate in England—the number of suicides recently soared to 4,881 in 2014—but, most disturbingly, because the draft version of that report stated that had just £10 million extra been spent on services for people who were suicidal, 400 extra lives would have been saved. For the sake of £25,000, which is less than the national average salary, each of those lives could have been saved.

I call on the Minister urgently to look at the plans for the redevelopment of the St Ann’s site. I understand that the north London estates plan will be finalised by the end of June, and I seek an assurance that a decision, that the north London estates plan will be finalised by the redevelopment of the St Ann’s site. I understand that there was no compelling evidence to support merging the trust with any other organisation; that the trust is relatively efficient; and that there is a clear case for clinical commissioning groups to invest in it.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, are the Government monitoring the suicide risk of those facing homelessness? Secondly, is the number of housing related suicides being recorded and documented during the inquest process? Thirdly, what support are the Government giving to local councils to ensure that vulnerable adults with complex mental health difficulties do not face street homelessness?

I just want to mention two cases. The first is that of a soldier in the Army—he was in the light infantry—who did five tours in Northern Ireland and served in Bosnia. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, but on the same day that he was issued with a section 21 notice he attempted to take his own life. Luckily, he was unsuccessful. He wrote to me that “facing homelessness was the catalyst to me taking the action that I did”.

The second case concerns a young woman constituent who was victim of child sexual abuse. She suffers from a dissociative disorder, and has spent three years battling the CCG to get the therapy that she needs to handle her complex mental health problems. Her battle continues, and she is still without the support that she desperately needs to deal with the trauma of her past.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be very impressed to know that the community is working very hard on this problem. That involves not only me, my right hon. Friend and local councillors, but Mind in Haringey and an individual by the name of David Mosse, who leads on the suicide prevention plan for Haringey. As I am sure the Minister knows, not one borough in London yet has a comprehensive suicide prevention plan that challenges all the agencies to take responsibility for trying to prevent suicide. As we speak, David, as a concerned resident, is leading a session to try to secure best practice in Haringey by bringing all the agencies together to prevent suicide. That is a very exciting development. I just wish we could match at the statutory level what the community, Mind, the suicide prevention team, parents and carers are doing.
A charter for better mental health services has been developed locally with some wonderful family carers and service users. Their demands are very clear, and I will send the Minister a copy of their charter. They want community mental health teams to be less overstretched, and they want effective early intervention. They recognise the desperate shortage of acute psychiatric beds—capacity is frequently 128%, which is over-capacity—and they basically want enough hospital beds to be available locally. As my right hon. Friend has said, we believe in community approaches to sorting out mental health problems, but we all accept that there are times when, even with the best will in the world, people need to be hospitalised for certain treatments. The idea of switching things into the community is laudable, but we need beds for the moments when acute care is necessary.

Another demand is for the crisis response service to be more fit for purpose, with an effective and accountable emergency crisis response. In the case mentioned by my right hon. Friend, the young man attempted to take his own life because of the domino effect: it was the emergency crisis response not being adequate, the ambulance service not being adequate and the fact that no bed was available that led to his attempt on his life.

Finally, the last three issues on the charter are that the route into admissions needs to be clearer for patients and carers, that there is a lack of suitable housing for vulnerable people after they have been in hospital and that carers feel that they are not listened to.

Will the Minister touch on preventing suicide through better homelessness options? Unfortunately, the moment when certain individuals receive their section 21 notice from a housing provider, meaning that they are going to be made homeless, often coincides with an attempt at suicide. I have quoted the cases of a man and a women from my constituency who have each been affected, but we know that, sadly, suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45, across the country. That is a very sad note to end on, but I look forward to the Minister’s response.

5.20 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate on an issue that I know is important to him and his constituents. I thank him for his courtesy in letting us see a copy of his speech; that was much appreciated. I also thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for raising the issues that she did.

I have to say that I have a soft spot for Haringey. Shortly before I first came to Parliament, 33 years ago, I was in the Hornsey and Wood Green Young Conservatives, and was a councillor in the London borough of Haringey, which taught me a great deal about the issues faced by an outer London borough with inner London problems. I still very much remember that time and the work that was done by very good councillors who were trying to do their best in that area.

My speech will necessarily be short, but I say right at the beginning that I share the concerns expressed by both colleagues. I will ensure that the meeting that the right hon. Gentleman was looking for takes place. He raised a number of detailed current issues in Haringey, which really need the specialist advice of those involved in the NHS and the clinical commissioning group. Unfortunately, it has not been possible for them to find time to speak to me in the last couple of days before this debate—I appreciate that it has been a very busy time in the NHS—but I know that they will find time, at the senior level, to meet him, me and others at Richmond House, at a time that we will put together as soon as we can. That will enable us to go into rather more detail on some of the issues that I simply will not be able to touch on today.

I share the right hon. Gentleman’s passion, which he illustrated very well in his speech, about these important issues. Some raise national issues; I will touch on those briefly, as they are important. I can understand his frustration about hearing comments made from a Dispatch Box about national amounts of money and then seeing what happens locally. I have got used to going round the country, talking about what successive Governments—in particular, the coalition Government and ourselves—have done and how there has been an increase in investment, and hearing people say, “Well, not round here, there hasn’t.” That is a very real issue: we must make sure that what we commit to flows through to the local NHS and CCGs. We are on to that in terms of monitoring and transparency, and can discuss it further when we meet.

I am very proud of what we are currently doing on mental health. We are investing unprecedented amounts, with spending expected to increase to £11.7 billion. CCGs are required to continue increasing their spend on mental health each year, and we are watching them. We have committed to investing £1.4 billion on children and young people’s mental health, and eating disorders. That will be spent by the end of this Parliament. The Prime Minister has said that an additional £1 billion will be spent to improve perinatal health, mental health liaison and 24/7 crisis care; I am grateful for the welcome that the right hon. Gentleman gave to that. Mental health really is a priority for all of us.

We have had the conclusions of the Mental Health Taskforce. The Department has accepted the recommendations directed at ourselves, as has the NHS. I am making sure that there is transparent delivery, and there will be constant reference back to the recommendations, so that people will be able to see what is actually being done, in order to counter the scepticism.

As for what the hon. Lady said, first, the issue of suicide is extremely important. I have asked for local suicide prevention plans to be revamped. We have a national suicide prevention strategy, but we do not have local suicide prevention plans in every area. That will change. She is right to talk about the link with homelessness. We need to do much more, and I am grateful to Samaritans, Cruse and all those in our national health service and other agencies who work hard on this issue. Crisis care concordats are in place everywhere—that was one success from the time of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—and they have placed a renewed focus on crisis and suicide prevention. I am glad that the hon. Member mentioned carers because they are also important. Indeed, she could hold an entirely separate debate on those three issues, and I urge her to secure one so that we can discuss them.
In Haringey we introduced the first waiting time standards for mental health, starting with psychological therapies this year. Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust exceeded the standards for improving access to psychological therapies, with 90% of patients treated within six weeks of referral, and 99% within 18 weeks. In February 57% of patients referred for early intervention psychosis received treatment within two weeks, which exceeded the minimum standard set at 50%. This is not as simple as pulling a lever because capacity must be built up over time—that is something we should discuss. I, too, watched the “Panorama” programme, and the Haringey example well illustrated the national pressures.

One of the three priorities in Haringey clinical commissioning group’s health and wellbeing strategy 2015 to 2018 is improving mental health and wellbeing. In Haringey an estimated 3,000 children and young people have some kind of mental health problem at any time, and more than 34,500 adults have a common mental disorder such as anxiety or depression. About 4,000 adults with a severe mental illness live in Haringey.

Over the next three years the CCG aims to ensure that people living with mental illness experience a more seamless service from hospital to GP. It intends to strengthen support for people to manage their mental ill health in primary and community care settings. Just over £34 million funding has been awarded to mental health services in Haringey—an increase of 9% since 2013-14. Of that, £31 million is for Barnet Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust. In 2013 to 2014, compared with 11 other CCGs in north and central London, Haringey spent the fifth highest proportion of its budget on mental health.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned St Ann’s and in-patient mental health beds have reduced there, as they have over the whole country in line with national policy. That has taken place as more appropriate alternatives have been developed in the community, and the trust has used a number of private bed placements owing to capacity constraints. The trust is also operating at extremely high levels of bed occupancy, and it is working with the CCG to reduce that. There will be a new development at St Ann’s hospital, for which an outline planning application was given in March 2015. NHS Improvement is working with the trust and its partners to develop a strategy for mental health estates across the sector, and we can discuss that in more detail.

I do not wish to conclude without mentioning equality and diversity. We know that different ethnic groups have different rates and experiences of mental health problems. Black people across Barnet, Enfield and Haringey were the subject of four times as many applications to be detained under section 2 of the Mental Health Act in 2014-15 as they constituted a proportion of the population at the 2011 census. The trust’s rate is broadly in line with national data and reflects a wider challenge that is the subject of extensive national research and action.

Our commitment to tackling inequalities in access to mental health services is set out in the mental health action plan “Closing the Gap”, published in January 2014, and the mental health taskforce made that a central issue in its recommendations. This week I met a group to discuss issues of equality and diversity in mental health. It was the first meeting that I have had on the back of the mental health taskforce, illustrating the priority that I attach to the issue, and we are working up some proposals for that. Along with our commitment to the other recommendations, the right hon. Gentleman will not find us lacking in commitment to deal with this issue, and I know how important it is. We also want to ensure that BME communities have access to more important psychological therapies, and we are working with the sector to find out why they have had less access to them, and what we can do to change that.

We have heard about the challenges facing mental health services in Haringey. The Government are committed to transforming mental health, and ensuring that patients receive the best treatment. I mentioned our initiatives at local level, and it is clear that Haringey is working hard to address those challenges, but there are many. Therefore, when we get together with a group of MPs and senior representatives of the NHS and trusts, we will discuss this matter with a little more time and detail. I look forward to that meeting, and will do my best to help the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady in their quest to support their constituents still further.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm  
House adjourned.
Dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Jim Shannon to move the motion, I must explain that we are having technical difficulties. The debate is hugely over-subscribed—many people want to speak—so it is likely that after Jim Shannon has spoken I will impose a time limit. However, there is no connection between my clock and the clock on the wall, which is going to be a difficulty for speakers. When Jim Shannon has spoken, I will explain what we are going to do.

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.

I thank all Members who have very energetically turned out in large numbers to support this debate. I am going to keep my speech to 15 minutes to give everybody else a chance to participate. I thank the shadow Minister for being here, and it is good to see the Minister in her place. We always get a good response from her, so I look forward to that.

Yesterday, we had a digital debate in preparation for this debate, and I have got some stats to give hon. Members an idea of how it went. It was organised by Lucinda Blaser and the staff of my office. We reached almost 3 million Twitter accounts, and a total of 1,100 tweets were sent throughout the day. There was an enormous amount of interest outside this House in yesterday’s debate, and the same is true of today’s debate.

I want to speak about the issues that concern me. It is hard to find someone whose life has not been touched in some way by Alzheimer’s or dementia. People up and down the country—unfortunately including many in my constituency—are affected by those indiscriminate diseases. Alzheimer’s and dementia know no class, colour, creed or gender; they can affect any of us. It is extremely important that we have this opportunity in Westminster to discuss advances in ways of tackling the disease.

This debate raises awareness and puts the issue of dementia and Alzheimer’s on the agenda for the whole of the United Kingdom. All Members will bring their own knowledge of this subject to the House. We will hear contributions from Members from across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

According to the Alzheimer’s Society, our ageing population will increase the trends. In 2015, 720,000 of the 856,000 people known to have dementia were in England. 45,000 were in Wales, 70,000 were in Scotland and 21,000 were in my home nation of Northern Ireland. In my trust area, which includes Lisburn, North Down, Down and Ards, the level of dementia is 25% higher than that of England after age standardisations. We have a higher level of dementia and Alzheimer’s in my constituency than anywhere else in Northern Ireland.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this absolutely vital debate. This is not just about the total number of cases of dementia that are now being registered; it is about the increase down the line. In my constituency, we are looking at an estimated increase of 30% over the next five years in reported dementia cases. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the increasing incidence of dementia?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely on the button on this issue. Very quickly on the figures, because stats can sometimes overawe us, it is estimated that by 2025 1.1 million people will have dementia and Alzheimer’s, and by 2051 2.1 million people will have the diseases. The numbers are enormous.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on such an important topic. On the increase in numbers, does he agree that some vital work is being done on mitigating the symptoms of Alzheimer’s, not least in many care homes and residential homes in my constituency? Equally, we have to focus on palliative care for people with Alzheimer’s at the end of their life.

Jim Shannon: I was going to come to that issue. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is not just about the diagnosis of dementia and Alzheimer’s, but about the follow-up, the path of care and how we help the whole way through. I will touch on some of those things later in my speech.

We must not abandon or diminish our efforts to find a cure. We have to take into account the reality we face and carefully plan for the future, so that all those with dementia and Alzheimer’s can get the care and support they so desperately need. As the hon. Gentleman said, that is the issue we have to address.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): We are talking about end-of-life support, but we have to take a practical approach. One of the charities in my constituency—Community Concern Erewash—has a project to dementia-proof houses in Erewash to help people in the early stages of dementia stay in their houses for longer. They are doing things such as labelling drawers and rooms, so that people know exactly where they are and can navigate their house for longer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such practical measures will make a difference?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The simplest things can make a difference. It is about improving quality of life and letting people with dementia and Alzheimer’s have a life with their families.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He makes a very important point, which is that we are concerned not only about those with the condition, but about their carers, of whom there are now 750,000. Does the hon. Gentleman agree—I have been talking to my local Alzheimer’s Society about this—that we have to...
ensure that we have information and provide access to support and networks so that carers do not feel isolated, as they often do?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. In the digital debate yesterday, there was mention of the clusters for those caring for people with dementia. There are 82 across the UK mainland, including some in our area and in Scotland and Wales. Lots of things are happening, and we need to see them develop.

To be fair—I know the Minister will say this in her response—the Prime Minister made very good comments about the 2020 challenge on dementia, which contains some marvellous things that can pave the way forward. The simple things can really make a difference and change people’s lives easily.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the hon. Gentleman for securing this very important debate. He is talking about getting the simple things right. In the Medway towns, we have dementia cafés—one is located in Medway—where families and sufferers can be brought together to share their experiences and get the support they need in their local area, which is absolutely vital at that time.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): This is such an important debate, and it is really important that we air all of these issues. It is about the simple things in many cases, but it spreads across a wide network. One of the respite centre residents of Dementia Care—an excellent charity in my constituency—was recently admitted to hospital for a routine procedure but was not released from hospital until 3 am, which threw their entire programme for the next day. More carers were needed to get them back into a routine. Simple things make a huge difference to such people and those who care for them.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady speaks with knowledge. I thank her for that contribution.

There are ten key indicators of the quality of life of people with dementia: communication difficulties; relationships; environment and surroundings; physical health; a sense of humour; independence; a sense of personal identity; the ability to engage in activities and the opportunity to do so; difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing; and, of course, their experience of stigma. All of those things are important.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. As he draws these strands together, there is one problem that we should focus on. Local authorities have many statutory responsibilities, but as a result of the significant cuts to their budgets, these areas—they are not statutory responsibilities but, as a number of colleagues identified, they play a huge role in enabling people to manage their condition, stay active for longer and provide respite for their carers—are being cut back, which will ultimately have a long-term cost for the health service.

Jim Shannon: Obviously, the right hon. Gentleman has a focus on the issue. We will throw that ball in the Minister’s direction and perhaps she will answer that as well.

Dignity and quality of life are far too easily taken for granted, but simple things are so often lost when someone is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or dementia. To do what we can to facilitate a better quality of life for those who through no fault of their own are so diagnosed is what I hope we came to this House to do—to make a difference. Yesterday, it was deeply encouraging to see from the digital debate how many bodies are active in the field of dementia and Alzheimer’s.

There are many issues to consider as part of dementia awareness, although one that is often overlooked is sight. I met an optician from Newtownards last week, and what I learned prompted me to mention the subject now. All too often, it is assumed that someone with dementia will gain no benefit from a sight test and vision correction, simply because they have a cognitive impairment or might not work, drive or read. Good eye health and good vision, however, can play an important role in supporting the wellbeing of a person living with dementia. Again, I ask the Minister for a better strategy. I know that opticians’ organisations would be happy to assist. Good vision can greatly increase a person with dementia’s sense of independence, allowing them to continue to participate in daily tasks and activities and in obtaining a good quality of life.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman intend to cover why there is an increase in dementia? Many of us are dementia friends, but why is there an increase in this awful illness? Do we know?

Jim Shannon: I would need to the wisdom of Solomon to answer that question. Personally, I do not know; perhaps it is society or how we live. People are living longer and, by the very nature of living longer, we have such problems. There are probably a number of issues involved and reasons for that. However, early diagnosis, follow-on care and end-of-life care are fundamental.

There is a need to raise awareness among people with dementia and their carers about the disruptions to vision and eye health that might be concurrent with or arise from dementia. We therefore need to emphasise the importance of regular sight tests and eye examinations.

The Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation has done some interesting and outside-the-box things for people living with dementia. Along with partners, they have delivered a dementia-friendly swimming initiative, which is steadily expanding across the country. That is an absolutely fantastic way to help improve quality of life. It is amazing how not-for-profits are putting in the hard graft to make heart-warming things such as that happen, often with no funding. It is amazing what a group of dedicated, selfless individuals can do, as has been mentioned.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I apologise for missing his opening remarks. Will he take the opportunity to commend the many local communities that have sought dementia-friendly status, meaning that a visit to the shop is not too embarrassing or a stigmatising event for sufferers or their carers?
Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has clearly hit on a very salient point.

In relation to the science and medical sectors, I ask the Minister about the significant spend on and moneys set aside for the investigation into how dementia happens, which the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked about in his intervention. That money will help to find a cure—and we need to find a cure, because we have to give hope. To give hope, we have to have medical interventions and the investigations leading to them.

Maggie Throup: The hon. Gentleman is talking about a cure. Recently, I visited the department of human genetics at the University of Nottingham, which is working hard on a genomics project to identify the change in the genes that might cause dementia and Alzheimer’s, so there is light at the end of the tunnel, although it is a long way off. Great work is being carried out, however, not only in Nottingham, but in many places in the UK and throughout the world.

Jim Shannon: We have to encourage all medical advances.

The number of people living with the condition in the UK is revealed as more startling when we take into account the unsung heroes—the carers.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on obtaining this debate. He made an important point about the unsung heroes, the carers. Does he agree that often the people who provide the care in the home rely on outside visits, but those are short-term visits, which are not really the answer to support the carer or the person suffering from Alzheimer’s disease or dementia? More work on policy development and resources needs to be invested in by Government in the vital area of caring.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for a valuable intervention.

Carers UK estimates that, of the 6.5 million carers in the UK, 670,000 people care for friends or relatives with dementia. It is estimated that the NHS saves some £11.6 billion each year because of those unsung heroes; their contribution as volunteer carers is very valuable. Carers may end up providing more than 100 hours of care per week, and all too often the outside world is completely oblivious to their efforts—even those who know the carers might be oblivious, because they do not know what is happening. Anyone who has lived with someone with dementia or Alzheimer’s, or knows a person who does, knows the problems. People with dementia can often unknowingly become agitated, even violent, and night-time wandering and shouting can have a serious impact on carers’ sleep patterns, let alone sufferers’.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Talking about awareness and carers, does he agree with me that a large number of carers might not even be aware of, but need to be taught, how to help and look after? We need an awareness campaign.

Jim Shannon: We do need an awareness campaign—perhaps it starts with this debate today, working its way through to our constituencies and the people we represent.

Too often, carers are left to suffer in silence. The existing services on offer are not publicised enough and are not up to standard. The main social security benefit available to carers is the carer’s allowance. Those providing more than 35 hours of care a week are entitled to only £62.10. Further to that, carers may incur sanctions on how much they can earn on top of the allowance. Dementia carers save the NHS more than £11 billion every year, but they get only £62.10 per week for giving up their lives for someone less fortunate. I know the Minister’s Department is not responsible for that but, with respect, it is not a good reflection on Government given the hours spent by carers. Times are tough for the public finances, but it must be highly insulting to carers for them to see some of the things happening in the news when they are getting only £62.10 a week.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Familiarity has been mentioned, and that is an important role for carers to play. My own grandmother deteriorated every time she was in hospital, because of the lack of familiarity. Does my hon. Friend support John’s Campaign, which encourages the provision of more time and greater support for carers in the hospital setting, as well as greater flexibility about the hours they can be there with their loved ones?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend makes a salient point. He always hits on the issues that we should all be aware of.

I welcome the fact that the Government are developing a new carers strategy. I can only hope that this debate will raise awareness of the need for urgent and large-scale reform of the way in which the Government treat carers. I welcome the dementia-friendly communities strategy and the clusters of dementia groups. In my constituency we have a number of homes where patients with dementia and Alzheimer’s are looked after directly. I also have a dementia friends group who come together in the Church of Ireland church in Newtownards. They bring together all the people of Ards and North Down who want to participate. They give them art, they give them music and they give them a chance to interact, and it is marvellous what happens.

Briefly, I want to mention some of the things that happen in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland dementia strategy has a list of achievements to its credit in recent times, which I bring before the House to help the debate: £6.25 million in the Dementia Together Northern Ireland project; the appointment of dementia champions—perhaps the Minister will give us some thoughts about dementia champions in the whole of the United Kingdom, because things are happening, but I would like to hear about them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On dementia champions and dementia friends, will the hon. Gentleman join me in praising the wonderful work that is done by them, especially in providing sufferers with familiarity—the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)? One of the ideas is to provide sufferers with things such as memory boxes to trigger the memory, which helps terribly with this dreadful disease.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.
Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. On Northern Ireland, he may be aware that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation supports the Dementia without Walls programme, and one place in which it has done something is in a city with walls—the Derry Engaging and Empowering Dementia project has included: work at the level of schools and everywhere to ensure that everyone is more aware of dementia; and Derry having the first dementia-friendly pantomime in Ireland last December, in the Millennium Forum.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for giving an example of some of the good things happening throughout the whole country.

I tabled an early-day motion some time ago to highlight what can happen in people’s homes, and I suggested issues such as smoking, drinking, diet, excessive weight, healthy weight and social interaction, which is so important. Many may enjoy a tipple or an alcoholic beverage, but for too long alcohol has been overlooked as a cause of dementia. The hon. Member for Beckenham asked what some of the causes are, and that is one of them. No one is saying to people to go cold turkey or to hang up their dancing shoes, but the facts are there and they need to be heard.

We have alcohol-related dementia, which is formally attributed to alcoholism, and conclusive evidence now shows that heavy drinking over a long period increases the chance not only of dementia in the long term but of early onset dementia. To illustrate that, Alcohol Concern has provided comparative data showing that the brains of men who drank more than four units of alcohol a day—approximately two or three drinks a day—over 10 years age at a higher rate than those of light or non-alcohol drinkers. The brains of men who regularly drank alcohol appeared between 1.5 and 5.7 years older than their healthier counterparts. Those are just some of the things we have got to address.

One other thing we have done in Northern Ireland is provide funding for dementia-specific nurses, new studies into treating dementia—seven studies are taking place in Northern Ireland—and we have clinical leads for research. That is what we need to do. I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and right hon. and hon. Members for coming to participate in the debate. I hope that is clear. That will probably take us just over 10.30 am. The Clerk tells me that, to aid right hon. and hon. Members, a bell will be rung one minute before the end of their speech time limit.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I cannot wait to hear the bell! I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. We know that there are more than 800,000 people with dementia in the UK today and that by 2040 that number is expected to double. I did a bit more digging into my constituency and found that Aldridge-Brownhills is ranked 220th by age standard prevalence.

My constituents are concerned about this subject—they have written to me about it—and probably most of us in the Chamber have been affected through knowing someone who has or who has had it. We often wrongly associate it with age, but the reality is that more than 40,000 younger people—people under 65—currently live with the condition, so I hope that one result of this debate will be a recognition that it does not just come with age.

Research also shows that dementia costs the UK a staggering £23 billion a year, which is more than the cost of cancer, heart disease or stroke. It is equally concerning that the diagnosis rate has been historically low. That is why I welcome the Government’s objective and the work they are doing to be a world leader in fighting dementia and their commitment to improve diagnosis, care support and research. That must be welcomed. However, it is worth recognising that as vital research goes on, the condition does not go away. We must recognise dementia’s impact on families. It can be very difficult to look after someone who has dementia and, especially in the early stages before they are diagnosed, trying to understand what the problem is and how to help them.

As has been touched on, we also need to recognise that it can be difficult and distressing for those with dementia when they go into hospital. To be in a different environment, away from familiar surroundings, is hard at the best of times, but it is even more so for those with dementia. Time in hospital can have a negative effect on the health and wellbeing of people with dementia and, as has been highlighted, delays in discharge can also exacerbate problems.

We have talked about the role of carers—not just the paid carers, but the unpaid carers who are there 24/7, looking after their loved ones. They do not get any respite and they often have a hard time of it. [ Interruption. ] Thanks for the bell. A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to do the “dementia friends” training session with the Alzheimer’s Society and to help to organise some training sessions. The one thing I took from those sessions is that it does not just come with age, even those who are not carers or do not know much about nursing and the care profession—can do some small, practical things that can make a big difference to people with dementia. In my constituency, we have a dementia-friendly café, and I am looking to set up a dementia friends session, so that we can pass on the word and encourage more people to get involved. I hope that others will do the same.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his excellent speech and on securing the debate.
In the north-east, there are an estimated 25,841 people living with dementia. In coastal constituencies such as mine, South Shields, the figures are higher than average due to older populations. On the coming years the figure is projected to rise locally and nationally, with more than a million people forecast to be living with dementia in the UK by 2021. I am sure the absence of any mention of the NHS or social care in the recent Budget was of little comfort to those who have loved ones living with dementia.

As the numbers of people in need of care and support rise, real action from the Government is lacking. Yes, we have the Prime Minister's commitment to making England “the best country in the World for dementia care,” and we are told that research investment has doubled and policies for improving diagnosis rates are in place, and that there are a million dementia friends, but commitment, research and reliance on charities are no substitutes for the care and support that thousands of people with dementia need right now.

Anyone who has ever had to make the heart-wrenching, emotional decision to have a member of their family placed in a residential or care home, even for a short while, will know that good care, dignity and respect are the cornerstones of providing loved ones with the safety and security they once enjoyed in their own homes. I know about that from my own gran, who was one of the strongest and bravest people I ever knew. As she got older, this strong woman became physically frail and, worse still, her mental health deteriorated too. Gran had dementia and, after many stays in hospital and some painful discussions, our family decided that she needed to be admitted into a care home. She escaped from the first home and was found alone, shivering in a field. At the second home she seemed happy enough, but she suffered an injury through carelessness of staff. If my gran had had carers at home, she would probably have had only one or two visits a day, with all of her getting up, getting dressed, meal times and bed times dictated by the times her care company could come, not when was best for her.

The thing is, though, gran’s story is not unusual; because in an age of increased need and reducing budgets, respect, dignity and choice are always the first to go. They cost nothing on the balance sheet in the first place, yet they mean so much to the people receiving care. This view is supported by the Alzheimer’s Society, which has reported that more than half of carers felt that their loved ones were not treated with understanding and dignity in hospital.

At present, we have a crisis in adult social care and in the NHS. Local authorities predict a £4.3 billion gap in adult social care by 2020, and NHS England and the Nuffield Trust estimate that by 2021 the NHS funding gap could have grown to £30 billion a year. Residential and care home providers and organizations that provide home care say openly that they do not know how much longer they will manage, because they have realized what we all know: there is no real profit to be made in good quality care.

The average cost of a year’s dementia care is £32,250 per person. I have always known that if we are really going to care for people living with dementia and support their families, we need to formulate policy starting with them and their needs. That is the approach that I took when I was a local councillor, and I am proud today that building has actually begun on South Shields’s £9 million centre of excellence for older people, an integrately care services hub with a focus on dementia, which I worked tirelessly on before coming to this place. I know that I do not have all the answers, but I know that the Government need to be more inventive and creative, and to address the crisis right now.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I realise that Members often curl their lip when Conservative Members stand up to tell the Prime Minister how brilliant he is; but since he put dementia on the global agenda in 2012 the horizon has changed remarkably. Between 2012 and 2015 something like £60 million was pumped into research, and there are incredibly ambitious targets for the doubling by 2020 of dementia and Alzheimer’s research. That includes all sources—Government, private and charity.

The issue is all about capacity building; £300 million is now being pumped in, of which £150 million is earmarked for a dementia research institute and an international discovery fund of 130 million quid. However, we must face the fact that the field of dementia research is still very small in comparison with others, particularly bearing in mind the fact that the £26 billion annual cost is more than the combined cost to the country of cancer and heart disease. Despite that, only three new drugs have been discovered in the past 15 years.

Something has to change, and that is why the Government’s announcement of a dementia research institute is so important. It is important for three reasons, the first of which is security for researchers. I do not know how many hon. Members know any scientific researchers, but they are as interested as anyone else in having a career. When they pick a specialism to devote their lives to, they need to know that there is a future in it, and the likelihood of funding to sustain them throughout their career. At the moment, dementia does not provide that. A dementia research institute will do it. At the moment about 70% of PhD graduates in dementia research leave academic research within four years of starting. That is not good enough if we are to find a cure.

Secondly, in the search for a cure, a single molecular target is highly unlikely. There is not a silver bullet to cure dementia. There are many different types of dementia and different underlying influences. If we are to find therapies and cures, and things that will assuage dementia and allow people to live with it, we will need a huge amount of collaboration. In the past 20 or 30 years, the private sector has spent about £30 billion researching dementia across the piece, but that has been happening in different silos, often with researchers working on the same dead ends, and wasting the money three or four times. It is critical that we should collaborate, particularly internationally, in the search for a cure.

Finally, given that there will be no single molecular target, it is unlikely that there will be significant advances towards a cure in the next 10 or 15 years. One of the Cinderella research areas, which does not get much funding or concentration, is care, therapy and management. One of my key wishes with respect to the new dementia research institute is that it should become a soup-to-nuts
research institute, looking at diagnosis, care, therapy, psychology and support for families, as well as a cure. The Government announced about 18 months ago that the institute would be up and running within five years. That means there are only three and a half years left, and I would be pleased if the Minister updated us on when that would be. Only once we have that information will we be in a proper position to tackle what is likely to be one of the top five public health challenges of the next century.

10.4 am

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate my ever-industrious friend who secured this important debate, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Regardless of where any of us live in these islands, I am sure we agree that, from the point of diagnosis until the end of life, every person living with dementia deserves nothing less than the best care society can provide. In Scotland approximately 90,000 people are living with dementia, about 2,000 of whom live in my constituency. There is barely a family who have not been affected by that awful disease. Indeed, there is probably not a person in the Chamber who has not been affected by the illness. Yet all too often those who suffer from dementia are stigmatised and discriminated against, because their symptoms are sometimes difficult to handle, so they are sometimes treated with less respect and dignity than other members of society. That is unacceptable and must change.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government have made tackling dementia a national priority and that since 2008 they have funded the Scottish dementia clinical research network, which has brought together academics, clinicians, carers and people living with dementia, with the aim of turning scientific discoveries into safe and effective treatments. That collaborative approach is to be commended. Since coming to power, the SNP Government in Holyrood have put those living with dementia, and those who care for them, at the heart of their policy making. In 2011 they published the standards of care for dementia in Scotland, which gave people suffering from dementia guaranteed rights—the right to a diagnosis; the right to access to a range of treatments, care and support; the right to be regarded as a unique individual and treated with dignity and respect; the right to be as independent as possible and to be included in the community; the right to have carers who are well supported and educated about dementia; and the right to end-of-life care that respects the wishes of the person concerned.

I applaud the Scottish Government for the great work they are doing, but it is important to recognise that it would not all be possible without an army of people committed to caring, and to making and implementing policies. Scotland is blessed with a volunteer corps and carers who make that possible. In Argyll and Bute, 2,000 people are living with dementia. A couple of months ago I was privileged to be invited to open, in my home town of Helensburgh, the brand new Alzheimer Scotland dementia resource centre, which has taken dementia care—figuratively and literally—from the back and side streets on to our high street. Our community now has a central hub, where people trained to provide support and education are constantly available. There is a drop-in centre, a performance area and a café, as well as space for individual and group therapy. It is a wonderful resource and I congratulate Alzheimer Scotland and its staff on achieving so much and making that happen—particularly Susan Russell, the service manager, and Jean Armitage, the policy and engagement manager. We know that dementia is a growing problem and that we have to tackle it; but let us not forget that there are already wonderful people making things happen in the community.

10.8 am

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate and for his long-standing focus on the issue. Last September when I was able to secure a debate on this subject I was very grateful to him for attending, and for his eloquent words, and I want to reciprocate today.

The subject is one of great significance—a significance that grows every day as our population ages and our life expectancy grows. It is an issue that is personally hugely important to me. I have supported the Alzheimer’s Society for many years, and recently in the House I co-hosted with the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) a dementia friends session for Members and staff. I am very grateful for all the work that she does on this issue.

Dementia is incredibly cruel. It can take a person away from us, even while they are still with us. As the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) set out, the basic facts are stark. My hon. Friend in particular drew attention to the challenge of early-onset dementia, which can often be forgotten, and we must remember the specialist services and support that people with early-onset dementia need and cater for them.

This is not a party political point. The Labour party should be very proud of its record in government on this subject, and I believe that this Government and this Prime Minister can rightly be proud of ours. We have heard a lot about the importance of awareness and understanding, care and treatment and research. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) was characteristically modest in talking about the Dementia Research Institute. The one thing he omitted to say was that it was his idea, and he should be rightly proud of what he has set in motion.

The aspect of this important issue that I want to focus on is the organisations and individuals who do so much to care for and support those with dementia. Setting aside for a moment the human impact of dementia, the estimated cost of dementia is £23 billion per year, with a large proportion of that effectively met by families and voluntary carers. We must remember the army of 670,000 all too often unsung heroes who help and care for people with dementia, as well as organisations such as Age UK and the Alzheimer’s Society, of which I am a member, and local councils and CCGs.

Last year, I had the pleasure of visiting the Poppies Memory Café in Syston, and later this month I will visit the Thrummy Drummer dementia support group in Thurmaston. Both do vital work in supporting those
with dementia in Charnwood and providing respite to carers. Alongside the excellent support services in my constituency that play such a vital role for those with dementia and those who care for them, there is another service that is sadly under threat as we speak today. The CCG recently took the decision to cease funding the service based in the Birstall resource centre in School Lane in my constituency, which Age UK has run for many years. It provides a vital lifeline for 19 people with severe dementia and respite for their families and carers, with a further eight people waiting for referrals. The service is not only much valued but extremely well used in Birstall. The removal of CCG funding will cause the service to close, which will have a devastating impact. A glance at the CCG board papers suggests that the decision is not financial; its budget has actually increased.

It is deeply disappointing that the CCG has taken that decision. While I am grateful to the CCG for the time it has taken to set out its views to me, I remain unconvinced of their logic. The reality is that that service is of huge importance to everyone. I suggest that its closure would be a tragedy for those who use it and that the CCG is taking a short-term view in closing it; costs to the NHS will go up in the long term. I would like to take this opportunity to say that it is time for the CCG to pause, think again, accept that it has got this wrong and reverse the decision.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I had not intended to speak; I thought my name had been withdrawn from the list. None the less, having sat and listened to this debate, I would like to take advantage of the opportunity to do so. I will not take even the four minutes that you suggest, Mr Stringer.

This is an intensely personal issue for many families across the country. I reflect on a couple I know very well. The lady of the household started to forget things. She started to repeatedly cook the same menu for her husband, who got rather tired of shepherd’s pie day after day. Those warning signs led to her being referred to a memory clinic, which did indeed diagnose the early stages of dementia. Where that will lead, the family does not know. I emphasise what a harrowing experience it has been for that family. Support services are available in west Wales, where they live, but there is a concern and fear that as this terrible disease goes on, the terrible decision to which the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) alluded with her family might have to be made and the lady of that household will have to go into some form of residential care.

I want to highlight some of the challenges we have in rural Wales. There is a spectre of couples having to go into some form of residential care. Of course, the support that is available—often for too short periods—is invaluable to those families, but the lack of residential care in close proximity to where the families reside is a very real problem.

I reiterate the point I made in an intervention to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); I congratulate him on securing this debate because awareness of this devastating disease is so important. We must praise the wider community, including the community councils and district councils that have sought dementia-friendly status so that the everyday pursuits we all enjoy can still be enjoyed by everybody in society, including those with dementia and Alzheimer’s.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I reiterate my congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this crucial debate. The attendance is a great testament to the importance of this issue.

I mentioned in my intervention that we were facing a tidal wave in the United Kingdom, and unfortunately my constituency of Solihull is at the crest of that wave. The latest figures I have, produced by the Birmingham and Solihull dementia strategy forum, show that the estimated number of people with dementia is 13,819 in Birmingham and 2,798 in Solihull. That number is predicted to grow by 31% to 3,800 in Solihull and by 18% to 16,300 within Birmingham. My constituency has an acute problem because it has an older population—clearly an older one than Birmingham. In fact, in the ward of Silhill, from which Solihull gets its name, 40% of people are over 65.

This is a hot topic nationwide and an acute one within Solihull. That is one reason why I decided to become a dementia friend in 2014. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), I took part in a sponsored session. One of the most telling things I remember from that session in Solihull was the discussion about how memory is like two bookcases full of books. If we shake those bookcases, books from different levels fall out. They are never really interconnected; they simply lose their place, and over time more books are lost.

People’s progress down the road of dementia can be fast or slow. Something that was talked about at that session was the idea of “living well” with dementia, which seemed an odd choice of words at the time. We, as a society, have to ensure that we enable people to live as well as possible with dementia. As part of that, we need tailored care packages. Solihull CCG, for example, is leading the way with its virtual wards and trying to help people through step-down facilities from the local hospital. We had a major campaign in Solihull to save ward 10, a specific step-down facility. That led to the creation of a new facility, Ardenlea, over the road, which looks after individuals who are coming out of hospital at the most vulnerable time, when they already have the mighty battle of dementia on their hands.

We need to stop providing care and services in silos, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said. We need to stop thinking that this is someone else’s responsibility. Dementia care in our society is everyone’s responsibility—that means Members of Parliament, GPs, nurses, healthcare professionals and wider society. We must consider how shops are designed, how we design support services and how we talk to people and interact with them. We need to get dementia-friendly and get on top of this issue, because it is going to be the issue of the 21st century.
I am not sure that there is a scarier disease out there. This is a disease where a person loses their mind, no longer remembers who they are or who their family and close friends are, and lives in a world of isolation where they are constantly trying to make sense of what is happening around them. My dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and dementia in 2006. From then on, we mourned the loss of him, piece by piece. We watched him deteriorate from a once handsome, articulate and thoughtful family man to an apparently empty shell, apart from small glimmers of recognition that are, in some ways, harder to bear.

With an ever-ageing population, this dreadful disease is becoming more prevalent. It puts pressure on families, services and communities. This cruel disease often means families can no longer care for their loved ones at home, leading to one of the most heart-wrenching decisions a family ever has to make. They may be able to remain at home, but that often puts a strain on the carer or carers looking after them, more often than not family members. Support must be put in place to allow carers to continue looking after their loved ones for as long as practically possible. They need respite and time away to recharge their batteries. They need aids and adaptations to make life a little easier. They need support from other carers and to be able to seek solace from those going through the same thing.

So what is the future? It is widely recognised that a number of risk factors affect a person’s chance of developing dementia, including age, genetics, medical history, lifestyle and even environmental factors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said, the Scottish Government have made dementia a national priority. We believe that a rights-based approach to dementia care, treatment and support is vital and we will build on that with the upcoming third dementia strategy. The strategy for 2016 to 2019 will set out key priorities: to improve support in all areas of dementia care, particularly palliative care and end-of-life care; to prevent avoidable hospitalisation, because unfamiliar surroundings can cause untold distress to dementia sufferers and their families; to redesign dementia services; and to capitalise on community assets and grassroots initiatives, such as the excellent South Ayrshire Dementia Association in my constituency and many more like it.

As the number of people with dementia in Scotland and the UK grows, it is of the utmost importance to have good care in place. The Scottish Government will continue to reduce the risk factors for dementia by encouraging and enabling healthy and social lifestyles.

None of us knows what is in front of us. I can only hope and pray that a cure is found one day and we can stop our loved ones being slowly taken away from us in such a cruel way.

10.21 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising this important subject.

Sadly, there is no cure for dementia, but diagnosis is important for understanding and so that support can be provided. Many welcome supportive initiatives have been developed in the community. For example, in my constituency, the local council has taken the lead in helping to make Burnley a dementia-friendly town and even offers free training to licensed taxi drivers. The initiative is part of a town-wide campaign to encourage residents and businesses to become more dementia-aware, helping Burnley to become a dementia-friendly town.

Raising awareness of dementia among transport services is vital. Some people living with dementia may lose the confidence to drive and become reliant on public transport. Taxi drivers may have friendly, familiar faces for people living with dementia and, if they have gone through a dementia information session, may be better equipped to understand their customers’ needs.

Suffering from dementia is difficult, as is caring for someone with it. It is important to recognise the needs of carers and to give them maximum support. I have seen the problems close up. My grandmother suffered dementia caused by Alzheimer’s disease. She moved from experiencing bouts of mild confusion to a total inability to cope unaided. As my family struggled to care for her, there was little if any specialist support or understanding, and eventually the family were forced to make the hard decision to admit her to residential care.

Things have improved since then: awareness has increased and more support is available. Projects such as the Butterfly project, which many hospitals have adopted and which helps to identify sufferers and to train hospital staff, are welcome developments. Sadly, however, carers are still too often undervalued and under-supported.

Last year, when doing research for my private Member’s Bill in which I tried to introduce free hospital car parking for carers, I talked to many carers, including several who were caring for loved ones suffering from dementia. I was affected by many of the stories I heard. One lady told me she had given up her full-time job to care for her husband who had developed dementia. At home, she fed, dressed and comforted him. When he fell and broke his hip and had to be hospitalised, she continued to provide the same care. She visited him every day, staying long hours, helping with his basic care and bringing calm. If she had not been able and willing to take on that role, it would have fallen to NHS staff.

It is estimated that carers save the NHS billions of pounds every year. At the same time, because caring duties may necessitate them leaving paid employment, many carers suffer financial hardship. I am shocked that the Government chose not to support my Bill, which would have offered some small assistance to carers. It would have sent a strong message of support to carers up and down the country that we value them. The way forward must be to increase awareness and to properly resource support for dementia sufferers and their carers.

Mention has been made of the Prime Minister pumping money into research, which is welcome, but while there is no cure, I would like the Prime Minister to pump money into improving care. That is not only the decent thing to do; it makes sound economic sense.

10.25 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and pay tribute to him for his...
excellent speech, which will have touched many hon. Members here, as evidenced by the turnout today, and our constituents.

My father’s mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s years before I was born and my only memories of her, albeit fond, are of her diminished self. My father has told me about how kind, warm and generous his mum was, but Alzheimer’s changed her personality and made her short-tempered, intolerant and at times aggressive. She was nothing like the big-hearted and loving wife and mother her family knew so well. In her final months, she was unable to recognise my dad, and that was heart breaking for him and the rest of the family. I remember that distinctly.

As a young boy, it was difficult for me to understand why she kept asking if she was a pest and required an answer every time. She seemed remote and at the time I did not know why. On one visit to us in Orkney, when my grandfather was admitted to hospital for an operation, she insisted on going to the shops to buy sweets for my brother and me, but would not hear of anyone taking her. In the end, my parents had to compromise, so I went with her: a four-year-old guiding and making sure a 71-year-old found her way and got home again.

I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been for my grandfather, my dad and my auntie to watch that slow decline in someone who was once central to the whole family—a war-time wife and mother, and a proud, capable and clever woman. The way my grandfather cared for her well into his 70s was phenomenal and incredibly touching. When she was hospitalised, he visited her twice a day, his own health suffering after many years of devoted care and worry.

It is difficult not to speak about the negative impact of Alzheimer’s because the results are real and devastating. It is also difficult to see beyond the illness, when for so many loved ones that is what dominates their daily lives for many years, but wonderful work going on to help people with different forms of dementia and their families. In my area, NHS Lanarkshire is working with Dementia Friends Scotland and Alzheimer Scotland to run a dementia friends programme at Wishaw general hospital that supports staff to recognise the signs of dementia and supports them in recognising that people with dementia can live fulfilling lives when given the care, support, respect and dignity they deserve.

It is important to put on the record the five key messages of the dementia friends programme: dementia is not a natural part of ageing; it is caused by brain disease; it is not just about losing your memory; it is possible to live well with dementia; and there is more to the person than dementia. It is important that we are all mindful of our language and actions. This debate is helpful in highlighting some of the issues that the dementia friends work so hard to bring to the fore. We all recognise the challenges faced by those with dementia and their families. We cannot hide away from them. They are faced from diagnosis through to end-of-life care.

If I had more time, I would have liked to touch on some of the Scottish Government’s excellent work. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned it and I thank him. In February, they introduced the Carers (Scotland) Bill, which enshrines in law for the first time in Scotland the rights of carers, coupled with a commitment, if re-elected, to raise the level of carer’s allowance to match that of jobseeker’s allowance.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for raising the matter.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for co-operating with the time limit on speeches, but if I am to get the last two speakers in, I must reduce it to three minutes.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Stringer, for allowing me the opportunity to speak in this very important debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the Bradford District Care NHS Foundation Trust on winning a national gold award for its work in the state-of-the-art dementia assessment unit at Lynfield Mount hospital.

The 850,000 people living with dementia today deserve to be properly supported to live dignified lives, but worryingly an Alzheimer’s Society poll found that 90% of people suffering from dementia felt that the support they received after diagnosis was inadequate, and 73% of GPs—the medical practitioners who arguably are on the frontline in managing dementia in our communities—believe that our health and social care system is confusing for people with dementia and, importantly, their carers. As a society, we need to support dementia sufferers soon after diagnosis, so that they are properly prepared to manage their symptoms, especially as the symptoms will worsen as the illness progresses. They are best placed to plan and prepare their affairs, but they must be helped to do that. At present, those suffering from dementia are not properly supported by the Government.

As a society, we should also be supporting the legion of selfless carers across the country, who contribute £11.6 billion to the UK economy each year through unpaid caring. Often, carers feel unsupported and isolated. We must ask ourselves as a society whether it is fair that those carers, contributing £11.6 billion in unpaid service each year, are allowed to feel unsupported and isolated.

That prompts the question: what more should the Government be doing? We are fortunate that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. An initiative run by the Alzheimer’s Society is already being piloted in communities. The carer information and support programme is aimed at family members and friends after a relative has been diagnosed with dementia. It involves attending information sessions in a group environment. The Prime Minister’s commitment, as shown by the “Prime Minister’s challenge on dementia 2020”, is commendable, and I am happy to place on the record my support, but the target date of 2019-20 is simply not ambitious enough. I therefore call on the Minister to commit in her remarks to exploring how extra funding can be made available, now, not in 2019-20, to support the roll-out of the carer information and support programme to communities across our country.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his exceptional speech and on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to speak, however briefly, in the debate as a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, as the only MP—I think that is still the case—who is a dementia friends champion, and as a former carer for my mum, who had Alzheimer’s disease. As we have heard today, if anyone’s life has not already been touched by someone who has dementia, it soon will be.

I commend the Government for their commitment and, in particular, the Prime Minister’s challenge and the investment in research funding that was announced last year at the World Health Organisation’s first ministerial conference on global action against dementia. It needs global action; we cannot act in isolation. It is estimated that by 2018 the global cost of dementia will be $1 trillion. I therefore ask the Minister to update us on the longer-term plans for building on that research investment and, specifically, what funding has been set aside to meet the challenges that make up the Prime Minister’s challenge on dementia and whether we are on track.

In addition to research, we need to ensure that hospital services take into account the specific needs of people with dementia. We know from the recent Alzheimer’s Society campaign, “Fix Dementia Care”—my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned some of the results—that 57% of carers, families and friends of people with dementia felt that the person they cared for was not treated with understanding or dignity in hospital; only 2% of hospital staff understood the specific needs of someone with dementia. We obviously need to address that. Could I put in a plug for the APPG report? Seven out of 10 of the people in hospital are not actually there for their dementia, but for something else. We have a report coming out next Wednesday on dementia and comorbidities, and I hope that people will be able to join us for that.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) will mention this in her winding-up speech, but we cannot divorce the issues in relation to social care from dementia care. I called on someone, just in a regular door-knock, and she obviously had dementia. She was on her own. She called on someone, just in a regular door-knock, and she obviously had dementia. She was on her own. She greeted me with an empty medication bubble pack and I was amazed at the expertise that the person there had. Heather Morrison and her team do a fantastic job. They told me a couple of stories that I would like to share. They had one client who would continually stamp on the kitchen floor and the family could not work out why the person was doing that. It turned out that the kitchen floor had been designed in tiles of black and white and they thought that the black tiles were raised, so they were trying to stamp them with their feet. That was one part of their dementia. Another sufferer would not wash with soap when they went to the bathroom. It turned out that the soap was the same colour as the sink and bath. They could not see it, which was why they would not wash.

The expertise and experience of the people who work day in, day out with those suffering from dementia is so valuable, and it is so important that we praise the carers. That is why I welcome, as my hon. Friend did, the passing of a carers Bill in the Scottish Parliament earlier this year to enshrine in law for the first time the rights of carers. Furthermore, the Scottish Government’s carers strategy recognises that carers must be seen as equal partners in the delivery of care, as their support enables people to live at home, in their own communities, safely, independently and with dignity. I also welcome the Scottish National party’s pledge to raise carer’s allowance to match jobseeker’s allowance if re-elected.

There has been a lot of talk about carers as the unsung heroes of dementia care. An organisation in my constituency, the Forget Me Not Club, provides more than 500 hours of free care a week. I was amazed at the expertise that the people there had. Heather Morrison and her team do a fantastic job. They told me a couple of stories that I would like to share. They had one client who would continually stamp on the kitchen floor and the family could not work out why the person was doing that. It turned out that the kitchen floor had been designed in tiles of black and white and they thought that the black tiles were raised, so they were trying to stamp them with their feet. That was one part of their dementia. Another sufferer would not wash with soap when they went to the bathroom. It turned out that the soap was the same colour as the sink and bath. They could not see it, which was why they would not wash.

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We have heard that familiarisation is a very important part of tackling dementia and caring for people who have dementia. Not going into hospital and not becoming institutionalised is so important for people with dementia, which is why the Scottish Government identified, in their proposal for the national dementia strategy for 2016 to 2019, a number of challenges to be dealt with, including tackling avoidable hospitalisation, which worsens outcomes for people with dementia every time.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the risks of alcohol as well as other lifestyle factors in contributing to dementia. It is important that we tackle the public...
health issues around that. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government are taking steps to encourage people to remain physically and socially active, to discourage isolation and to encourage behaviour that has been recommended by the Caerphilly study.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) that agree that the Torbay Dementia Action Alliance’s memory café is exactly the sort of community initiative that can help to provide support to patients suffering from and living with dementia, and to their carers?

Stuart Blair Donaldson: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are a number of strategies and community initiatives. In my constituency, another initiative is live music appreciation. Dementia sufferers and their carers can go along, listen to live music and join in if they want to. That was my first interaction with the Forget Me Not Club in my constituency, and it was a great thing to see.

Finally, the Scottish Government’s national dementia strategy also incorporates Alzheimer Scotland’s five pillars model of post-diagnostic support. Alzheimer Scotland does a fantastic job in providing advice, support and all manner of things for those suffering from dementia and for their carers. Its five pillars model includes:

“Planning for future decision-making…Supporting community connections…Understanding the illness and managing symptoms …Peer support… Planning for future care.”

All the things that charities, local communities, communities and the Government do will help people to live well with dementia.

10.42 am

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. I recognise the remarkable amount of work that he does on social care and carers, and I thank him for that. We have had some excellent contributions from 14 hon. Members—almost too many to mention, so I will not mention them all. We are making some progress but we have a long way to go to improve care for people with dementia and support for their carers.

The Labour Government launched the first ever national dementia strategy, appointed the first national clinical director for dementia, and commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to develop the quality standard for dementia. Together, those began the process of establishing memory clinics, providing better training for GPs and improving the quality of dementia care for people in hospital. I thank the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for mentioning that record. It is welcome that the Government are carrying on that work through the Prime Minister’s important challenge on dementia 2020. I am sure that hon. Members here today agree with the aims of that challenge but we must have to accept that there is a long way to go before they become a reality.

Dementia is a distressing condition. In the long term we should be aiming for a cure, but while working to find a cure we must put equal emphasis on the care provided to people with dementia and the support provided to their families and carers. Carers UK reminds us that the symptoms of dementia can make providing care particularly difficult. People with dementia—we have heard about this in the debate—can grow agitated and violent, and night-time wandering and shouting can disrupt carers’ sleep.

Families report challenges in finding services that have the expertise to provide the right care and support. Of course, that means that it is more difficult for carers to get practical help or to take essential respite breaks as they do not have, or they lose confidence in, the quality and appropriateness of the care available. I welcome the strong case made by my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for better support for carers.

The care sector has a turnover rate of 25% so even when a care package at home is arranged, high staff turnover makes it harder to build familiarity and trust. For people with dementia, receiving care each day from someone they see as a stranger can be upsetting and confusing, and can make them more likely to refuse support, putting further pressure on their family carers. It is clear that improvement is needed, so can the Minister say whether the carers of people with dementia will be a key strand of the upcoming carers strategy?

I applaud the Alzheimer’s Society “Fix Dementia Care” campaign, which wants to ensure that people with dementia receive the highest standards of care in hospital, in care homes and in the home. It is of great concern that a survey of carers of people with dementia found that only 2% believed that hospital staff understood the specific needs of people with dementia, more than half felt that the person they cared for was not treated with understanding and dignity in hospital, and nine out of 10 felt that the person with dementia became more confused while in hospital.

The Alzheimer’s Society is calling for all hospitals to publish an annual statement of dementia care. In my area, it was pleasing that Salford Royal recorded information for patients with dementia and that the records showed that Salford Royal’s performance on a number of elements of care was better than national averages. However, other local hospitals did not record that information so there is much to do to bring that up to standard.

As part of improving hospital care for dementia patients, listening to carers would be a step forward. Nicci Gerrard is leading John’s Campaign for the right for family carers to stay with people with dementia in hospital, as we heard earlier. Nicci’s father John suffered a significant decline when he was in hospital for five weeks. Although the family felt that individual nurses and doctors were kind, conscientious and respectful, restrictions on waiting times meant that the family could not sit and talk to John, read to him, make sure he ate or keep him attached to the world.

John’s Campaign calls for the families and carers of people with dementia to have the same rights as the parents of sick children. They should be allowed to remain with them in hospital for as many hours as they are needed or are able to give. I understand that 272 hospitals across the UK have pledged their support to John’s Campaign. Will the Minister outline what is being done to improve hospital care for dementia patients and whether she supports John’s Campaign?
As well as improving hospital care, there are real concerns about the state of social care. The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services reports that £4.6 billion has been cut from adult social care budgets and that 300,000 fewer people are receiving publicly funded services than in 2009-10. Social care has been an easy target for cuts. I am concerned now that the Chancellor's aim to find a further £3.5 billion in savings by 2019-20 will hit council and social care budgets even further.

The Government have stated that, by 2020, they want to see an increase in the number of people with dementia being able to live at home with more personalised support available to them and their families. That is a laudable aim, but the Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme last week showed just how poor home care can be, with time clipped from care visits, carers working very long days and not being paid for travel time, care needs neglected, and no time for the carer to talk and listen to the person receiving care.

This year and next year are tough years for social care funding because home care and residential care providers bringing in the so-called national living wage have estimated they will face costs of £330 million in 2016-17 with no additional funding for this Government policy. The better care fund only provides £100 million extra next year, so this year is a problem. It is not surprising that carers say that issues with their pay and conditions prevent them from delivering good quality care. Unison found that three quarters of domiciliary carers do not have enough time to provide dignified care and that 84% of service users not getting enough time for care are people with dementia.

Caring for someone with dementia is not just about aspects of physical care. It is about conversations—knowing the person and knowing what is a comfort to them. Across hospitals, primary care and home care, we need to improve staff training and understanding of how to support people living with dementia and how to support and work with their family carers.

Carers UK reminds us that carers are the experts in the care needs of the person they care for, so it is heartening that today, Dr Julie Wray of the School of Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work and Social Sciences at the University of Salford is launching her book, “Supporting families and carers: a nursing perspective”. I hope that her nurse colleagues use the book to develop their knowledge of how to work with carers of people with dementia. They are the people who make such a vital contribution to the care of all those people.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I call the Minister. Would you leave a couple of minutes for Jim Shannon to sum up?

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I will do my best, Mr Stringer. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. In the time available, and leaving a couple of minutes at the end, I will not be able to cover all the points raised in this excellent debate. I have never seen the Chamber this full at this time on a Tuesday morning, which is testimony to the importance of this subject.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a steadfast advocate for this vital cause. There is a great turnout on both sides of the Chamber, and it is clear—explicitly so in some speeches—that dementia and Alzheimer’s are topics that touch many of us in the Chamber today. As others have said, dementia and Alzheimer’s affect 850,000 people in the UK and impact widely on carers, families and wider society. I put on record at the outset my thanks to the wonderful national charities in this field. We value our close working relationship with them, and we value the way that they push us to be the best we can. From what has been said in this debate, it is clear that they have formed important local relationships.

Many hon. Members have made the point that dementia is a global problem that requires international collaboration to find global solutions, and the EU is helping to keep dementia on the international agenda, with the recent Italian and Luxembourg presidencies and the current presidency of the Netherlands prioritising dementia. It is an important issue and a shared agenda. Members on both sides of the House have been generous in supporting the Prime Minister’s 2020 challenge implementation plan, and I echo the support expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for the previous work, because we are building on important work done by the previous Labour Government. This is not a partisan issue; it is a challenge to us all. That is true internationally, too. The UK’s international leadership has been strong, and I hope that the UK’s presence will put dementia at the EU’s heart, building on the work that has already been done.

On working with Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford knows, healthcare is a devolved matter, with each Administration responsible for its country’s healthcare, but there are many key collaborations and joint initiatives across the UK, notably in research. For example, the Medical Research Council funds dementia research across the UK, including in Northern Ireland, and people in all parts of the UK can sign up to “Join dementia research.” The subject of research has rightly been much touched on. In particular, the challenges were ably outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who explained why there are particular challenges in this area.

I will reiterate some of the commitments that the Government have made. There will be: up to £150 million for the UK-wide Dementia Research Institute; £300 million to invest in dementia research by 2020; an increase in the total funding for dementia research from the National Institute for Health Research, research councils and charity partners; and more opportunities to participate in research. By 2018, 12% of people newly diagnosed each year will be registered on “Join dementia research,” with 10% participating, but there is more to do. Understanding the causes of dementia will help us to drive the development of treatments and industry innovation. Through things such as the dementia discovery fund, we want to ensure that we have innovative international approaches to making the most of the opportunities that come in the search for a treatment or a disease-modifying therapy, on which we have set ambitious targets.

I also stress, because it has come up again in this debate, the importance of research that also helps us to know best how to support, how to care for and how to
improve the lives of people. We are funding things that will have immediate benefits within the next 12 months, as well as things that we hope will bring about a cure or a disease-modifying therapy. One example is that we have commissioned a £20 million research initiative on living well with dementia, funded by the NIHR and the Economic and Social Research Council, which focuses on issues that really matter to people in terms of the practical, day-to-day challenges. Again, there will be opportunities to talk about those in the House.

We have made big progress. Record numbers of people are joining dementia research. We have ambitious targets in that regard, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House can help us to meet them. Diagnosis is vital, as has been mentioned in the debate. Again, huge improvements have been made in the diagnosis rate, from 42% in 2010-11 to 67.4% at the end of February 2016, an increase of around 25 percentage points, but there is more to do, particularly to drive out variation. There is still considerable variation, but ongoing and regular effort is being put into that. I pay tribute to the considerable leadership being given by the NHS’s national clinical director, Alistair Burns.

Meaningful care has rightly been highlighted by Members on both sides as one of the biggest challenges. I am supported by an excellent team of officials in this area, and they are well aware that this is a challenging area. In particular, post-diagnostic support is challenging for the person who is diagnosed, but it is especially challenging for their carers and family. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) was right to pay tribute to some of her local initiatives and to highlight how big this area is. The joint declaration on post-diagnostic dementia care and support was signed by leaders across the health, social care, local government and voluntary sectors, and it is the first time that we have had an unequivocal joint commitment to improving care and support for people with dementia and their carers following diagnosis. We want to see joined-up plans for health and care support in every area, with personalised care plans for every person with dementia. With NHS England and other partners, we have developed ways to drive that and to measure it within our implementation plan.

Members have rightly said that carers play a pivotal role. I am all too aware of the strain that a dementia diagnosis puts on other family members, which has been rightly highlighted in this debate. We recognise and pay tribute to the pivotal role that carers play. I have touched on progress in research, but I emphasise that we want to see people with dementia, their families and carers live well and have meaningful support.

Time does not allow me to talk in any detail about the carers strategy, but we have launched a call for evidence to inform the cross-Government national carers strategy on what more can be done, and there is clearly much to do in the field of dementia. I encourage all Members to contribute to that, and to encourage their local groups to do so. Carer’s allowance has been touched on. We are rightly being challenged on the money being spent on care, but we are spending more than £2 billion a year on carers’ benefits in Great Britain, supporting more than 750,000 carers. The rate of carer’s allowance has increased since 2010, but I am afraid that time does not permit me to go into detail. I am sure there will be occasions to do so in other debates.

We are further supporting the implementation of improved rights for carers—including carers for those with dementia—enshrined in the Care Act 2014. That is backed by £104 million of funding in 2015-16. The better care fund brings the great promise of more important work on integration, and there are some exciting examples of local initiatives, particularly coming out of Greater Manchester. Again, there will be other opportunities to talk about how the better care fund and those integrated vanguard models can lead the way to more improved care and support for people with dementia.

The role that charities and communities play in enabling people with dementia and their carers to live well through initiatives such as sport, music and dementia cafés has rightly been mentioned. There are some wonderful initiatives, including the Sporting Memories Network, and I pay tribute to all the local initiatives mentioned by the hon. Members. I was recently privileged to visit an initiative led by the Manchester Camerata and its music therapist—wonderful work is being done there. There are some 1.5 million dementia friends in England and Northern Ireland doing wonderful work, and a public awareness campaign is under way in Northern Ireland.

There is little I can say in the time available on risk reduction other than that it is vital. Dementia is not an inevitable part of ageing, and up to 20% of those diagnosed with dementia have vascular dementia, the effects of which can be minimised or prevented altogether by a healthy lifestyle. Members are right to draw attention to work on factors such as alcohol, exercise and weight—I hope there will be a chance to say more about that in a future debate. I ask Members to encourage their constituents to take up their free NHS health check. We are piloting initiatives on early-onset dementia awareness.

Let me end by congratulating all hon. Members on their contributions. I refer them to our implementation plan, which was launched last month and has much detail about how we are responding to the Prime Minister’s 2020 challenge. As I close and leave a few seconds for the hon. Member for Strangford to respond, I reiterate that the Government’s commitment to this subject is absolutely undimmed, and it is clear from the contributions this morning that Parliament's commitment to this important cause also burns brightly.

10.59 am

Jim Shannon: In the very short time that I have, I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and hon. and right hon. Members for their significant contributions. All political parties have participated, and all regions have taken part. We all want the same things: advances to find a cure to a global problem; more money to be spent on medical research; thanks to the carers, paid and unpaid; and diagnosis, follow-up care and end-of-life care. Make the simple changes. I thank everyone for their personal stories, too.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
National Defence Medal

11 am

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the National Defence Medal.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. This is a short debate covering a vast subject, and I hope to chart a way forward to a more substantial debate in the near future. I know that a number of hon. Members will wish to contribute, and I am keen to allow that, because the topic is worthy of considerable discussion. However, if time runs short, I hope that Members will excuse me if I fail to take as many interventions as they or I would like.

When I began exploring the subject and took on the task of leading this debate, I was concerned about having time to do the research necessary to do justice to the subject, but as it turned out, I need not have worried. Many people have been generous in sharing their knowledge, for which I thank them sincerely, and copying me in on their correspondence with the Government. I appreciate the many people who have taken the time to get in touch with me, both before and since I secured this debate. However, any errors in my speech are mine alone.

In the time allotted, I cannot hope to cover all the anomalies thrown up by the current policy, but there is one that I cannot let pass. Today is the 51st anniversary of the death of Warrant Officer John F. Lonergan of 131 Parachute Engineer Regiment and Sergeant Cyril Atfield of the Royal Army Pay Corps, both of whom were killed at Al Milah, 60 miles from Aden, South Arabia, in what is now the Republic of Yemen.

The deployment of 131 Para Regiment to South Arabia was the first time a Territorial Army regiment had been sent into conflict since 1945. In the engagement that led to the deaths of those men, five others were wounded and one officer was awarded an MBE for gallantry. It is surely undeniable that all the men were in a dangerous situation as a result of their service, but because of tight medal rules, none of the others involved in the engagement would receive a medal to acknowledge their service, unless they happened to be around long enough to receive one for long service.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am not sure that that is accurate. They would qualify for the General Service Medal, Arabian Peninsula, even though they were killed within the 28 days, if their commanding officer put them forward for one.

Kirsten Oswald: I thank the hon. Gentleman sincerely for that contribution. I will speak about that particular medal, so his intervention is useful.

Much is said about the British medal policy being based on risk and rigour, but as Al Milah demonstrated, anyone who steps forward as a member of the armed forces may find themselves sent into a foreign land, sometimes to be woken at night by the sound of incoming fire. To me, that is self-evidently a dangerous proposition, and it certainly strikes me as enough risk to demand that we recognise it. However, this debate is not about an action or actions that took place a long time ago. It must be about what is right here and now, and that is what I hope that we can address.

One piece of correspondence shared with me relates to the action in Al Milah. It is yet another Ministry of Defence rejection of recognition for the service of Warrant Officer Lonergan, Sergeant Atfield and other members of the armed forces who placed themselves in harm’s way in Yemen at that time. The request was not for bravery medals; it was simply that they be awarded the General Service Medal with clasp South Arabia, which was awarded to other members of the armed forces in Yemen at that time. I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has been pursuing the case.

The letter from the MOD quotes Winston Churchill in 1944, in a debate about the medals to be issued at the end of the second world war. I have curtailed it for brevity, but I hope that Hansard will display the citation for Members’ benefit. He said that “a distinction is something which everybody does not possess. If all have it, it is of less value...A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow. The task of drawing up regulations for such awards is one which does not admit of a perfect solution...All that is possible is to give the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number and to hurt the feelings of the fewest.”—[Official Report, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

I argue that those points are as valid now as they were then.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): I have a constituent called Glen who has been campaigning on this issue for many years. He was drafted through national service to serve as a non-commissioned officer in the Suez emergency in the 1950s, yet he feels that he has never received adequate recognition for the years that he dedicated to service and the sacrifice that he made. Surely we should do all that we can to honour those drafted to protect our country.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Lady makes a valuable point. There are many people in a similar position. They feel that they are being missed out, and that people do not understand or recognise what they have done.

The difference between my position and that of the MOD is that I believe we must take account of changes in context. As John Maynard Keynes said: “If the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. She will be aware that there are many ex-service personnel who did not receive an operational medal during their service with the armed forces. Some of them were not on the front line: submariners on nuclear deterrent duty, for instance, or those in the Royal Observer Corps. May I make a plug for those in the Ulster Defence Regiment who served in Northern Ireland? Some of them also do not meet the criteria. There are a number of people I feel should be considered. Does she feel that the Minister should refer to them in his review?

Kirsten Oswald: I agree. I have been contacted by people who have served in many and various ways but are not entitled to a medal. It is an issue of concern, and I hope that we will hear more about it from the Minister.
It does not matter how many independent reviews, staffed largely by people embedded in the status quo, take place; the changing facts provide the challenge facing the Government. The facts have changed. It is time that British medal policy changed to reflect them, and that it followed the example set by Commonwealth and other countries.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She is absolutely right to say that many people are concerned about having their contribution recognised, particularly people who served in Northern Ireland and feel that they were not recognised for their contribution in the same way as people who served in more recent battles. I wrote to the Prime Minister on behalf of Robert Scollick, my constituent, and the Cabinet Office response said:

“I have to tell you there are no plans for further work on this issue, nor can I offer you a time scale when it might be sensible to return to this issue.”

I wish the hon. Lady luck in bringing to the Government the idea that the time to discuss it is now.

**Kirsten Oswald** (Parish): I agree that it is time to re-examine the issue. Things have changed. We must remember that our armed services are now made up entirely of those who have joined up voluntarily. They do so entirely of their own volition, and they clearly understand the potential peril that they face.

One of the other ways in which the context, and therefore the facts on which to base a decision, have changed involves the adoption of the armed forces covenant in 2010. On page 4, we find the commitment that performing any form of service in the armed forces deserves recognition and gratitude. Indeed it does, but unfortunately, for too many of those serving in our armed forces at present, we do not always deliver them. The armed forces covenant is mentioned often in this place, but such lofty words do not always translate into real and proper consideration of how we ought to support our service personnel and veterans.

Consider the recent poor outcomes of the armed forces continuous attitude survey, or the lengthy struggle to extract fair compensation for service personnel suffering from mesothelioma. The UK Government do not always do enough or act at an appropriate speed. A tangible recognition of service undertaken by means of a national defence medal would be only one way to continue to improve how we deal with our service personnel. We should surely be considering all our obligations.

Significantly, the most recent medals review, led by Sir John Holmes, recognised that the case for a National Defence Medal was worthy of consideration. I agree with him that such a decision would be significant and that it requires a broad political consensus; I am pleased to see a range of Members here. At the time of the review, the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals advised specifically that it required a broad political consensus; I am pleased to see a range of Members here. At the time of the review, the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals advised specifically that the issue might usefully be reconsidered in the future, going so far as to consider how criteria might be applied for such an award. I do not propose to do so here, but I agree that the matter would have to be examined properly so that a clear award framework could be set out.

I am interested in the principle of a medal being awarded and that is what we should consider today. In the meantime, Ministers have agreed that the eligibility requirements for the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal, which is currently awarded only to other ranks and not to officers, should be harmonised in the future, and I hope that today’s discussion will be a way to further that debate.

Having examined the argument against a UK national defence medal, I found it to be thin and inconsistent. Medals are already awarded for service, or sometimes just for being somewhere at the right time. While some people with just 10 years of service may have two Jubilee Medals, I have been contacted by a former member of the RAF who served for 20 years but received no medal at all. It is impossible to argue that that is a coherent position. Many people leave the service with no medal while some people who joined in 2000 and left in 2012 have received two medals without seeing any operational postings. How does that policy address Churchill’s plea that recognition should “give the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number and...hurt the feelings of the fewest”? —[Official Report, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), I am aware of the General Service Medal; in fact, I received one with a clasp for air operations in Iraq. However, I have a constituent who, as the hon. Lady just said, served in the Royal Air Force for 26 years in RAF Germany, during the cold war, which we could argue was a series of operations, without receiving a medal. So the hon. Lady has lots of support as she considers how we can recognise those of commitment to our nation and our security with a national defence medal.

**Kirsten Oswald** (Parish): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that interjection; that story about his constituent is illustrative of the stories of members and former members of the armed services who have contacted me. There are people in so many different situations who fall down gaps that we perhaps did not realise were there.

How can this situation possibly be justified? If, as Churchill said, we want “to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved” medals, is it any wonder that some people might consider that they are not being recognised equally? And is it any wonder if some former members of our armed forces consequently shun Remembrance Day events and other commemorative events? That concern has been raised with me and it is a great shame that some of those who have served, sometimes in very difficult situations, are not entitled to a medal, which causes them to be anxious about remembrance ceremonies. That is very unfortunate and entirely avoidable.

In the same 1944 debate that Churchill spoke in and that I have quoted, Leslie Hore-Belisha MP commented on exactly that kind of discrepancy in recognition. He said:

“The fact that such anomalies exist is no excuse for deliberately adding to them. It is the function of good legislation and administration to remove them and, if not to remove them, at any rate to diminish them.” —[Official Report, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 908] That is what we should consider. The British Veterans National Defence Medal Campaign advances the simple and logical proposition that one way of diminishing
such anomalies is to ensure that all members of the armed forces get the recognition they deserve for stepping into that role.

Other Governments have recognised this issue and acted to recognise the contribution made by their service personnel. The UK Government should now do the same, and acknowledge in this tangible way the work and the willingness to face peril that is common to everyone who signs up as a member of our armed forces.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am sure she will agree that when people sign up for the military, they sign up to put life and limb on the line for this nation, and for them not to have a medal that recognises that contribution is part of the insult, given that—depending on which operation they were involved in and what medals were awarded—they have made that core decision to put their life and limb on the line for the nation, which would be recognised by this medal we are discussing.

Kirsten Oswald: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That intervention absolutely gets to the crux of this issue. The Australian Government have recognised that point with their new defence medal, which was instituted in 2006, and they describe the purpose of that medal as being to recognise “the outstanding contribution to our proud military history made by Australian men and women in uniform.”

That is all of them. Similarly, when New Zealand instituted its defence medal in 2011, the country’s Defence Minister, Wayne Mapp, described the basis for issuing the medal as follows: “Many thousands of New Zealanders have met the demanding requirements of military service. They have served their country and community loyally and well...Up to now, there has been no recognition of this service, on which the Government places high value. This medal remedies that.”

That is exactly the type of recognition that I am looking for.

Here, however, the Ministry of Defence seems to place great store on the argument that a national defence medal would devalue other awards, which is an absurd proposition. When I asked a question about this topic at business questions recently, the Leader of the House of the Commons said he did not think that medals should be handed out in this way, and that the value of medals for particular examples of valour and service would perhaps be devalued by the issuing of a national defence medal. I could not disagree more. People who join our armed forces do so knowing that they are putting themselves into peril, and it is high time that we recognised that.

I believe that those who have been awarded medals for bravery do not feel that their awards are devalued because other colleagues receive the same campaign medal as they do, and nor would they feel that their awards were devalued by the receipt of a national defence medal. Those who were awarded a General Service Medal do not feel that it was devalued because others were awarded it, too. Arguments such as that made by the Leader of the House of Commons are simply camouflage for an unwillingness to listen.

Having already quoted Churchill, I will close my remarks today by doing so again, and this time I hope that the Government will pay particular attention to his advice. Writing on the conduct of negotiations between states, he advised: “In war and policy one should always try to put oneself in the position of what Bismarck called ‘the Other Man’. The more fully and sympathetically a Minister can do this, the better are his chances of being right.”

I commend those sentiments to the Minister and I look forward to hearing how the Government intend to take forward the recognition by Sir John Holmes that the case for a national defence medal deserves proper consideration.

11.15 am

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Stringer.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) on securing this debate. I am aware of the early-day motion on this issue that she has previously tabled, and I know, both from that and her comments today, how strongly she feels about it.

Her Majesty’s armed forces are the best in the world. Our service personnel have served Britain with honour, and are serving with honour at this very moment in many parts of the world. Their history is an inspiring story of courage, heroism and sacrifice, and it is because of our brave armed forces that we are protected. It is because of their inspirational work that our country stands safe, or at least as safe as any other country in the world. I take this opportunity to thank all those, both past and present—and, indeed, their families—who have served in our armed forces. This Government truly value their service. It was this Government who finally enshrined the principles of the armed forces covenant in law, to ensure that those who serve or have served, and their families, are treated fairly. The Government continue to work with businesses, local authorities, charities and community organisations to support our forces through services, policy and projects.

I am proud, for example, that we have committed to spend 2% of our national income on our military every year until 2020. We have also given over £450 million from LIBOR funds to military-related charities and schemes, and we are taking seriously the mental health of our veterans, launching a survey to try to understand their needs. We are providing mentoring, training and advice to our ex-servicemen and women through the veterans employment transition support programme, and we have invested £15 million to improve prosthetic services. We have given £20 million to eight projects to improve accommodation for veterans.

Let me now address the main point of today’s debate. Military honours and medals are one way, but only one way, that we can recognise the exceptional service of those brave men and women who go beyond even the high expectations of their comrades, commanders and country. It is vital for all who receive one that we do not devalue its importance.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Last year the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), then a Defence Minister, said that British military tradition dictates that
I recognise that, but we already have a long service and good conduct medal, so would it not be in the best of British tradition to incorporate a national defence medal, in recognition of the service that good men and women of this country give to protect all of us?

**Mr Wilson:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is true that we have a long service and good conduct medal, which was introduced as far back as 1830. It rewards other ranks who have completed 15 years of regular service, but not officers—I think it started at 21 years, and over time has come down to recognise those levels of service.

I will directly address the hon. Lady’s concerns later in my comments, but first I want to go back to something I have already referred to. Medals are one way, but not the only way, of addressing the concerns that some veterans have. Another method is memorials. Memorials are lasting public reminders and are places of pilgrimage for veterans and their families, the latest example of which is the memorial to Bomber Command, which was opened on 28 June 2016 by the Queen. There was a huge campaign for a memorial of that type. We also have the world war two memorial, the National Memorial Arboretum near Tamworth, which contains a number of other memorials, so we should not treat this issue in isolation. There are other ways of recognising the massive contribution that the military and their families have made to this country over many centuries.

Let me also say, however, that there is no simple way of doing that. It is impossible to satisfy all who have served their country. It is no easy task to set the limits or where the line falls for who receives a medal and who does not. There will also be disappointment on the borders of such decisions. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said that Churchill addressed the matter directly on the Floor of the House back in 1944, and she was good enough to put on the record part of what he said. I would like, however, to add the first part of what he said:

> “The object of giving medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved them. At the same time a distinction is something which everybody does not possess. It all have it if is of less value. There must, therefore, be heartburnings and disappointments on the border line.”—[Official Report, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

Those words ring as true today as they did then, and in many ways the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire has made for their country. However, the badge is not officially sanctioned and is therefore not a medal.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Minister talks about those who deserve, yet the litany of those whom many would argue are deserving—from nuclear testing and Northern Ireland to suffering through front-line service in the cold war—should not be dictated by a debate on the Floor of the House of Commons in 1944, but by the lived experience of those who served our country and the Crown with distinction, based on how we perceive our community today, not in 1944.

**Mr Wilson:** Of course what has happened since 1944 should not necessarily be dictated by 1944, but in that quotation Churchill summarised the issues and the anguish involved. I was merely trying to reflect that in my comments, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire did in hers.

**Kevin Foster:** Does the Minister agree that the slight difference between today and 1944 is that in 1944 adult men and women of a particular age were conscripted, under threat of imprisonment, at a time of war? What sets the veterans of today apart is that they volunteered to serve our country.

**Mr Wilson:** Of course there is a clear difference between what happened in the second world war and what happens today, but Churchill’s comments summarised the issues that needed to be carefully weighed up when making the decision. There is a strong lobby in the military for not making the changes, as well as the one we are getting from veterans about the national defence medal. The Government’s job is to try to make decisions about where the line falls in a fair and honourable way, and that is not easy. We will upset one group of people whichever decision we come to.

Although the Ministry of Defence instituted the armed forces veterans lapel badge in 2014 as a way of identifying all those who had done military service, it has never been the tradition here in Britain to consider service in the armed forces as the sole justification for a medal. It was right, therefore, that in 2012 the Prime Minister gave medallic recognition its appropriate attention, by commissioning Sir John Holmes, a retired senior diplomat, to review the awarding of military medals. I can assure hon. Members that great thought has already been given to all the points raised this morning. Sir John’s review team received more than 200 submissions and spoke to more than 50 people, including representatives of various veterans’ groups. Sir John independently reviewed a number of cases as possible candidates for changed medallic recognition, one of which involved Arctic convoy personnel and led to the Arctic convoy medal being given.

The national defence medal was worthy, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire pointed out, of full consideration in the 2012 review. Its supporters seek recognition for all those who have served, irrespective of where they were called upon to do so. The review estimated the cost of the medal at £475 million, and although it went far beyond the narrow consideration of cost, there would be implications for other activities and choices if the Ministry of Defence had to take that burden.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The Minister talks about the veterans badge. I am sure it must be clear—it has been mentioned in this very hall before—that the badge is not officially sanctioned and is therefore not a medal.

**Mr Wilson:** No, but as I made clear earlier, there are different ways of recognising the sacrifice that people have made for their country. Although the badge is not a medal, it is a recognition of service.

British campaign medals are not awarded as a record of service as in some other countries, but as a result of particularly difficult circumstances of service life—risk
Mr Rob Wilson

and rigour, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said. Although some Commonwealth countries have their own equivalent of the national defence medal, namely Australia and New Zealand, the review felt that that did not present a strong enough case for us to do so. Sir John's proposals were considered by the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals, and the Committee could not see a strong reason for introducing such a medal at this time. Sir John published his final report in the summer of 2014.

The Government have taken unprecedented action to support our military, investing in areas from housing to social and medical care, and we will continue to do that. Unlike what happened under previous Governments, in recent years we have seen major investment in mental health, veterans' accommodation and veterans' hearing. We have seen multimillion pound investments in supporting our veterans, something done under no previous Government. We value all our military as brave heroes who keep, and have kept, our country safe, but following the most complete and far-reaching review of military medals for a generation, Sir John Holmes recommended not to introduce a national defence medal. That was no easy task, and I repeat what Churchill said: that there will be “heartburnings and disappointments on the border line.”

Sir John's review was published less than two years ago and, given that the circumstances remain exactly the same, we do not feel there is significant value in revisiting the matter. That position is not in any way intended to disparage those who have served their country. As I said at the outset, the Government have the highest regard for all those, past and present, who have served in the armed forces, and we will continue to do all that we can to support them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

HIV: Women and Girls

Ms Karen Buck in the Chair

2.30 pm

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tackling HIV in women and girls.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and her ministerial colleagues for their ongoing commitment to international development and the 0.7% spending target, despite the best efforts of the august Daily Mail and other media. It is good to see that our ministerial colleagues remain firm in their commitment to international development.

As chair of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, I called for this debate to provide an opportunity to reflect on the progress made and the challenges ahead in the response to HIV and AIDS and, in particular, in ending the AIDS epidemic as part of the sustainable development goals. I want to use the debate as an opportunity to press my right hon. Friend on the Government's commitment to the SDGs, which were adopted in September 2015 by UN member states to galvanise efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest by 2030.

The final framework outlined in the agreed text contains 17 goals and 169 targets—it is not a brief document. One of those targets is:

"By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases”.

If the aim of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 is to be achieved and if we are to bend the curve of the epidemic to manageable levels, the bulk of the progress must take place in the next five years. Without that, the epidemic could spiral out of control, and we can expect a spike in treatment resistance. Investment not made at this stage will lead to greater treatment costs at a later date. The joint United Nations programme on HIV—UNAIDS—agrees and has released fast-track targets. The 90-90-90 targets aim to ensure that by 2020, 90% of people living with HIV know their status, 90% of them are accessing treatment and 90% of those accessing treatment are virally suppressed. If we achieve that, the number of onward transmissions of HIV will be significantly reduced.

Meeting the targets is a stepping stone that will ultimately make it possible to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 and avoid an estimated 28 million HIV infections. The latest figures released by UNAIDS show that nearly 16 million people are now accessing antiretroviral therapy, or ARVs. That compares with the figure of 1 million 10 years ago. That is good progress. In 2014, there were 2 million new HIV infections, compared with 3.4 million in 2001. Those figures show that progress is being made, but they underline the need to do more.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that unfortunately, as a result of
stigma, prejudice and discrimination, many people with HIV and AIDS are driven underground and therefore do not seek treatment? We must do all we can to deal with that injustice and prejudice.

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes good points. We often think of stigma and prejudice as affecting poorer parts of the world and, unfortunately, many parts of the Commonwealth, but stigma remains an issue even in the UK. Even in the UK, people seeking treatment for HIV will often go to a sexual health clinic outside their local area because they are afraid of the stigma that can be attached to being seen as being HIV-positive. We have made significant progress, but a lot remains to be done in the UK and in particular the developing world. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

There are still around 20 million people living with HIV who are not accessing ARVs. Just 25% of those living with HIV are simply not aware of their status. I want to talk about some of the key issues facing the AIDS challenge and the HIV challenge. Since 2000, adolescent deaths have tripled. AIDS is the leading cause of death for adolescents in Africa and the second greatest cause of adolescent deaths globally. Some 60% of new HIV infections are among young women. Globally, HIV/AIDS remains the biggest killer for women of reproductive age. More than 5,000 young women and girls acquire HIV every week. In southern Africa, adolescent girls and young women acquire HIV seven years earlier than their male peers, which has a devastating impact on their life chances. HIV/AIDS is a major barrier to education and to remain economically active. If we want to achieve gender equality across education, health and economic participation, we have to tackle HIV/AIDS in women and girls.

We know what needs to be done to achieve the target to end the epidemic by 2030. We know that we need to challenge and end the stigma and discrimination faced by those living with HIV/AIDS. That stigma acts as a barrier to people being tested and accessing the services they need. We need to improve access to treatment for those who are diagnosed as having contracted the virus. With just 25% of girls having a full understanding of how HIV is transmitted and prevented, we need to improve education. We also need to tackle violence against women and girls. Adolescent girls and young women who have experienced sexual violence are 50% more likely to have acquired HIV.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his chairing of the all-party group. Given that the highest incidences of HIV and AIDS among women and girls tend to be in countries with strong historical links to Britain, does he accept that we have a particular responsibility to show international leadership on the issue? Would this not be a good time for the Department to announce that the Secretary of State will, as a result, be attending the 2016 UN General Assembly high-level meeting on ending AIDS in June this year?

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point. It is still a shame on the Commonwealth that so many of our Commonwealth partners continue to discriminate against people with HIV and against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Later, I will go on to mention some of the challenges with our withdrawal from many of the middle-income countries. It leaves many marginalised groups and many criminalised groups bereft of support, whether that is treatment or even just accessing healthcare in general.

On the Durban conference later this year, the hon. Gentleman will not have seen the answer to my written question that was published about 10 minutes ago, but the Department of Health will be sending ministerial colleagues to represent the UK and the Department for International Development is sending officials. The UK will be represented at the Durban conference—that is hot off the press.

Let me turn colleagues’ attention to some of the other issues. This is not just about the wide range of complexities, whether it is access to treatment, violence, education or economic participation; it is about how we approach research and development, both in dealing with HIV/AIDS and, in the developed world, in accessing the medical tools most needed to meet public health needs. The UK has an important role to play in meeting those ambitious objectives.

Historically, DFID has been a leader in the global response to HIV and AIDS and was viewed as one of the most forward thinking and effective agencies. When he responds, I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will confirm how DFID’s research and development is progressing, so that we can ensure that our standing as a world leader in that field will remain. At one time, the Department had a large dedicated policy team engaged in the AIDS response. It showed financial leadership through increased funding of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, but I am concerned that its AIDS and reproductive health and rights team has gradually reduced in capacity and was renamed the sexual and reproductive health and rights team, with HIV being theoretically mainstreamed across DFID’s work.

There is increasingly a perception that DFID does not have the focus on HIV and AIDS that it once did. To be fair, every Minister I have spoken to in the DFID team, including the Secretary of State, has confirmed that HIV/AIDS remains a Government priority and an integral part of the Department’s work; yet the newly published UK aid strategy makes no reference to HIV or AIDS and gives no indication of how the UK intends to contribute to meeting the SDG target to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. I checked the DFID website, and as far as I can see it appears to be silent on eradicating HIV as a departmental goal. It used to be a specific target and there used to be specific mention of what the Department was doing to eradicate HIV, but the website currently appears to be silent on that issue. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister explain why HIV has not been explicitly included and commit to putting that right?

Mr Gareth Thomas: When the hon. Gentleman researched the DFID website, was he able to find any speech by the Secretary of State or one of her ministerial colleagues on Britain’s contribution to HIV/AIDS that had not been provoked by a debate like this one, or by other House of Commons debates or questions?

Mike Freer: To be fair, I did not search through all the speeches given by colleagues in the Department. I did see that the most recent targets and policy statements
ended in 2015, when the SDGs were agreed, and that some of the other policy documents dated back as far as 2013. To be fair to colleagues in the Department, I am sure that they have made speeches, but I did not search the database. I was searching the targets and policy pages. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to direct me to what I have missed, but it appears that the website is currently silent on specific targets and policies.

Can my right hon. Friend the Minister reassure me that he will ensure that the HIV response is given a clearer and explicit inclusion in the strategies to meet the needs of women and girls in order to support gender equality, as well as all the other related issues? Addressing HIV is a key component of the women and girls agenda, and I hope he will confirm that it will be made a specific target and policy of the Department and will be clearly and explicitly mentioned on its website. The lack of a clearly articulated HIV strategy sends out a signal that HIV is being deprioritised and absorbed into other areas.

Mrs Helen Grant: DFID has put a lot of money into the global fund—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will confirm the amount, but it is something like £1 billion—which has done some great work in tackling AIDS and HIV. Government support for that sort of multilateral aid is very important. Does my hon. Friend share my hope that, following the multilateral aid review, investment in funds such as the global fund will continue to be significant?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Our commitment to the global fund is outstanding—I believe we are its second-largest donor. My concern is that, because we are the second-largest donor, the global fund listens to the mood music from the UK Government. One issue that I have raised on many occasions is how our withdrawal of aid from middle-income countries, stopping much bilateral aid and moving through to multilateral aid, leaves many marginalised groups bereft. No transitional funding is put in place. We have started to see that kind of emphasis being reflected in the priorities of the global fund because it takes its lead from its major donors, which is understandable.

If the mood music coming from DFID is to deprioritise and, unintentionally, to leave marginal groups bereft, so the global fund will, perhaps by accident, also leave those marginal groups bereft, as it follows the UK lead in targeting non-MICs. I understand the strategy for MICs, but there is a significant risk that those groups that are most at risk in MICs are, through either cultural differences, stigma or criminalisation, left to fend for themselves. That cannot be a good outcome for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to address that.

It would be a catastrophic mistake to lose the focus on HIV/AIDS because we are on the brink of finally being able to control the epidemic as a public health threat. Will my right hon. Friend tell us how his Department is planning to meet the SDG target to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030, particularly for women and girls? What assessment has been made of the Department’s capacity to implement the target? The challenge of achieving universal access to ARV therapy remains

ahead of us. As I mentioned earlier, something in the region of 20 million people living with HIV are not accessing treatment.

Last year the all-party group on HIV and AIDS conducted an inquiry into access to medicines that revealed some of the challenges that many low and middle-income countries face in accessing medicines. Treatment prices remain prohibitive in many countries. The price of treatments is primarily driven by licensing costs and decisions about what the market will sustain. Intellectual property rights grant exclusive rights to manufacturers that can make drugs without competition, which leads to high prices.

Affordable first-line treatments are now available in low-income countries in the form of generic drugs. That has been a major step forward in increasing access to treatments. However, the cost of second and third-line treatments remains prohibitively expensive, as such products are largely protected by patents, which keep the price high. Many middle-income countries are excluded from licensing deals that allow generic production, forcing them to purchase drugs at inflated prices. That restricts access to treatment. If a large proportion of people with HIV are women and girls, they will be excluded, because the health system will simply not be available or the treatments are too unaffordable to be universal.

International donors, including the UK, have been scaling back bilateral overseas development for MICs, thereby expecting national Governments to increase domestic funding. As I have mentioned several times, that leaves marginalised groups bereft of access to treatments, and some treatments will simply stop being provided.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this extremely important debate. Does he agree that the issue is not only access to treatments but access to technology? During the Easter recess I was interested to read about portable methods for monitoring and assessing HIV. It is clear not only that joined-up thinking is needed across Departments—including Health and DFID—but that we should look at STEM subjects and our contribution to technological advances to ensure that people in rural communities have access to treatment through advances in technology.

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I visited South Africa and saw some of the work being done by Médecins sans Frontières in the townships there. What was interesting was that, despite the poverty, virtually everyone had a mobile phone. Many of the treatments, including the prompts to adhere to ARVs and other information, could be provided by harnessing technology. There is a huge gap that can be tackled, particularly in remote communities. Through the use of mobiles and other forms of remote technology, we have an opportunity to get information to people in remote areas and ensure that they have access to education and, if necessary, some form of treatment. Access to technology is a major challenge that colleagues in the Department for International Development can perhaps look through advances in the Global Fund.

We need to look the cost of new drugs. I hope that DFID can take a lead in looking at how the current research and development model prohibits access and
innovation. Let me give an example about paediatric treatment. In South Africa and elsewhere, there is an absence of paediatric antiretrovirals. In the clinics in many of the townships of South Africa, doctors and nurses have to crumble the tablets and, almost through guesstimates, come up with a dosage suitable for the child or baby because paediatric antiretrovirals are not financially viable for the drug companies. The existing models work against providing universal access to ARVs and containing and defeating the epidemic. I believe that DFID can take the lead in looking at a way of de-linking the cost of research and development from the demands of profitability.

A proposal is under discussion to create a global R and D fund that would operate through a combination of grants, milestone prizes and end-goal prizes. If it were based on an open innovation-type approach, it could reward all those who have taken part, entered the process and contributed to developing the new treatment. That idea is not pie in the sky; it has not been developed by those who seek to undermine the pharmaceutical industry. That kind of development is championed by none other than the Prime Minister. In fact, the Conservative party manifesto contained a pledge—my right hon. Friend the Minister looks puzzled—that this country will “lead a major new global programme to accelerate the development of vaccines and drugs to eliminate the world’s deadliest infectious diseases”.

I challenge colleagues in DFID to take the lead in looking at different ways of funding R and D to reduce the cost of second and third-line antiretrovirals. The Government have been generous in maintaining the 0.7% funding and in the money allocated for the global fight against malaria and the Ross fund.

Tackling HIV and AIDS in women and girls is a task we cannot shirk. It cannot and must not be subsumed into the main work of the Department and mainstreamed. We need explicit targets and action that we can hold the Government and Ministers to account on. I thank colleagues for attending today, and I look forward to hearing my right hon. Friend the Minister looks puzzled—that this country will

Mrs Helen Grant: The hon. Gentleman is making very important points about women and girls, but does he agree that they should be included as decision makers, not simply as victims and recipients of aid?

Mr Thomas: Absolutely. Britain’s international leadership on this issue is important because one of the things that we, as a country, should be championing is the cultural change that is needed in countries so that, as the hon. Lady says, women and girls become more active decision makers. At the moment, in too many cases, they are not. I gently bring her back to the important point she made about the strong support given by Britain to the global fund. I welcome that investment, but it is not enough to outsource leadership on HIV and AIDS from ministerial offices to the global fund. Political change is needed in countries as much as investment in health services, with which the fund helps. I fear that that is the important missing link in Britain’s response at the moment.

On 16 March, at International Development questions, I asked the Secretary of State specifically whether her Department’s spending on HIV and AIDS would be rising or falling over the comprehensive spending review period. In her reply, she said that the Department was planning shortly to publish the results of its bilateral aid review. Will the Minister set out for us whether he expects bilateral HIV-specific programmes to be rising, when up to now they have been in decline?
I am told by some of the NGOs that follow the Department’s work on HIV and AIDS closely that no mention of any such work seems to be in the aid strategy published by the Department last November. It would be good to hear from the Minister why that omission has happened. Furthermore, the sexual and reproductive health team, which has responsibility for HIV and AIDS work—certainly on the basis of ministerial answers to written questions—appears to be prioritising a series of other issues. They are very important issues, granted, but they are issues other than HIV and AIDS. Again, it would be good if the Minister explained that choice to downgrade the work on HIV and AIDS by the sexual and reproductive health team in DFID.

I come back to the first intervention that I made on the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green. He mentioned the Durban meeting, but I gently suggest that the UN General Assembly’s high-level meeting on ending AIDS, which is to take place in New York in June, is equally important. That is surely the perfect opportunity for the Secretary of State to set out Britain’s continuing commitment to and willingness to play a significant leadership role in tackling AIDS.

In addition, Britain could ask the new Commonwealth secretary-general to prioritise a discussion of the work needed in Commonwealth countries to tackle the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Foreign Office ambassadors and senior staff could perfectly reasonably be tasked to talk to senior figures about what more might be done in countries with particular challenges in tackling AIDS.

Mrs Helen Grant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. At those various international meetings, global ministerial commitments to tackle issues such as forced marriage and early marriage are also key factors in fighting HIV and AIDS.

Mr Thomas: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. A series of factors drive the spread of HIV and AIDS. A health response is needed—we have rightly talked about the need to invest more in antiretroviral AIDS therapy and to improve health services more generally. A series of cultural practices need challenging and gender empowerment issues need addressing.

The only way that such things can happen is if political leaders are willing to step up to the mark. The challenge needs to come from a country such as Britain that has shown great leadership on the issue in the past; we will work with and support them, but we want things to change. I hope that the Minister will reassure me that the Secretary of State is willing to show that kind of generosity in giving way. At those various international meetings, global ministerial commitments to tackle issues such as forced marriage and early marriage are also key factors in fighting HIV and AIDS.

There are, without doubt, issues of HIV infection among women in the UK, but the heaviest concentrations of HIV infection are in the developing world. In such places, women are most affected. In sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest burden of HIV, 57% of people living with HIV are women, and figures from 2014 show that, among women of all ages, there were 12,500 new HIV infections every week. Those figures are huge. The effect of infection on each life is devastating; the lives of young girls, future women, will be devastated unless we do more to act. We must ensure that the UK plays a prominent role in securing a future for them. It is vital to consider how aid programmes funded by the UK and the devolved Governments can help to change that deadly trend.

There is a correlation between disproportionate rates of HIV infection among women and gender inequality. Gender inequalities have far-reaching consequences for women living with, and at risk of, HIV. To name but a few, issues include domestic violence, the role of sexual violence and the lack of access to income and property. Only last month, with the Women and Equalities Committee, I visited the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which focuses primarily on women’s economic empowerment. We must ensure that we unpick such gender issues and learn how best to tackle them. I ask the Minister how DFID intends to monitor and track the progress of sexually transmitted disease and to set targets for achieving those goals. The disease will not disappear by itself, and ultimately we must do all that we can to end the epidemic.

Advances have been made to improve access to antiretroviral treatment, but socioeconomic barriers for women to overcome remain. In particular, UNAIDS research identifies food insecurity as a barrier to adherence to antiretroviral therapy. Without adequate dietary intake, people undergoing antiretroviral therapy cannot experience the full benefits of treatment. That can create a vicious cycle. Women are usually those involved in producing, purchasing and preparing food. When a woman is HIV-positive, household food security is impacted as responsibilities shift to the younger women in that household, often raising additional issues of food insecurity for their families.
It is believed that 90% of HIV-positive children contract the virus from their mother during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding. Inadequate nutritional status may increase the risk of HIV transmission, and women therefore need access to information and replacement feeding options to minimise the risk of transmission during breastfeeding. It is unacceptable that the number of women and girls contracting HIV infections continues to be a growing trend, especially in developing countries. Young women aged between 15 and 24 are five times more likely to be affected than young men of the same age. The problem of HIV in Africa is complicated and there is no magic bullet. However, we must do more to educate men and boys about how they can prevent this disease, so that we prevent such harrowing statistics. Adolescents between 15 and 19 make up 74% of the new HIV infections that affect young girls and women.

The Scottish National party believes firmly that the empowerment of women is key to tackling and battling global poverty, and we are not alone. The First Minister is quoted as saying that the SNP sees the empowerment of women as the key in battling global poverty. Scotland’s First Minister has said:

“For virtually every nation, fully empowering women is probably the single simplest way, in which they can sustainably increase their productive potential. Gender equality can help to transform the global economy.”

The World Bank has said:

“Putting resources into poor women’s hands while promoting gender equality in the household and in society results in large development payoffs.”

The UN General Secretary has said that

“removing the barriers that keep women and girls on the margins of economic, social, cultural and political life must be a top priority for us all—businesses, governments, the United Nations and civil society.”

The Scottish Government have taken action where possible to help the world’s most vulnerable people through their small grants programme. This programme supports NGOs to make a big impact and reduce poverty worldwide. The grant also includes using community sport to educate young people about HIV and using technology for a mobile phone app to improve emergency care in Zambia.

The HIV crisis is impacting developing nations, but it can be stopped. In order to best contribute, UK aid must focus on education about HIV transmission and on empowering women who are at most risk of infection. I urge the Minister to consider the effects of HIV on women and girls. How does the Department intend to monitor and track its progress in achieving the sustainable development goals? It is the responsibility of all Governments wherever possible to provide leadership in this debate. I hope the Minister will be able to respond to my questions.

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) on securing it. Many of us have an interest in this issue. I suspect that many more would be here if it was not for other duties and debates elsewhere, because the issue certainly resonates with us. We are here today because we want to highlight the issue for those in other parts of the world.

We are taking steps here in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we need to encourage countries and Governments to take steps elsewhere.

Worldwide there are some 900 million adolescent girls and young women in the 15 to 24 age group. Despite being 12% of the entire population of the world, too often for cultural or political reasons those young women are left without a voice or any say or control over their own bodies. We are all aware of the issues across the world and the violence against women. Rape seems to be a method of violence and war that some soldiers inflict on women wherever they have the opportunity to do so. We have had many debates in Westminster Hall that have highlighted the rape of women and girls and the brutal, horrible violent acts that take place against them. We recently had a debate on Burma and the Rohingya people.

Across the Sahara and across Africa, rape seems to be a weapon of war and we must highlight this issue. I often say we have to be a voice for the voiceless, and so we do. In this House we have to be a voice for those who have no voice, who do not have anyone to speak up for them, and the debate today is an opportunity to do just that.

Women have limited access to healthcare in developing nations and little or no access to education. Systems and policies skewed against them in some of the more gender-oppressive nations combine to create obstacles that block adolescent girls and young women from knowing how to and being able to protect themselves against HIV. We need a loud awakening of some of the Governments across the world so that they understand what is going on.

Despite the fact that the world is becoming more global, there are still regions in the world where young women and adolescent girls remain at a much higher risk of HIV infection than their male counterparts. It is shocking that, despite this fact being known, there seems to be no real progress, and girls in the age group I referred to still account for a disproportionate number of new infections among the young people living with the infection. There are an estimated 340,000 to 440,000 new HIV infections among young women aged 15 to 24 each year. If that does not shock us, I do not know what does. Despite making up only 12% of the population, they accounted for 60% of all new infections.

Poverty plays a big role, but the elephant in the room, as so often, is that although it is a global issue, there are clear issues in particular regions that exacerbate the case. It is true that some cannot afford access to care, treatment and preventive measures, but more often than not it is the cultural or political treatment of women that means they are unable to access the treatment, care and preventive measures that they need. Fifteen per cent. of women living with HIV are aged 15 to 24, a shocking 80% of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa. We know that that is an extremely impoverished area of the world, but we also know that the culture and policy towards women there is a far cry from the relative gender equality we enjoy here in the west.

Indeed, up to 45% of adolescent girls in those poor regions reported their first sexual experience to be forced. That is another shocking statistic. It is estimated that around 120 million girls worldwide have experienced rape or other forced sexual acts at some point in their
life. The magnitude of those figures should shock us all. They remind each and every one of us exactly what the issues are and it is why this debate is so important. From a collection of more than 45 studies from sub-Saharan Africa, it was revealed that such relationships were common between younger women and older male partners, and relationships with large differences in age are associated with unsafe sexual behaviour and the low use of condoms.

Women who experienced violence from a partner were 50% more likely to have contracted HIV than women who had not experienced such violence. In fact, of all the age groups, even married girls and women in the 15 to 24 age group are most affected by spousal physical or sexual violence. Some of the Members who have spoken already, including the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who spoke just before me, mentioned DFID. Again, the background notes supplied for this debate are very helpful. I want to put this note on the record:

“DFID has committed to putting girls and women at the heart of its development assistance. As well as continuing a focus on women and girls in DFID's bilateral HIV programmes, more work is required to capture, measure and maximise the HIV-related benefits of DFID's wider work with women and girls.”

Hon. Members who have spoken have expressed some disquiet over the DFID policy in relation to its ever being successful. The Minister always responds in an energetic and knowledgeable way, so I am sure he will be able to indicate and reaffirm DFID's response. If there is a shortcoming—I perceive there is—DFID must address that as well.

The note continues:

“Global progress on reducing new infections in women and girls remains a priority for DFID.”

I hope that is the case. Negative gender stereotypes and harmful norms are equally damaging. Adolescent girls and young women face significant barriers in accessing health services or protecting their own health. Lack of access to comprehensive and accurate information on sexual and reproductive health means that adolescent girls and young women are not equipped to manage their sexual health or to reduce potential health risks. Furthermore, they are less able to negotiate condom use. They have limited access to HIV testing, modern contraception and family planning, and are less able to adhere to HIV treatment. Those facts cannot be ignored.

Queen Nana Adwoa Awindor of Ghana, who chairs the African Queens and Women Cultural Leaders Network, has underscored the important role that cultural and traditional leaders have to play in the fight against HIV and AIDS, saying:

“It is our responsibility to ensure that harmful traditional practices that promote the spread of HIV such as early marriages and female genital mutilation are eradicated.”

What she is saying is, “Change traditions and protect the people.” I hope that today’s debate will in some way do that.

In sub-Saharan Africa, only 26% of adolescent girls possess comprehensive and correct knowledge about HIV, compared with 36% of adolescent boys. In that context, according to UNICEF, among girls aged 15 to 19 who reported having multiple sexual partners in the previous 12 months, only 36% reported that they used a condom the last time they had sex. There are basic, simple issues that must be addressed by DFID and through the Minister’s Department, but also by the Governments responsible for the countries where HIV and AIDS are epidemic. There is a need for relentless pressure to be exerted, using the international bodies at hand, such as the UN, on the Governments of the countries in question. The things I have talked about are not acceptable in the UK, and we are addressing them; they should not be tolerated anywhere else in the world.

3.21 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) on securing what has been a considered and useful debate on tackling HIV and AIDS in women and girls. I congratulate him too on his work as chair of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, of which I am a member. There were useful contributions from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), who brings considerable experience to the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). I shall reflect in particular on some of what she said—and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke of being a voice for the voiceless. I do not think there is any question of his voice not being heard. He spoke with his usual commitment and passion.

This debate is timely, as has been mentioned, taking place as it does in the context of the adoption of the sustainable development goals. Indeed, some of us will be back tomorrow for a debate on the implementation of those goals in the round. However, today’s debate is a useful opportunity to reflect on the particular issue of tackling HIV and AIDS, for all the reasons that we have heard, in particular the need to make rapid progress now that the goals are agreed. The number of people around the world living with HIV and AIDS continues to rise, despite the progress being made, and indeed partly as a result of it, given the enhanced longevity from treatment—an HIV infection need not be a death sentence per se. Nevertheless, transmission continues to increase and, as we have heard, in particular parts of the world that may affect women and girls disproportionately.

Three themes arise from what we have heard in the debate: general issues and challenges, such as those I have touched on; the steps and strategies needed to tackle those challenges; and the ways in which we fund and prioritise those steps. I will reflect briefly on those, making sure, of course, that the Minister has plenty of time to respond to all the questions that have been asked.

We have heard that HIV/AIDS is the No. 1 killer of women of reproductive age around the world. In our part of the world it is sometimes difficult to comprehend that, because it is not necessarily true in every individual country, or in developed countries such as ours. However, in developing parts of the world it is of particular concern. During the recess I was in Zambia with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The overall prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the country is 12.4% of the population—some 500,000 women. Yesterday I welcomed Jacqueline Kouwenhoven, who is Dutch born but is a Member of the National Assembly of Malawi. She is
the Member of Parliament for the Rumphi West constituency. In Malawi the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among men is 8.1%, but among women it is 12.9%. That is a pretty stark demonstration of the disparity, and the disproportionate impact that HIV/AIDS has on women, which is reflected in other statistics we have heard in the debate. I think others have discussed how 74% of new HIV infections in 2014 among adolescents in Africa were among girls and women. That is 12,500 new infections every week, and it gives us a sense of the scale of the challenge.

There is a challenge in two respects. First, there is a challenge for the individuals, as HIV/AIDS limits their life chances and lowers their life expectancy, limiting their ability to work, contribute to society and live flourishing, dignified lives of their own. However, there is also a broader development challenge, in the form of a barrier to societal and economic development, starting at household level, because younger children may be taken out of school to provide care or take up income-generating activities. That has a knock-on effect on whole societies. My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East quoted Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, on the importance of empowering women fully, as the simplest way for countries to increase their productive potential sustainably. Interestingly enough, the quotation came from a speech given to the Chinese Friendship Association in Beijing in July 2015. As we have come to expect, Nicola Sturgeon is not afraid to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak out, without fear or favour, around the world on issues of gender equality. That goes to the heart of the point made about the need for political leadership—both an holistic response to a holistic challenge, and political leadership to drive that response forward.

The steps needed to tackle the spread of HIV and AIDS among women and girls in particular fall into two key areas. The first is prevention, in its broadest sense. We have heard a lot in the debate about education, including education specifically for awareness—of status, safe practices and cultural barriers. All those things are important, and we have heard about some of the support that the Scottish Government are providing. A particularly interesting example came about through the small grants scheme, which allows the funding of small, innovative programmes. The Yes! Tanzania programme conducted a feasibility study on using its sports facilities to educate young people about the transmission of HIV and AIDS, and used the study to put the lessons into practice. It will deliver both sport and sexual health training to more than 60 community sports coaches, teachers and peer leaders, and through that method will reach more than 2,000 young people in Arusha in Tanzania. Hopefully it will go on to measure the impact of the work.

Using small grant funding can be a useful and innovative way to try out new techniques and to reach young women and men in particular, through forums where they might not traditionally have expected to receive such education. It would be useful to hear the Minister reflect on whether there any lessons he can learn from that kind of thing.

Jim Shannon: I would like to reiterate what the hon. Gentleman has said. The Elim Church in my constituency—to give just one example—does fantastic work in Swaziland with young boys and girls who have HIV/AIDS. Some of the good work that the hon. Gentleman has been discussing, and that he asks DFID to do, is also being done by church groups throughout the United Kingdom. I mentioned the Elim Church, but the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodists, the Baptists and the Roman Catholic Church all do it as well. It is good to recognise some of the good work that other groups do.

Patrick Grady: I am sure we can all give examples from our constituencies or broader areas of interest of specific projects or programmes that have made a difference. An issue relating to some of the broader questions that have been asked about DFID is to do with its different priorities: the way in which it is leveraging the 0.7%, which we all welcome, and how that can be done as effectively and as holistically as possible. Having some flexibility to try to innovate in new areas and support small, dynamic projects is definitely one area for consideration.

There is the important question of education specifically about HIV/AIDS, which we have heard about, but there is a broader question of education as well. Although it is true that, as I have said a number of times—my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East said it too—there is no silver bullet to global development, educating women and girls is about as close as we can get. Broader access to education—not just education on HIV/AIDS but, more broadly, education that trains and empowers women with the skills they need to take into society—can reverse the negative spiral that I spoke about at the beginning of my remarks. That economic empowerment is crucial.

Angela Crawley: I want to highlight again the need to educate men and boys on their role as community leaders, partners, fathers and brothers, because they also have a role to play in education.

Patrick Grady: Indeed. Speaking from my 36 years’ experience as a man, I entirely agree about the need to tackle all these issues. Education, in a range of different forums and of both men and women, is important.

Access to treatment is also crucial. It has been interesting to read in some of the documents supplied in preparation for the debate about the progress made in terms of prophylactic and preventive treatment such as the dipivirine ring trials and various other medical advances, which are incredibly encouraging. It is important that they are invested in and supported. That is why the points made, especially by the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green, about intellectual property in the development of pharmaceuticals is key. That has come up in numerous Westminster Hall debates on international development, in particular on tackling preventable disease. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister how the Government intend to take forward those proposals— I was interested to hear that movement in that direction appeared in the Conservative manifesto.

Just as with education, where specific education and improvements in education across society as a whole is needed, the same is true in treatment. We need to be able to treat the specific symptoms, effects and infections and boost the overall level of wellbeing of society as a whole. That is where questions of food security and so on come in.
Dr Lisa Cameron: In addition to a medical model, does my hon. Friend agree that it is extremely important that couples counselling is also offered to help in coming to terms with HIV diagnosis, reducing stigma and the risk of violence and desertion by a partner, and ensuring that adaptive coping strategies are applied?

Patrick Grady: That is a useful point. My hon. Friend brings considerable experience of those issues to the debate, so it is useful to have her contribution.

That brings us to funding and prioritisation. I generally echo all the questions directed at the Minister so far. On the prioritisation that DFID is prepared to give to the sustainable development goals, every credit is due to the Government for the role they played in the negotiation and establishment of those goals, which are a hugely comprehensive framework for global development. We now have a road map that can take us to the kind of world that we know is possible, which will allow us to reach other targets such as the 90-90-90 target, which has been referred to. However, I do not think I am alone, even in the Chamber, in being slightly disappointed by the lack of emphasis given to the sustainable development goals in the Command Paper, for example, or the lack so far of a joined-up Government approach or even of information about that. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East raised questions about monitoring.

Other mechanisms also need to be considered. The Global Fund is due for replenishment, so it would be interesting to hear a timetable from the Minister for the Government’s commitment. They have said repeatedly that they are prepared to give up to £1 billion, so my question has repeatedly been: if they are prepared to give up to £1 billion, why not just give £1 billion? The Global Fund knows how much money it needs and the UK has an opportunity to show global leadership by committing as much as it can to that replenishment.

Finally, the point about middle-income countries is crucial. I spoke about Zambia earlier on, and the definition of a middle-income country stretches from a GDP per head of something like—I do not have the figure in front of me—$1,500 to $13,000. In that vast range, a country can suddenly become a middle-income country and find itself less able to access the resources and support that helped it to attain that status. It would be interesting to know how the Government intend to support countries as they transition to middle-income status to reduce the risk of back-sliding in so many areas, not least HIV/AIDS transmission.

HIV is a preventable and treatable disease and we have the knowledge and ability to reduce transmission and improve access to treatment, especially with regard to women and girls. If we do that, we boost development, help to build stable societies and grow economies. Everyone benefits, but we must have the political leadership and willingness to invest effectively.

Let me congratulate the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) on securing this important debate. Let me say a word about the position of women and girls in the UK and remind the House that the part of the population with the most disproportionate incidence of HIV/AIDS is African women. The reason they have that level of infection is because if people think the level of stigma in the population as a whole against HIV and AIDS is bad, for men who have sex with men in the African community it is so much worse. It is all about stigma, so anything we can do in this Chamber to break down that stigma will save lives not just in the global south, but in communities in some of our constituencies.

As we have heard, the number of women and girls living with HIV continues to increase in every region of the world. As a group of politicians, we should pause and think about what that means to people’s lives and hopes. This is not just abstraction and about position papers; it is actual people’s lives. Last year I was privileged to visit Uganda on a wonderful trip, organised by the Aids Alliance and Stop Aids, to meet the men and women working on Uganda’s HIV/AIDS response at Government level, at non-governmental organisation level and at grassroots level. It was an amazing trip.

I visited 10 different projects in all during my time in Uganda, but three stand out. One was a project involving the Lady Mermaid Bureau and Crested Crane Lighters. This was a project for female sex workers—actually, we could not consider those women victims. We went to the market where they plied their trade. They spoke to us about their fears, their experience of police harassment, their hopes, their efforts to get information and protection to younger sex workers, and their hopes for their children. This is the sort of grassroots project among a marginalised community that is so important to fund and support if we really are to roll back HIV/AIDS in those communities.

I also met the Uganda Youth Development Link, which is a genuinely young persons-led project—the chair was 28 years of age. It is a network of young people from 10 to 30 living with HIV/AIDS, and they pointed out that one of the problems with HIV response in the global south is that it does not reach young people: it is not reaching under-18s; the work is not being done in schools. In what are very young societies, if we are not focusing on under-18s or doing the work in schools, we are not doing what we need to do to reach the goal of eradicating HIV/AIDS.

I saw many projects in Uganda, and my trip brought it home to me that, in the end, it is not about what we say here in this House. It is not even about what the big NGOs and the UN can do. It is about communities and empowering people—particularly women and those in marginal communities—to offer leadership and to roll back this scourge.

We have made a great deal of progress on HIV/AIDS, but it is important that we do not roll back on that progress now that our goal of eradicating altogether is within sight. I hope the House will forgive me if I remind it of Labour’s record on this issue. We have continued to be a champion in the AIDS response, leading the first global promise to deliver universal access to HIV treatment, care and support by 2010 at the 2007 Gleneagles G8 summit.

The Government are to be applauded for their contribution to the Global Fund, which has disbursed $27 billion on programmes for HIV, TB and malaria,
and programmes supported by the Global Fund had saved 17 million lives by the end of 2014. However, there is a concern about bilateral spending and the absence in the Government's programmes and policy of a specific commitment on HIV/AIDS. Commendable as the Global Fund and the Government's support for it are, bilateral aid for HIV continues to be important to meet the gaps that the Global Fund cannot fill and to equip affected communities—whether it is the young people or the brave and vibrant sex workers I met in Uganda—with the skills, tools and information they need to help the Global Fund to meet its goals.

Sadly, it would appear—I am content to be put right by the Minister—that UK bilateral funding for HIV has been decreasing, and many are concerned that it may come to a complete end. I would stress to the Minister that we cannot afford to depend on any other source of funding. We need to build the capacity of communities to demand their rights. Ending AIDS by 2030 requires investment in communities and support to demand their rights, and the evolution of the Global Fund clearly demonstrates the value of such investments. There are still challenges in ensuring that key populations—for example, LGBT populations or sex workers—have a voice, but the Global Fund has developed strong human rights principles and places a value on the inclusion of those populations in governance structures. That evolution is driven by the affected communities, but it needs strategic bilateral funding.

As colleagues have said, the sustainable development goals have committed to ensuring that no one is left behind. The UK Government, in their new aid strategy, have committed to leading those efforts. Delivering on that promise, however, will require ensuring that those who are most marginalised, vulnerable and excluded can benefit from efforts to deliver the SDGs, including the goal on ending AIDS. The Global Fund cannot achieve that alone.

We have to consider the practicalities. I saw in Uganda last year that condom use—which is not a high-tech medical intervention, but a vital one—in the global south has gone down. There has been an increase in new infections, and under-18s are not yet a target group. Forty per cent of the Ugandan population are under 18 years of age. That very high proportion of young people is true across the global south, and one challenge faced by groups seeking to work on HIV/AIDS is the rise of vicious anti-human rights legislation on homosexuality and the LGBT population. In Uganda, we found that that was a major obstacle in the communities that needed to be reached.

I will mention one more group that I met in Uganda. Icebreakers Uganda is a youth-led LGBTI organisation that we visited in Kampala. Thank what it means to be an LGBTI organisation in a country that has passed legislation and criminalisation, the organisation has to be very careful about how it works, but it continues to work.

I commend the Government for their contribution to the Global Fund. It is unfortunate, as we have heard, that we have only promised 80%, not 100%, of what we should be providing. I stress the importance of making HIV/AIDS a specific goal and a specific issue in relation to women and girls. The Government cannot expect to be taken seriously in their concern for women and girls if the issue of HIV/AIDS is not only high up the agenda, but explicitly so in the speeches that are made, on the Department's website and in the availability of funding.

3.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who spoke with infectious enthusiasm about her experiences in Uganda, the programmes she saw there and the genuine commitment to community empowerment.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) for focusing his forensic intellect and our attention on this vital life-and-death question, on the eve of the replenishment of the Global Fund, with the UN’s high-level meeting on ending AIDS and this year's AIDS conference coming shortly thereafter. This is a year in which we must make a change in the trajectory of this disease with respect to women and girls.

I clearly have to reassure my hon. Friend. I do not believe that this is the best forum in which to take him through the Department's website, but I am confident that we can arrange a time to do so, perhaps when there is a screen in front of us. On the goal that he found absent, the high-level departmental goals will not specify every disease upon which we want to make an impact. I put it to Members this way: we put our money where our mouth is—follow the money. We are the second largest donor in the world in response to the AIDS epidemic.

In 2014-15, we spent some £374 million on our response to AIDS. In the current cycle, we have committed £1 billion, subject to the 10% burden share, to the Global Fund. We support UNAIDS, UNITAID, the Clinton Health Access Initiative and the Robert Carr network for outreach to civil society. All those things are vital, and they have had an impact. The response to the AIDS epidemic has seen in the past five years 15 million adults being treated for the disease, 1 million babies of infected mothers being able to avoid infection themselves and a two-thirds reduction in the number of new infections—and yet, as my hon. Friend pointed out, in sub-Saharan Africa 50% of the people who are infected do not know it, and among young women, only 15% know they are infected. Clearly, this has to be our main effort if there is any prospect of us getting to zero: to zero new infections, zero—

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) rose—

Mr Swayne: I am sorry. The hon. Lady has rather thrown me—I give way to her, if she must.
Catherine McKinnell: I apologise for interrupting the Minister's flow, because he is making a very important speech. I have listened carefully to the debate, which I commend the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) for securing. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the shadow Secretary of State, that because of what the Minister is saying, the Government should be very clear that that is their aim. I still do not understand why they have not explicitly stated it in their information. I hope he is coming to that point.

Mr Swayne: I hope that I will be given the chance to get there, and that my statement today will be regarded as something of an explicit statement in lieu of what Members have not been able to find on the website, but that is a question we might come back to.

As I was saying, this has to be our main effort if we are going to have any prospect of getting to zero: to zero new cases, zero deaths and, as the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington and my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) pointed out so importantly, to zero stigma and discrimination—a vital part of the equation.

How are we going to achieve that? I believe that the proper principle is to deploy our resources where the need is greatest, where the burden is greatest and where the resources are fewest. I have to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green in respect of his perfectly proper concern about middle-income status countries. The reality is that the Global Fund deploys half its resources in middle-income countries and specifically has programmes to deal with neglected, vulnerable populations in high middle-income countries. We have given £9 million to the Robert Carr fund specifically to address some of those issues.

I put it to hon. Members that as countries develop and become wealthier—I accept entirely that, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) pointed out, there is a question of what defines a middle-income country, and there is a wide spread—there has to be an expectation and a challenge to them to start deploying more of their resources to deal with the problems of healthcare and AIDS in particular. It is very much part of the Addis agenda that countries deploy their own resources, and part of the challenge to us and to the Global Fund is to hold them to account for doing so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green was right to challenge me on the issue of research and development. I do have concerns, but we are the leading investor in product development partnerships, which delink the market incentives for research and development and replace them with the prioritisation of public health objectives. Some 11 new products are now on the market in low-income countries as a consequence of the partnerships that we have developed. In addition, we have invested. We are the fifth largest funder of UNITAID and have put £60 million into its programme for developing diagnostics and treatments. Indeed, there is also its groundbreaking development in the treatment of paediatrics, with some 750,000 treatment regimes for children.

Ms Abbott: I agree with the Minister that as countries get wealthier, in principle they should take responsibility for their own HIV/AIDS programmes. However, when there are allegedly middle-income countries that are members of the Commonwealth but which, to all intents and purposes, are going backwards on LGBT rights, does Her Majesty's Government not have a responsibility to intervene with the type of projects that would make it easier to access marginalised communities?

Mr Swayne: I accept entirely that there is a challenge to all the developed world and all right-thinking countries to hold those regimes to account for their treatment of human rights and respect for human rights. Nobody should be left behind—that is the principle that we have to abide by—and we must find programmes and measures to deal with that. I accept that the hon. Lady is right on this issue.

On the issue of research and development, we are alive to this problem, but let us consider it a work in progress. I accept entirely that there are still problems, but I am glad that the World Health Organisation is now implementing what it calls an observatory on research and development, and that a working group will be set up to drive the matter forward.

The issue of condoms was raised by the hon. Lady and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am very much in favour of the distribution of high-quality male and female condoms. What is more, I want to see much wider distribution of the benefits of microbicides, which were raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow North with respect to the rings and gels that are being used and in which we have invested some £20 million. I believe that that is essential.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised a key point—I think his words were that AIDS is being used as “a weapon of war.” He is right about that, and I want to see reproductive and sexual health as a key part of our response to any humanitarian emergency.

Of course, I want to see a successful replenishment of the Global Fund. That is essential—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Glasgow North is signalling that he wants a commitment to be made now, but I am going to have to disappoint him. Members over a figure and commitment now. That has to be left to the Secretary of State and it can only be done once the bilateral aid review and the multilateral aid review have been published. However, I am impressed by the way in which the Global Fund has attempted to address our preoccupation with women and girls and to make its response to women and girls central to its strategy. We now want to see how that changes things on the ground, because women's needs are highly complex and our response has to be correspondingly comprehensive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green asked me on a number of occasions how we were going to address the needs of women and girls, and it is a response that goes well beyond what we can do specifically to address the issue of AIDS. It is a question of changing culture and of changing law. It is a question of changing economic development and of giving women the power to protect themselves. It is about empowering women and giving them information and access to family planning services. It is about giving them an education and a livelihood. All these things will empower women to ensure that they are enabled to negotiate the terms under which sexual intercourse takes place. However, I tell my hon. Friend this: a world
free of AIDS—one in which absolutely no one is left behind—is one in which the rights of a girl are promoted and protected from the minute she is born.

3.59 pm

Mike Freer: We have had a very good debate. I reiterate the point that if the Department’s commitment to women and girls is comprehensive, it has to include and specify dealing with HIV and AIDS. I thank colleagues and the Minister for taking part today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered tackling HIV in women and girls.
sport key priorities, as well as increasing diversity in sports leadership and administration. Research from Leonard Cheshire Disability ahead of the Paralympic games highlighted the necessity of this and found that over half—57%—of disabled people surveyed said they had completed no moderate-intensity physical activity in the previous seven days, compared with just 24% of non-disabled adults. Of those surveyed, 41% identified lack of suitable activities and exercise provision as the main barrier, with inaccessible facilities and fear of injury also being identified as significant barriers.

Leonard Cheshire Disability said that the employment rate for disabled people is currently around 46.7% compared with a record rate of around 80% in the rest of the population. In Worcester, the employment rate is even higher, but a recent report from the city council’s scrutiny committee, which I support, has pointed out that it is still a concern that disability unemployment remains stubbornly high. The disability employment gap nationally stands at around 33% and, like Leonard Cheshire Disability, I warmly welcome the Government’s worthwhile and progressive goal of halving that gap. That is the right thing to do not just for disabled people but for the whole economy.

Social Market Foundation research suggests that if the disability gap was halved and those who fell out of work as a result of disability were reinstated, we could see another 600,000 people in work and the economy would be boosted by an estimated £13 billion. I welcome the progress that has been made with 293,000 more disabled people working over the last two years, but I share the Minister’s conviction that there is much further to go.

The Minister and I spoke about these issues at the last Conservative party conference and competed with each other in our enthusiasm for the employment goal, but I admit that I have learned a great deal from him in his determination to achieve it. I have shamelessly plagiarised his approach to reverse jobs fairs under the Disability Confident banner and it is greatly to his credit that the event in Worcester last week has been widely heralded as a success. It was supported by a number of local businesses, including Sanctuary Housing, Malvern Instruments, Dolphin Computer Access, Wits End Wizardry and Waitrose, whose first store in Worcester is due to open in June. It was attended by a wide range of local disability charities, including the wonderful Headway, Sight Concern, ASPIE, the Aspire Academy and the Royal British Legion, as well as the Access to Work and Disability Confident teams at the Department for Work and Pensions. I thank all those who took part, especially local businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and the Worcestershire local enterprise partnership who came along and made pledges.

The most impressive team at the Disability Confident event was the team from the University of Worcester, comprising two wheelchair athletes, Alex Giles and Tom Horrocks, and the England and GB blind football star and University of Worcester communications manager, Will Norman. Each of these athletes spoke about the vital importance of the facilities the arena provides, the huge potential of its future development and the employability benefits, such as communication skills and teamwork, that accessible sport has given them.

Will Norman is not only a brilliant role model in his sporting achievements, but a wonderful ambassador for the university and its wider support for job opportunities for people with disabilities. He is a highly successful communications professional, as well as a national athlete and footballer, who has written passionately about the benefits of supporting disability sport and real inclusion that treats those with disabilities not as other, but as part of the whole.

We were joined at the event by a former student of the university whose testimony is worth bearing in mind because it exemplifies both the challenges that disabled people may face and the huge success they can achieve when those challenges are overcome. Jordan Powell, aged 24, a graduate in history and politics at the University of Worcester, said he spent two years not even getting interviews for hundreds of jobs until he deliberately neglected to tell recruiters he was disabled. Within one week of not declaring it on job forms he was offered interviews at four different companies, and now works in telesales for London estate agent, Ludlowthompson. He said:

“In two years I applied for jobs every day, I went for hundreds of them and couldn’t get anything.”

He continued:

“So I decided not to tell people and within a week I’d got four interviews—I’m now a telesales executive and I’ve smashed sales records for my company.”

Jordan came to see me some months ago in my surgery in Worcester to share his story and his concerns about the prejudice and fear that too many employers still feel towards disabled people. He explained that he felt that much of the prejudice was based on unfounded fears that they would not be able to support someone with a disability, and said that he wanted to help address those fears. He told me how Ludlowthompson had gone out of its way to make him welcome and even offered to tear its offices apart if it would help him, but that other companies had invited him to interviews that were upstairs and then failed to make allowances or adjustments when he turned up in a wheelchair. Within six months of getting the job with Ludlowthompson in Worcester, he was setting new records for the company, and he told me that it was having to rewrite its remuneration policy to take account of the level of sales he has recently been achieving.

I was delighted when Jordan, who has also run as a council candidate for the Labour party in Worcester, agreed to work with me on a cross-party basis to deliver the recent Disability Confident event. His testimony was a powerful addition to it. The head of human resources at Sanctuary Housing, the largest residential social landlord in the country, said she had been convinced by his testimony and that he has changed some of Sanctuary’s policies and made it a more disability-confident employer.

Jordan also told me how playing accessible football at the university helped to build his confidence and enabled him to recognise that being in a wheelchair need be no impediment to achievement. Jordan’s story is by no means unique. The facilities that the university arena offers have already impacted thousands of people both with and without disabilities. In its first 12 months of operation it welcomed over 500,000 people, including
150,000 children, and staged 70 major national and international sporting events, 40% of which had a disability focus.

A direct impact of inclusion by design has been that Worcester has welcomed thousands of disabled and non-disabled athletes. Activities range from beginner classes for youngsters who have never engaged in sport to international junior wheelchair basketball championships. Student coaches currently deliver outreach wheelchair sports and inclusive sports sessions in more than 50 partner schools in the region and present inclusive coach education programmes and workshops in the arena to more than 60 disability organisations each year.

The economic impact of the arena for the local community has been estimated as at least £9.4 million.

The university’s unique disability sport coaching degree is developing the next generation of inclusive coaches who have an impact on hundreds of local schoolchildren who will go on to have an impact at local, national and international level. Significantly, more than 300 students on other degree courses at the university have selected specialist modules on inclusion and disability sport coaching. One of the most impressive things to see on a visit to the arena is not only the many students with and without disabilities training to teach disability sports, but the number of disabled athletes and students training to coach sports in mainstream settings. What a wonderful example it would set to have in mainstream schools more sports and PE teachers who themselves have overcome the challenge of a disability and can demonstrate to students of all abilities their passion for and achievement in sport.

It is no wonder that Sir Philip Craven MBE, president of the International Paralympic Committee, who officially opened the venue, said:

“I’m blown away by the University Arena. It goes to show what can happen when you have the right people with the right attitudes—they’ve created a wonderful place. This facility has clearly come from a passion for sport—a passion for everybody being involved in sport.”

The arena now forms the heartbeat of the university’s recently launched international centre for inclusive sport, which has attracted partners from around the world in all forms of sport, including universities in Europe, the US and China and international disability sport governing bodies from around the world, which will be invited to conferences and workshops to share good practice for the benefit of youngsters on their programmes.

The European wheelchair basketball championships of 2015 attracted 400 athletes and officials and were viewed in person or online by more than 200,000 spectators. That was the single most successful inclusive Paralympic sporting event since the London 2012 Paralympics, which did so much to inspire a generation about the potential of disabled athletes and increase the media following of accessible sport.

Subsequently, there has been a surge in interest from universities and sporting clubs wishing to visit Worcester and look at ways of replicating the design and inclusive agenda of our arena. For Worcester as a city, the spectacle of hundreds of athletes in national team colours arriving in their wheelchairs has already done wonders for local people’s appreciation of disability confidence and disability sport in general. I am delighted that the city continues to build on that legacy and that later this year the Worcester Warriors, my local rugby team, will host the county’s first international mixed ability rugby tournament, in conjunction with charities including Combat Stress. I am proud that our local premiership rugby team are the first in that league to be supporting mixed ability sport.

The arena has also delivered direct benefits in terms of employment for people with and without disabilities. In recent years, thousands of University of Worcester students have actively engaged in work placements with a focus on disability sport. It is significant that a vast number of graduates have secured posts throughout the UK that specialise in disability and disability sport-related activities. Many of them have disabilities themselves. Just a short round-up of recent examples would include a wheelchair user in a sports media post, a visually impaired student who is now in a media post, wheelchair users and power wheelchair users who have secured coaching roles, a double amputee who is a sports development officer in the south of England, a deaf student who is now a teacher in a special school for pupils with behavioural problems, a blind footballer working for a leading telecommunications company, a power wheelchair user who is now a community power wheelchair coach, a wheelchair user doing performance analysis for the GB wheelchair basketball team, a blind student who is now working for a national company as a provider of disability equality training and another blind student who is now working for a national foundation supporting disabled and disadvantaged people.

Many current University of Worcester disabled students are also employed as ambassadors for the university in outreach work throughout the UK to inspire others. The list of non-disabled students who have entered careers as strategic leaders, coaches, teachers or support workers for those with disabilities is too extensive to include in this speech. Beyond that are hundreds more—

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this extremely important debate to Westminster Hall. I am heartened by the work that he is describing. Will he do the all-party parliamentary group on disability the honour of linking us to the university arena and also coming to speak in that forum in order that we can look at continuing that work elsewhere?

Mr Walker: I would be delighted to do that and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I would also be delighted to extend an invitation to the all-party group to come and visit the Worcester arena, because I think it is a genuinely unique national asset and something that we should draw to the attention of that group, so I am very grateful for the intervention.

Beyond that are hundreds more people who will be inspired to believe in themselves and develop their skills at both competitive and participatory level by the arena and the access to sport that it provides. Crucially, it is not just a venue for international level or even university level sport, but a key facility for encouraging and supporting basic participation and inclusion for groups ranging from schools to hospices to the elderly. Charities such as Whizz-Kidz nationally and Acorns Children’s Hospice locally have already benefited from its facilities, and I expect many more to do so as the international centre for inclusive sport widens its scope and reach.
The arena received some of its initial funding from the national lottery’s Iconic Facilities Fund and later received the Guardian award for a building that inspires. I suggest that its contribution, both present and future, to disability confidence and disability employment is one more reason why it should continue to inspire and be an icon.

I know that the Minister shares my enthusiasm for this inspirational Worcester landmark. I urge him to ensure that colleagues across Government share the knowledge of what it does and can do for disabled people. I ask for his continuing support as we seek to create in Worcester a genuine gold standard for disability confidence, with a gold-clad heart in our international centre for inclusive sport. I hope that he will continue to work with me to ensure that Worcester can become a beacon for disability confidence and to improve the lives, the life chances and the working opportunities for disabled people.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am sure that there will be general rejoicing on the streets of Worcester today, but let me add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on the occasion of his birthday.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, wish my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) a very happy birthday. He highlighted the fact that I was a local Worcestershire lad. I remember, on my 18th birthday, on that Saturday afternoon, purchasing a record from Pure Records—happy memories.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a real local champion. The majority of my response will be on sport, but first I want to comment on his hosting of the Disability Confident event and the success of his own reverse jobs fair in engaging with the local business community to create crucial opportunities for disabled people to get into work, as part of our commitment to halve the disability employment gap. All too often, businesses lack the confidence to make what are often very small changes. In introducing such employers to the vast wealth of support groups, charities and organisations that will help disabled people to find work, my hon. Friend can be very proud of what a great success he made of that event. There are people who will now get an opportunity that, had he not made that effort, they would never have had.

I am delighted to talk about sport. Clearly, it is crucial to healthy, active lifestyles—disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive as non-disabled people. Sport can directly create job opportunities, as has been highlighted throughout this debate, and we also saw, in the case of Jordan Powell, how it helped to build his confidence to go on to find work. Sport creates role models to inspire people, in particular young people, and also, all too often forgotten, there is the actual enjoyment in sport. Certainly my visit to Worcester arena was really enjoyable. There were inspirational people delivering transformational opportunities. There is a track record of success where it has genuinely made a difference. The irony was that before I arrived to see all those healthy, active people, I had a McDonald’s breakfast, as I had arrived early, so there is still some way to go for me.

The facilities at Worcester arena are fantastic. It caters for disability by design—it is not an exception but a given. The arena was specifically designed to be accessible to all. This is not just about the physical structure; it is also about the need to allow assistance dogs—they are welcome throughout. There is an induction loop system throughout the building. There is also the extensive training for staff and the awareness. It is just a case of disability being a given, not the exception. The people who designed the arena did not just think about the obvious, such as where the sport would take place. This goes right across the board. It includes the changing rooms and the accommodation. The student halls were built at the same time, and people were working on the assumption that outside term time, when the competition events took place, they would become accommodation for the athletes. As a given, they were 100% fully accessible, as were the media facilities. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the facility was busy. That seems like a silly, obvious thing to say, but actually too often we go to iconic buildings and they are only used by specific people, or using them. That is not the case with the arena, which is permanently in use and therefore able to attract major sporting events, which is brilliant for creating role models. That was not an accident; inspirational people realised that they had to work in partnership.

The arena was created in conjunction with organisations such as Sport England, through its Iconic Facilities Olympic Legacy Fund—a catchy title—as well as with the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, Basketball England, Badminton England, many other sporting groups, the local authority, local businesses and the local community. It is not just the students who benefit, although it is great that they do; people come from far and wide to benefit from the fantastic facilities. By listening to and engaging with them at the concept, we got a facility that would always be a success.

Underlying all that was the aim to ensure that the facility was commercially viable. Too often, a ribbon is cut and the great and the good turn up to celebrate the opening. Without a good business plan behind that, there would be savings on the maintenance, opening times, programmes and activities. Right from the beginning, it was understood that the facility should never lie dormant for long periods of time and should maximise commercial opportunities—students, local sports clubs and the community, as well as the elite and professional athletes.

I was interested to see that Worcestershire County Cricket Club, Worcester Wolves, Aston Villa Football Club, Birmingham City Football Club, West Bromwich Albion Football Club and many other groups were taking part. Those are household names and they provided support, including enjoyment, performance analysis—that would have been a pretty painful thing for me during my sporting career—and fitness and nutrition advice. That was my McDonald’s breakfast; they knew I was coming. The arena has become the home ground for sporting clubs such as the Worcester Wolves basketball team and the GB men’s wheelchair basketball team. That is a fantastic legacy.

It does not stop there. The ambition is to continue to expand to create further partnerships. Worcestershire County Cricket Club is looking to do a lot more with its
Chance to Shine programme and new inclusive cricket centre. As a cricket fan, I would be delighted to make a return visit. The arena really has helped with Sport England's objective of saying that where it is providing funding, major capital investments are required to make its facilities accessible.

Sport England goes further by publishing free online tools and guidance to support designers, building owners and operators to create accessible facilities. Having such a suite makes it an easier sell, as it can say, “Look, this isn't an inconvenience for you. By making those changes at the beginning, you will benefit commercially and with usage. This is a win-win for everybody.”

We want to ensure that not just the people who go along to Worcester Arena benefit but that, right across the board, accessible sporting opportunities are a given. Part of that is ensuring that the topic is part of the education of the next generation of PE teachers. The University of Worcester has led on that, because it is a given that it is part of its education process. It is integral, as it is part of modules.

I know how important educating PE teachers on the subject is because, randomly, I was selected to open a PE conference on behalf of the Government—I think somebody misread somebody else's biog and attached it to me, so I had to do a keynote speech on the topic. I had to be very creative that morning. One thing that came back to me was the number of PE teachers who wanted to offer more accessible sporting opportunities but feared that perhaps they would get it wrong, end up doing something where they might be sued, that there would be an accident or that things would not go right. As a given, the next generation will have that confidence. I give credit to the English Federation of Disability Sport and to Sainsbury's for their successful course to upskill existing PE teachers to ensure that PE staff have that confidence. I pay tribute to the PE teachers I met, and there were hundreds. There is a genuine appetite to make changes and I have heard, time and again, just how they have benefited from doing so.

We are not resting; we are not waiting for this all to happen by accident. I set up a round table, which included the Sport and Recreation Alliance, Sport England, the English Federation of Disability Sport, the Youth Sport Trust, the Amateur Swimming Association, the Tennis Foundation, the Royal Yachting Association, Boccia England, British Wheelchair Basketball and Disability Rights UK. The aim was to look at how we can further shape the sport strategy. I have regular meetings with many other sporting organisations, including the Premier League and the Football League, about making facilities more accessible for disabled supporters, as well as with the Rugby Football Union and the British Paralympic Association. Some fantastic work is going on and, at the heart of that, Worcester arena is held up as a shining, beaming example.

I pay tribute to Channel 4, because there are also employment opportunities in the media. It has been successful in securing the rights to cover the Rio Paralympics and made a genuine commitment that half its presenters for that event will be those with a disability. It is not just doing that to tick a box—that would do a disservice to potential disabled presenters. The channel wants people who have a talent to take advantage of the opportunity to further their careers and to have further opportunities, whether with Channel 4 or other media organisations. It has gone right back to the training colleges and the performing arts people, saying, “Look, we wish to recruit. You find people who have the enthusiasm and the talent. You train them.” There are genuine job opportunities coming from there, which is a real credit to those organisations.

I went on a brilliant visit, championed by a fantastic constituency MP who is held in such high regard. I saw that as we visited all those people. There were so many inspirational people who have made Worcester arena such a success. I am excited that it does not stop there and that there will be further opportunities. My hon. Friend made it very clear that he felt that Worcester arena was gold standard. I think it is platinum standard. In material terms, that is even higher rated.

I hope that many other organisations can look and learn, and create the same sorts of enjoyment and opportunities that Worcester Arena does. It is a real tribute to my hon. Friend that he has highlighted that
today. He will have a further opportunity to showcase all the fantastic work that is going on right at the heart of his community with the all-party parliamentary group. Once again—what a way to celebrate my hon. Friend’s birthday.

Question put and agreed to.

4.29 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future funding of supported housing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The House was told by the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 21 March 2016 that the Government “have no further plans to make welfare savings beyond the very substantial savings legislated for by Parliament two weeks ago, which we will now focus on implementing.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1268.]

That assurance to the whole House was repeated the following day by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The purpose of this debate is to remind the Government of the consequences of imposing the local housing allowance on supported housing. The proposals will definitely be a further cut in welfare provision. The local housing allowance was introduced in order to cap the housing benefit given to private landlords. The cap is locally set, and it limits the amount of housing benefit to a figure based on the lowest 30% of the rental market in each local authority. In Newcastle upon Tyne, the city that I have the honour and privilege of representing in this place, it would mean a cap of £90 a week on housing benefit for a one-bedroom flat or £60 a week for a room in shared accommodation—£60 a week is the benefit offered to anyone under 35 years old who is single and has no dependants. It is a quirk of the system that supported housing in more prosperous boroughs is less badly hit by the measure because private sector rental levels, on which the calculation is based, are higher.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend mentions prosperous boroughs, and the London Borough of Ealing would, on paper, count as one of them. Does he agree that it is a scandal that, even in my constituency, groups such as YMCA West London are being hit? One of my very early engagements as an MP was with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). We went to look at YMCA West London’s refurbished hostel in south Ealing. After the summer Budget and the 1% cut in social rents, YMCA West London wrote to me and said that, because it had used all its cash reserves to refurbish the hostel on a business plan that assumed future rental levels, it was looking at staff cuts, service reductions or possible closure. Is that not a scandal?

Mr Brown: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Perhaps I should have said “relatively prosperous.” The distinction will be clear to people in the north-east of England, but perhaps less so to her constituents. She raises another important point, which is the uncertainty hanging over the arrangements, and I will have more to say about that later.

Returning to the Government’s intention, the changes introduced in the autumn statement extended the cap into the social sector, in line with the provisions that already pertained in the private rented sector, which means that the rate paid to private renters on housing
benefit will apply to the social sector, too. The measure will apply to new tenancy agreements signed after 1 April 2016, with the rate changing on 1 April 2018.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman will know that, during the Report stage of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, Members on both sides of the House encouraged Ministers to introduce the moratorium—the 12-month review—on these specific housing developments, which gives us, on a bipartisan basis, an opportunity to consider the work being undertaken by specialist housing providers and to try to find consensus to offset what were originally envisaged to be quite draconian changes.

Mr Brown: I would like to find a consensual way through this, but maybe the Government should have thought about these matters before applying the measure to social housing. If they propose reform, they should think about what the reform should be and then introduce it, rather than introducing it in such a heavy-handed way and then saying, “Maybe we’ve gone too far. We had better have a review.” Like the hon. Gentleman, I would be fascinated to know what the review has come up with, because it is due about now. In fact, I think the Minister said it was due in March 2016.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being generous with his time. Does he agree that the Government should have given due consideration to those people who suffer from mental illness and who will be affected by these “draconian” cuts, as the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) put it, to their housing benefit?

Mr Brown: I certainly agree, and I intend to go through a range of people who are affected by the measure. When I was researching for this debate, I found that the list was far more extensive than I originally thought. The measure is projected to save the Exchequer £120 million in 2018-19, rising to £225 million by 2020-21. The Government have said that they will delay the imposition of the cap on supported housing for one year, and they are currently reviewing the application of the cut to such housing. They have said that the review will “provide a foundation to support further decisions on protections for the supported housing sector in the long term.” Perhaps the Minister will explain what that means and tell us when the review will report, because we are all interested.

The uncertainty is damaging enough. Supported housing is a type of social housing that includes a care element. It allows those who cannot live by themselves without care to live independently with a support worker and with dignity in a place to call their own. Due to the very nature of supported housing—including a care element—it is more expensive, and thus a cap limiting weekly rent to as little as £60 will mean that much of it is unaffordable. In essence, the most vulnerable, those who need care in order to live, will have their housing benefit cut. Supported housing for vulnerable adults and young people who need help to live independently can include housing for people with learning difficulties, social problems or mental health issues; vulnerable older people; women fleeing violence; people with physical disabilities; and servicemen and women. Surely if anyone is especially entitled to our consideration, support and affection, it must be those groups, and particularly ex-service personnel.

The Byker Community Trust in my constituency runs supported housing for veterans of the armed forces. The trust has low rents because it is a relatively young stock transfer organisation. Comparatively, it is one of the cheapest in Newcastle upon Tyne. However, the rents for veterans will significantly exceed the local housing allowance cap. Veterans in supported housing in the Byker Community Trust will have a shortfall of £32.50 a week if they are over 35 years old. If they are under 35 years old, they will need to find an extra £63.48 a week to cover the cost. The Army values the provision, and indeed it has supported its introduction. One veteran told me that “the army does everything for you when you are service personnel, adjusting to civilian life was difficult.”

He did not know what he would do without the project. Supported housing includes housing for young single people who are at risk of sleeping rough, begging in the streets and spending what little money they have on legal highs. Uncared for, they need the constructive intervention of adults. Supported housing is an appropriate and proportionate way of responding to those problems, which are covered by a range of Government agencies.

Tyne Housing in my constituency has a site in Newcastle East at St Silas’s church. It provides supported housing and day services for vulnerable and isolated people. The housing is provided mainly through single-person flats and supportive workshops to help people lead a full and fulfilling life. That specialist housing project is exactly the type of provision that will be hit by the cap. The project’s leaders tell me that as a result of the Government’s changes, the project will have to close; it is as straightforward as that. Those affected are vulnerable and need our help, but if the Government proceed with the cap as proposed, they will fail those people. The local cap on funding for supported housing could have huge repercussions. The National Housing Federation has released figures estimating that 82,000 specialist homes will be threatened with closure, just under half of all supported housing in England. That will leave an estimated 50,000 vulnerable tenants who are unable to work without support.

The uncertainty is having an immediate impact. Services coming up for re-tender are at risk of closure, irrespective of the outcome of the review, simply because the providers cannot make a potentially unfunded commitment in respect of what might happen beyond 2018. The National Housing Federation has said that 2,400 planned new homes have already been scrapped as a result of the cap, and almost a quarter of supported housing providers, 24%, told the NHF that all their supported and sheltered units are at risk of becoming unviable and closing if the cap is implemented.

The cut will cause serious problems for providers in Newcastle and the north-east. Changing Lives Housing Trust is a national registered charity based in Newcastle that provides specialist support services throughout England to thousands of vulnerable people and their families. It provides support to homeless people, recovering addicts and ex-offenders, as well as providing specialist women’s and family services. The charity has estimated that the cap will lead to an annual shortfall of £2 million in funding for its services.
Isos Housing, which manages more than 17,000 homes across the north-east, calculates that 700 of its 900 supported housing tenants will be affected by the cut, losing an average of £80 a week. Home Group, another major provider in the north-east, estimates that 223 services covering some 3,945 beds will become unviable if the proposals are implemented.

The Government seem to be aware of the problem, hence the review, but I hope that this debate will prove a useful chance and platform for the Minister to tell us where the policy is going. The Government policy, as announced, will have a number of unintended consequences. The most obvious question is where will those vulnerable people go when supported housing is no longer affordable? What alternatives do they face? The likelihood of suffering and exploitation is obvious. The immediate concern is a rise in homelessness and its consequences. Some people may end up with the police or in national health service emergency provision, such as accident and emergency; others may find themselves exploited without housing support or accommodated in unsuitable housing.

Home Group’s average accommodation costs for someone with learning disabilities are £13,500 per bed space per year, or £260 a week. In its challenging behaviour and learning disabilities costing statement the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence estimates that NHS inpatient care for people with learning disabilities costs between £96,000 and £197,000 per person per year. The average hospital day bed costs about £300. By comparison, a night in a prison cell costs £418, and an ambulance call-out averages about £250. The difference in cost between supported housing and NHS care is huge. Ultimately, the taxpayer is better off with supported housing.

Home Group estimates from the Department of Work and Pensions’ own figures that the cost implications of losing supported housing could be as much as £2.5 billion. I ask the House to consider that—a cost of £2.5 billion in unintended consequences, spread across different Departments but falling pretty heavily on the Department of Health, for an attempted saving of £225 million. We ought to pause and rethink. Supported housing is money well spent and proportionate to the range of problems that it addresses. It is a relatively small expense that, if cut, could cause great misery to the most vulnerable and great cost to the taxpayer. The answer is to exempt supported housing from the proposed cuts.

I have two extra points to raise with the Minister. The Government should say what their proposals are for the future of supported housing under universal credit. I hope that the answer is something better than, “We are giving local authorities a small grant to try to do what they can for themselves, but they’ll have the power to do it themselves”—not the money, of course; just the responsibility. I hope that he can say something more comforting than that. Perhaps he will be able to tell us what funding structures will exist to fund supported housing when housing benefit is abolished under the universal credit structures proposed for 2018. Can he update us on that?

If the Minister cannot give us the full policy, can he at least update us on the findings from the review, which we are all expecting and which he promised in March? The promise has now mulched into “in the spring”, but in any event the review is imminent. Perhaps now would be a good time for him to tell us how he intends to avoid the hardship that I have outlined, and how he feels he can best give assurance to an important sector desperately in need of it.

Several hon. Members rose.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): This debate is to finish at 5.30, and it is clearly well supported. The recommended time limits for Front-Bench speeches are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for the Labour party and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Mr Nicholas Brown will have a couple of minutes at the end to sum up. Eight people are standing, and there are 18 minutes until I call the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, so I am afraid you must limit yourselves to two and a half minutes each so that everyone can get in. If people intervene on speeches, I will not be able to accommodate everybody. I will impose a time limit of two and a half minutes. I know it is not very long, but I hope everyone can get in.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I will do my best, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) for securing this debate, which comes at an opportune time, given that the Government’s review is taking place. I urge the Government, in carrying out the review, to start with a clean piece of paper. As we heard from the right hon. Gentleman, a lot of vulnerable people will be affected by the changes. I will not go through them in detail, but the feedback that I am receiving in Suffolk is that the recent changes to and restrictions on rental income for social housing providers and the changes in capital funding for adult social care are having a direct negative effect on capital investment available for supported housing schemes, leading to fewer and less innovative projects.

In moving forward with the review, my plea to the Government would be to break out of departmental silos. This is not just an issue for the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions; it is not just about housing and benefits. It is an issue for the Department of Health, as it concerns physical and mental healthcare, and it is a job for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, as it concerns preparing vulnerable people for the workplace.

It is also necessary to involve councils, which deliver these policies at the coalface, whether as housing authorities or social care providers. It is important to listen to housing associations and charities that are carrying out innovative projects that change people’s lives and that in the long term are sustainable financially. These include Give Us A Chance and the Papworth Trust, and—more locally in Suffolk—Saffron Housing Trust, Orwell Housing Association, Stonham Housing Association, and Access Community Trust, which has done great work in Lowestoft for many years.

As supported housing involves more than just housing and has wider benefits outside the walls of DWP and DCLG, we need to consider a wider range of funding sources from other Departments. Perhaps devolution provides a means of securing these funds. Also, councils
should be encouraged to pursue an open-book approach to negotiations rather than fixed-price tendering. That way, tailored, bespoke and long-term solutions can be provided to meet specific local challenges and needs. In summary, let us start with a clean piece of paper, work collaboratively and think long-term.

4.51 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Welcome as the delay in introducing the housing benefit cuts for those in supported accommodation is, it is simply not enough merely to delay them. In my opinion, the UK Government must exempt supported housing tenants altogether from these devastating changes or find an alternative funding model. That is because change to housing benefit can undermine the ability of such tenants to pay their rent, thereby putting their home at risk and threatening both their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as posing a genuine threat to the financial sustainability of housing associations.

Such changes could have a devastating impact on the future provision of refuge accommodation in Scotland, where all refuge accommodation is in the ownership of either housing associations or local authorities. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has identified that associations in Scotland could lose between £5 million and £14 million per year, which would be completely unsustainable.

From within the industry, we have already had a range of apocalyptic warnings from informed and knowledgeable service providers. A survey conducted by Scottish Women’s Aid found that, “in a rural area, introducing a cap linked to the LHA rate”—that is, the local housing allowance rate—“would result in an annual loss of £5,800 for a 2 bedroom refuge flat. In an urban area, the annual loss for a 1 bedroom refuge flat would be £7,100, and in another semi-urban area the loss on a 3 bedroom refuge would be £11,600 per year.”

David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, said in December:

“The impact of the LHA cap on the amount of Housing Benefit payable for supported housing will be stark and make it extremely difficult for any housing associations to develop new supported housing. Without existing levels of benefit being available, providers across the country will be forced to close schemes.”

That is echoed by Andrew Redfern, chief executive of Framework, a specialist housing association, who has said:

“It would mean the end of supported housing. All our schemes would close, and I think all others would as well.”

Also, an Inside Housing article from 21 January laid bare the impact of capping housing benefit, identifying that only 5% of schemes could survive, which is a shocking figure.

In conclusion, the LHA bears no resemblance to the actual costs incurred by supported accommodation providers and if, as a result, such housing options became financially unviable, vulnerable tenants might be forced into potentially costlier alternatives, such as institutional care; funding increased hospital stays, the higher cost of private landlord housing and—in the worst case—the higher costs of imprisonment. This move must surely be the very definition of fiscal irresponsibility.

4.53 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I am indebted to the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall.

I was first alerted to this issue not when I had the honour to serve on the Housing and Planning Bill Committee but via one of my local housing associations. Alan Lewin, the chief executive of Axiom Housing Association, talked about the viability of supported housing schemes in low-cost areas and how the reduction in rent was very likely to reduce their viability permanently, not only in places such as Fenland and around Peterborough but throughout the country.

I will briefly make a plea to the Minister by reiterating the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) that this is a cross-departmental issue and it goes to the heart of the Treasury. If the Treasury really wants to restrict and reduce housing benefit payments and the cost of acute district hospital care, it has to think long-term and holistically, and put in place legal and financial inducements to providers across the piece to provide extra care and supported housing. So it is not only the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions that are involved, but the Treasury. As I say, we have to think holistically.

I will also make the plea that this is a regional issue. Sometimes with our housing policy, we have been inclined to be very London-centric. There is a regional issue here, in terms of the affordability not only of general needs housing but of specific supported housing.

The mark of a civilised society is how it treats people who are voiceless, who do not have representatives and who are vulnerable, and it is important that we bear that in mind. All Governments make mistakes and all Governments are subject to the law of unintended consequences; that is very important to consider.

In this moratorium review, we must also take it into account that the costs of support for the particular individuals who we are discussing today are significantly higher than the costs of general needs housing. That is also a very important point.

Let us take in all the evidence from across the country, and let us have a proper regional and holistic approach, which must include a cost-benefit analysis of the costs that fall on things such as the criminal justice system and the NHS. Let us have a proper review and let us try to work together across party divides, so that at the end of the review we can have a consensus on looking after the needs of the people who really need our help—the most vulnerable.

4.56 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) for securing this debate. I am only sorry that we do not have more time for it. Lots of Opposition Members, particularly Labour Members, feel very strongly about this situation and there are some very important issues involved.

I will also raise a local issue. I thank the North Star Housing Group and its chief executive, Angela Lockwood. That organisation provides specialist housing, including
specialist supported housing, within my constituency and across the north-east region. I wanted to highlight a number of examples, but I also want to point out the nature of the problem.

A recent survey by Inside Housing revealed that 95% of supported housing providers have stated they would have to close at least some of their schemes, and a quarter of those providers said they would have to close all their supported housing. That is particularly worrying for County Durham. There are 6,450 supported and specialist units across the county that support a range of people. As my right hon. Friend has already outlined, these people are very vulnerable, including people with mental, physical and learning disabilities; the elderly; people recovering from substance abuse; people trying to rebuild their lives; and women fleeing domestic violence, for whom supported accommodation could save their lives.

The very short-term financial savings that the Government hope to achieve will quickly evaporate, because supported and specialist housing helps to reduce crime and ease pressure on already overstretched health and social care services. If the Minister believes that this measure will save money, he needs to reflect on the findings of the Homes and Communities Agency, which found that investing in supported housing saves the taxpayer £640 million annually. As other Members have pointed out, if there was a little forethought and cross-departmental co-operation between various Departments, the value of supported housing could be better appreciated.

We will not address the housing crisis by penalising the vulnerable or by cutting funding for supported and specialist housing. The best way out of the crisis is to build more properties of all types and tenures, not just specialist housing. The best way of making things even harder for the local housing allowance. These changes that we are already at a disadvantage with regard to the value of the local housing allowance. These changes that we are likely to be unable to afford social housing. Where does the Minister think those people should live? Magenta Living, which operates in my constituency, has said that tenants on benefits will have to find an extra £25 per week out of their other benefits. In future, vulnerable prospective tenants and homeless singles are likely to be unable to afford social housing. Where does the Minister think those people should live? Magenta also points out that the problem is particularly difficult in the case of acute care, where there is a need for significant communal space for assisted bathing, treatment rooms and so forth. Magenta has told me that the Government are undermining their own drive to increase the volume and scope of older persons’ housing at a time when social care is at crisis point.

Specialist housing schemes are really important for the most vulnerable people in our society, and it is on that provision that we should judge the civilised nature of our society. I ask the Government to think again, to find their point of compassion and to show support for social housing or not. Based on the proposals thus far, I suspect not.

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Specialist housing schemes are really important for the most vulnerable people in our society, and it is on that provision that we should judge the civilised nature of our society. I ask the Government to think again, to find their point of compassion and to show support for social housing.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) on securing this important debate.
There is an enormous breadth of supported housing. In my constituency we have a brilliant foyer, which supports young people, sheltered accommodation for blind and partially sighted residents, care homes for people with physical disabilities and sensory impairment, homes for people with learning disabilities, refuges for victims of domestic abuse, accommodation that supports young and vulnerable new mothers and their babies, many sheltered schemes and care homes for older residents, and supported housing for people with mental health needs. I have visited many of those facilities and have never failed to be moved by the difference to individual lives that is made by providing appropriate care and compassionate support, enabling people who have a wide range of needs to live the best, most independent and most fulfilled lives possible and, in the case of refuges for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, enabling women and their children to move on and rebuild their lives in a safe place, away from the horrors they have escaped. Supported housing is a positive investment that saves the public sector money in the long term.

Yet the National Housing Federation estimates that across the country there is already a shortfall of more than 15,600 supported housing places. It is absolutely no exaggeration to say that the Government have entirely avoidably thrown the sector into turmoil by proposing to cap the local housing allowance and introducing an annual rent reduction of 1%.

Over the past two months, I have met with five housing associations that are active in my constituency and provide supported housing, and have been struck by how strong an impact the Government’s policies are having. All the associations said that they were planning to reduce their current provision, all of them had put new schemes on hold for the time being, and one of them was exiting supported housing provision altogether. Those are not isolated examples. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East said, Inside Housing magazine recently reported that 95% of providers would be forced to wind up some schemes if the LHA cap were introduced. There is a particular risk to smaller providers, which often deliver the most specialist and responsive supported housing but are not able to cross-subsidise that with mainstream housing.

There is an urgent need for the Government to bring the uncertainty and turmoil to an end, confirm the removal of both the LHA cap and the reduction in rents for the supported housing sector, and work with the sector on a viable, sustainable plan to deliver the supported housing we need to meet the current shortfall and the future growth in demand. Supported housing is vital for equality, for quality of life and for the development of compassionate communities where everyone can live life to the full.

5.5 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Much has been said about the importance of supported housing to our communities. St Mungo’s provides a number of supported housing schemes in Brent, especially for people with mental health and substance abuse difficulties. It also supplies supported housing for people who come out of prison and are in the in-between stage—the one-stop stage. Although I welcome the Government’s rethink, it is a shame that we have come to this point because many of those who were supplying supported housing services had already flagged up the issue. Undue stress has been put on the organisations, and worrying about whether they would be able to stay in their supported accommodation has done nothing to help people’s mental wellbeing. Gandhi once said that we would be judged by how we treat the weak and vulnerable in society.

If the LHA cap is applied to St Mungo’s tenants, it is estimated that the organisation will quickly face an annual shortfall across its supported housing services of about £8.8 million. It would not be able to sustain such a dramatic shortfall and, like many of the other organisations we have heard about today, it would cease to provide housing. The cap would be such short-termism—penny-wise, pound-foolish, as the saying goes. Therefore, although we welcome the Government’s decision to rethink, it is a shame that we have come to this point and I hope that the Minister will listen to what Members on both sides of the House have to say.

5.7 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) for introducing the debate, the importance of which is demonstrated, I think, by the attendance. It is unfortunate that Members’ speeches have been limited to two and a half minutes. There have been some excellent contributions—too many for me to list.

I start my comments by setting the wider context, using an holistic approach—a phrase that has been used. The Government’s entire housing strategy must be considered a mess, unless we assume that they want to dismantle the concept of social housing. The much trumpeted right-to-buy scheme and its extension to the properties of social landlords will reduce overall stock, and will be compounded by the forced council house sell-off to fund replacement housing. It is clear that the replacement houses will not be like for like, and they may be located in areas where there is less demand. All those factors combined will have an effect on housing associations’ finances. The ironic reality will be an increase in the overall housing benefit bill, as private rents increase and more properties end up on the buy-to-let market.

Another issue for the social rented sector is the 1% rent reduction, which, according to the Government’s figures, will take £10 billion out of the social housing market by 2021. That £10 billion loss will obviously reduce the chances of some supported accommodation being affordable within a wider model. It is incredible that the Government have proposed a cap on social sector housing benefit rates without thinking about the impact on supported accommodation. The measure is expected to save only half a billion pounds over this parliamentary term. When compared with the £8.5 billion cut in corporation tax and the £5.5 billion of capital gains and inheritance tax giveaways in the Budget, that half a billion pounds is a drop in the ocean. The Government have admitted that they do not have statistics on those who access supported housing and have belatedly agreed to an impact assessment, which shows real flaws in their sign-off process.

The one-year delay in implementation can only be cautiously welcomed, because such accommodation may still be at risk. To use the fall-back answer that discretionary...
housing payments can be used misses the point completely. It is the argument used in relation to the bedroom tax, and it is the argument that the Government lost in court. I repeat that the term “discretionary” means that the funding is uncertain. It is impossible to believe that DHP will plug all the gaps. My local authority has confirmed that the overall DHP budget will need to be increased, so there will not be any real savings if that is the way the Government go.

We have heard that lifeline services are at stake. Let us be clear about that. Supported housing can end years of hell for those suffering from domestic abuse. It can save lives, prevent rough sleeping, support people with mental health issues and allow older people to live independently in a safe environment. That in itself can lead to offset savings in the NHS or reduce the need for people to be in a more intense and expensive residential home. It can help prevent bed blocking in the NHS. The polar opposite of supported housing provision does not bear thinking about. We have heard that there could be increased health costs, increased crime and increased costs associated with imprisonment.

As a councillor, I was pleased to see the construction of a new development in Kilmarnock called Lily Hill Gardens. It provides supported accommodation for people with special needs, allowing independent living within the complex, subject to a 24-hour telecare package. That project was truly transformational for the tenants. I shudder to think what will happen if future projects cannot go ahead.

One of the caseworkers in my office previously worked for Women’s Aid. The circumstances in which some people live are frightening, and I pay tribute to the dedication of the support staff and acknowledge the risks that they face. How undervalued must they feel at this moment? Kilmarnock Women’s Aid was able to confirm that it provides information, support and temporary refuge accommodation to women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. The impact of benefit sanctions and reforms are already having a disproportionate effect on women and lone parents. Universal credit, which will be paid monthly to one household, further increases the possibility of financial abuse.

If refuge services are not exempted from housing benefit, a vital lifeline for women and children who need to find safety from domestic abuse could be lost. We have heard about the financial impact estimated by Scottish Women’s Aid and the fact that the Inside Housing article estimates that 95% of services could be lost. The Government do not need an impact assessment. Those points prove that an extended exemption for supported accommodation is required.

5.13 pm

**Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) for securing this debate. There does seem to be cross-party support for and interest in this issue, because it affects every constituency. My right hon. Friend mentioned how it affects the north-east, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris). I was very interested in what the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) said about how different the situation is outside London. Local housing allowance in London is at a completely different level from what it is in some rural areas. That important point must not be forgotten.

Supported housing means that no one is left behind. It is what makes a civilised society. We have heard passionate speeches today about how in all areas, people will be affected in different ways. The majority of supported housing tenants depend on housing benefit to cover the cost of their housing. The proposed application of the local housing allowance rate in social housing would have a significant impact on the most vulnerable residents in all our communities. The decision is already having a devastating effect before it even comes into force: the building of thousands of vital supported homes has been delayed or scrapped altogether because of uncertainty over future funding.

The National Housing Federation estimates that 82,000 specialist homes will be forced to close. That is 41% of all specialist housing. Last Friday I visited Emmaus Greenwich along with my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). It does a fantastic job. It does not just house people; it rebuilds lives. The introduction of the local housing allowance cap would mean a reduction of 40% of its housing benefit income, leading to a local shortfall of an estimated £86,000 a year. Nationally, Emmaus would lose around £3 million a year.

We have heard many passionate speeches today, and I would like to set out some questions for the Minister. We have the Housing Minister in front of us, but I understand that the decision is pretty much led by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions, so he may not be able to answer the questions today. If he cannot, I ask him to commit to writing with the answers. Will he commit to working with the sector to try to understand the impact of the decision? Has he had conversations about that? There is some uncertainty. It has been mooted that only new tenancies will be affected. Does that mean new claimants, or does that mean new tenancies? If an existing claimant has to move from one property to another, does that mean that they then lose out? That clarification would be welcome.

Why is the evidence review into the decision not completed yet? It started in December 2014, I think, and should have been completed last year. It is still not complete. Is there a reason for that delay? Will the review be finished? Will the Minister announce a full exemption from the LHA cap for all tenants in supported housing? Has a cost-benefit analysis of the decision and the delay taken place? The impact of the decision has one cost and the impact of the delay has another.

Has anyone looked not only at demand now, but future demand? For instance, has there been any review of how many women applied for housing because of domestic violence, whether nationally or locally? Does the Minister know what the figure is for his constituency? We need to look at future demand. We are making decisions now when demand is growing.

Yesterday, a written response came back to a parliamentary question. The question was:
“To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what estimate he has made of the number of disabled people living in social housing who will be affected by the cap to local housing allowance.”

The response was:

“The information requested is not available. As such it is not possible to accurately estimate the number of disabled people living in social housing that will be affected by this policy”.

How can we have a policy that is costed when we do not know how many people it affects?

The hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Peterborough said that this is a cross-party and cross-agency issue. It will affect the NHS, the courts and the probation service, so it needs an in-depth look. David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, is a man I do not agree with on everything, but he has said:

“This decision must be made and it must be made quickly.”

I agree, and I look forward to the Minister’s answers.

Brandon Lewis: I suggest that if the hon. Gentleman reads what was said when we had a longer debate on this subject in the main Chamber just a couple of months ago, he will see that we were very clear that we will make sure that the most vulnerable are protected. He is presupposing something that nobody has suggested is going to happen.

Look at our track record on supporting the most vulnerable. We have set aside more than £500 million to create a safety net against homelessness. We have increased funding for central programmes to reduce homelessness even further over the next four years. That funding will include a new national programme of millions of pounds to support and scale-up work on rough sleeping. On the specific subject that was just raised, we have pledged £40 million for domestic abuse services, ensuring that no victim is turned away from the support they need. At the autumn statement we announced £400 million to deliver thousands more specialist affordable homes for the vulnerable, the elderly and those with disabilities. The Department of Health has committed to fund up to 7,500 further specialised homes for disabled and older people.

We have spent around £50 billion every year on benefits to support people with disabilities or health conditions, and that spending will be higher than it was in 2010 in every year until 2020. Funding for supported housing is also part of the Government’s wider financial settlement to councils, which includes £5.3 billion in the better care fund, and will result in councils being better able to work together, across agencies, and to invest in early action to help people to live safely in their homes for longer, which, ultimately, is what most people want to be able to do.

We understand how vital it is that those living in supported accommodation and those who provide it receive appropriate protections. I pay tribute to the excellent providers, some of which have been mentioned this afternoon and many of which I have met in my travels around the country. Indeed, I was a trustee of a foyer some years ago. We all know of examples from our constituencies and around the country of excellent providers doing excellent things to make a real difference to the lives of vulnerable people. That is to be applauded. These organisations do vital work that shows the very best ways of supporting and helping vulnerable people.

While looking after the most vulnerable in society, we must also ensure that funding for supported housing is efficient, workable, transparent and sustainable, in order to provide a secure, quality service that delivers for those who need it and makes the best use of the money available. As the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) outlined, my Department and the Department for Work and Pensions—this issue crosses Departments—have jointly commissioned an evidence review of the supported housing sector. That review will help us to shape the future based on the latest evidence of the current scope and scale of the supported housing sector. It has included extensive consultation with local authorities, supported housing commissioners and all types of supported housing providers, be they charities, housing associations or providers from the commercial sector.

The review will report shortly, and we will continue to work with and listen to the sector as part of developing a long-term, sustainable funding regime. In the past few
weeks I have met David Orr and others and spoken to providers, and I will continue to do so because it is important that we develop a long-term, sustainable funding regime. It is really important that we get it right.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): May I throw something else into the mix of the consultation? Because of the different statutory framework we have in Scotland for homeless accommodation, there is a greater need for private sector companies to fill supported accommodation roles in Scotland. The cuts directly impinge on such providers being able to fulfil Scotland’s statutory obligations. Will the Minister take that back as part of his consultation and consider making private accommodation specified accommodation, so that those who need to can claim discretionary housing benefit?

Brandon Lewis: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman on that but, as I outlined, the report will be published shortly and we will then respond to it.

I want to put on the record how grateful I am, as are colleagues from across Government, for all the constructive engagement we have had from providers, local authorities, charities and service user groups. We want to continue to work collaboratively with stakeholders as we develop the sustainable future for supported housing that we all want to see. Based on the findings of the evidence review, my Department will be working closely with others across Government, as well as with representatives of service users, supported housing providers and partners, to develop options. The ambition remains to develop a system that is flexible, meets the needs of tenants and stimulates investment in the sector by creating certainty and clarity on future funding.

The sector has welcomed our decision to have the year-long deferral to ensure that the report can complete and we can feed back on it to give that certainty and confidence as we go forward with the final outline. As we made clear when we announced the deferral, the policy review will ensure appropriate protections for vulnerable people. We have done that, as is evidenced in our actions. The latest Homes and Communities Agency figures openly report that there have been 16,813 older people’s and supported housing completions under our affordable housing, and more than 2,000 starts and almost 1,000 completions have already been recorded under phase 1 of the Department of Health-funded care and support specialised housing programme.

We will always protect the most vulnerable in society and provide them with the support they need and a safe home to live in. We must also ensure that that is sustainable and that they have certainty for the future, which is why it is right that we let the report complete and be published. We will then respond to it as efficiently and quickly as we can to ensure certainty and confidence going forward.

Mr Nicholas Brown: Mr Hollobone, you have presided over a very disciplined debate with a clear purpose: to question the effectiveness of the policies the Government are pursuing and alert the Minister to what I hope are the unintended consequences of the policy as we understand it.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame M. Morris), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for expressing the Labour party’s point of view. I also thank the two Scottish National party Members who have taken part in this short debate, the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyr Day) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), the latter of whom spoke from the Front Bench. We all had essentially the same point to make: what is proposed is cruel, stupid and expensive.

Even the two Conservative Members who spoke, the hon. Members for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous), made the point—correctly—that this is a cross-departmental issue and it is wrong to try to tackle it by focusing only on the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government. If things go wrong, the consequences will be far more broadly felt than at just those two Departments, with effects on the budgets of all sorts of other Departments—certainly including the Home Office and the Department of Health on top of the two I just mentioned.

The Minister gave us a partial answer on when the all-important report is expected: “March” and “spring” have now become “shortly”. I welcome that. I think we will be returning to this matter again when the report is in the public domain. There is still a question mark over what is to happen when universal credit is introduced. The Minister was not able to deal with that today, and I accept that he is a Minister at DCLG rather than DWP, but nevertheless it is a vital question, not only for those who rely on the provision but for those who are bidding for the contracts to make the provision. It is very difficult for the latter to bid for a contract without knowing what the funding arrangements will be post 2018.

Finally, I do not recognise the £4 billion figure that the Minister used at the start of his address. Perhaps I misheard him, but it sounded to me as though he said that supported housing costs £4 billion. I think a number of us will want to pursue that further. I thank everyone who participated in the debate, including the Minister. I can confidently say that we will be returning to this matter again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future funding of supported housing.

Mr Hollobone: Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Wednesday 13 April 2016

[Valerie Vaz in the Chair]

Private Members’ Bills

9.30 am

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the procedure for debating and voting on Private Members’ Bills.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the good number of MPs who are present and who have expressed an interest in speaking. I also thank the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who will be wrapping up for the Government and the Opposition respectively.

A debate on parliamentary procedure would not normally generate much interest outside this estate, but the level of interest may be rather different this morning, because many members of the public have become disillusioned with some of the things that we do in Parliament, and no more so than with the charade of those Fridays when we discuss private Members’ Bills.

Some of the most progressive legislation by Parliament in recent decades has come through private Members’ Bills: the suspension and then abolition of the death penalty, the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967 and the Abortion Act 1967—all the result of private Members’ Bills advanced by Back Benchers and given time by the Government. Between 1997 and 2015, however, across four Parliaments, of the 1,977 private Members’ Bills introduced, only 103 became law. Since many of those were Government handout Bills, the number of private Members’ Bills with which an individual Back-Bench Member was able to make a difference to law and society by bringing forward a Bill was tiny.

That is no surprise when we see what happens to private Members’ Bills under the existing system; when a small number of MPs are present in Parliament to discuss Bills because MPs know there is only a very small chance of them being enacted; when Bills are talked out by an even smaller number of usually Conservative Members, whose only aim is to stop them being voted on; when serious Bills about serious issues are not given serious consideration or the chance to become law; and when most private Members’ Bills do not get discussed at all and those that do rarely get a Second Reading vote. The system is broken.

The procedure for debating and voting on private Members’ Bills is dishonest and misleading. It is an expensive and frustrating waste of time. What happens on Fridays in this place not only brings Parliament into disrepute, but feeds the cynicism that increasing numbers of people feel about politics and politicians. It does us no good service.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a really important issue, which I have personal experience of, with my High Cost Credit Bill in the previous Parliament. Does he agree that sorting the system out will contribute significantly to rebalancing the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, and that one of the practical issues we need to look at is how to prioritise private Members’ Bills according to their degree of support, as well as the possibility of using Tuesday evenings, to avoid conflict with constituency work on Fridays?

Jeff Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come to some of those issues shortly. He is right, which is why tackling the matter is important, as he says.

I will try to be brief, because a lot of Members who want to have a say are present, some of them with extensive experience of this issue, and because my suggestion is quite simple: if we want to do something in this place, let us do it properly. If we are going to allow a system in which Members may bring forward Bills, we should have a system that allows those Bills to be debated properly and voted on.

The Procedure Committee is looking at this issue, and I hope our debate will help to inform its deliberations. In its current review, the Committee has taken evidence from a whole range of people: the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, Back-Bench Members, parliamentary officials, journalists, charities and the Hansard Society. When the Committee reports, I hope that this time the Government will act on the findings, because as hon. Members might know, the Procedure Committee also discussed the issue in the last Parliament. The Committee accepted that the system was flawed and came up with some proposals for change, so that private Members’ Bills would at least be put to a vote at the end of Second Reading—not as much of a change as I would have liked, but progress nevertheless. It was disappointing, however, that the Government found no time to debate or endorse the Committee’s proposals in the last Parliament.

I hope that the Procedure Committee will have more success this time around. Last time, the Government rejected the first proposal and did not even respond to the second proposal, so perhaps this will be third time lucky. I also hope that better progress will be made in this Parliament, because it is now widely agreed that the system is flawed. I do not often quote a Conservative MP, but I completely agree with what the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), said:

“In their current form private members’ bills are a cruel deception that we play on our electorate.”

I agree, because the existing system gives a false promise to the public—that the procedure for private Members’ Bills will result in meaningful legislation and make a difference to their lives.

I do not want to get too bogged down today in talking about the technicalities of parliamentary procedure. We could talk for a long time about process—I will make a couple of suggestions about that—but other hon. Members present also have suggestions, and I look forward to hearing them. What is more important is the wider principle: the false hope that the process gives members of the public, who think that they might be directly affected by what is being debated, and the impact not only on constituents, but on the reputation of Parliament, as the existing system fails the public.
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making many good points. Does he agree that it is not just about the Government’s ability to stop legislation on Fridays, but that the existing system is discriminatory against non-London or south-east hon. and right hon. Members, who find it more difficult to attend the Commons on Fridays?

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As a fellow Mancunian MP, I could not agree more.

The system gives false hope to people who want to see action on issues that matter to them: people, for example, who think it is a good idea for children to be taught first aid at school or carers who have to pay high car-parking charges when they visit hospital—the subjects of two Bills that were talked out on Fridays in recent months. Let me quote two people who were particularly frustrated. Jonathan Ellis of the British Red Cross said:

“It is very frustrating that the emergency first aid Bill was ‘talked out’ as we had cross-party support from MPs, over 14,000 members of the public and a number of other organisations. Filibustering denied the opportunity for a democratic vote on this uncontroversial issue and ultimately denied school children the opportunity to learn first aid.”

Ellie Rose of Macmillan Cancer Support said:

“It’s not fair that many cancer patients and their carers pay extortionate hospital car parking charges in order to access life-saving treatment. An important opportunity was lost to vote on an issue that could have made a significant difference to hundreds of thousands of people’s lives.”

We have all heard similar complaints and we have probably all had representations from our constituents. I have spoken to people who have tuned in to watch debates on issues that they had a personal interest in and that they thought Parliament was being given a chance to make a change on—a change that might have improved their lives or the lives of people they know, only to see a debate ruined by filibustering—

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeff Smith: How could I not give way to an hon. Gentleman with such experience of the subject?

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. If the Bills to which he has just referred were so important, why did they not attract sufficient numbers of MPs to be able to close the debate through the use of Standing Order No. 36?

Jeff Smith: Simply because the debates were on a Friday—I will come to that. If the hon. Gentleman is so convinced of the arguments against those Bills, we should have had a proper debate on a day in Parliament when lots of people are present. We could debate the issue and vote on it, rather than talking it out.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am on the Select Committee on Procedure and have had a private Member’s Bill, and I have quite a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that we are almost victims of our own misfortune, as it were, in that we have transferred sitting Fridays, on which we are sent to Westminster to represent our constituents and constituencies, to be constituency days? My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) is absolutely right that if issues are important, we should be able to say to our constituents, “I will not be at the opening of the ‘school or the fete’—whatever it might happen to be—“because I am discharging my duties as a Member of Parliament on a sitting Friday,” of which we only ever have 13 in a year.

Jeff Smith: The hon. Gentleman has identified an important point, and I will come to sitting Fridays shortly. In some cases I have had hundreds of emails from constituents urging me to turn up on a Friday for a private Member’s Bill—sometimes because charities or other organisations have mobilised them—and we are doing a disservice to those organisations and constituents, and to ourselves, by allowing expectations to be raised that a debate in Parliament will lead to a Bill being passed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Expectation management is important, both for charities, in managing the expectations of those who are emailing us, and for us, in the way that we respond. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to a certain extent that extends to the ten-minute rule Bill procedure? I had emails from constituents who wanted me to vote on a Representation of the People ten-minute rule Bill because they genuinely thought there would be a debate in this place that would change the voting system of the United Kingdom, but that was not going to happen. I do not think that is necessarily the constituents’ fault. The charities have to take a bit of responsibility for managing the expectations of the people they ask to write to us.

Jeff Smith: I agree with that important point. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether it is due to lack of knowledge or wilful misreading of parliamentary procedure. I like to think it is the former, but that indicates that we need to be much more open and clear about not just private Members’ Bills but a whole range of other parliamentary procedures, as the hon. Gentleman rightly indicated.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it ridiculous to expect people outside this place to know the minutiae of procedure? Those of us who are in our first term are still struggling to come to terms with it and, when we have 27 Bills on a list and we are getting emails about No. 17, that brings the House into disrepute. The responsibility is on us, not on the charities or constituents.

Jeff Smith: That is a good point, and if the responsibility is with us, our responsibility is to change the system to make it understandable for the public.

When people write to us about these Bills, they think they are something that will make a difference, but we know as parliamentarians, once we have learnt the rules—some of us are still learning them—that it is not going to happen. A case in point is the NHS reinstatement Bill. Many constituents wrote to me and implored me to attend the debate because they thought it was an opportunity to change Government policy on the NHS, an issue of huge importance to many of our constituents. I was interested to hear the debate on the Bill. I thought there were flaws in it, but I understood the sentiment behind it and I was hoping to hear a debate in which the
As a Member in this House since 2001, I have put a high premium on being accessible to constituents on a Friday, as well as during as much of the rest of the week as I can, as I am sure that he does. Does he agree that the suggestion that private Members’ Bills should perhaps be discussed on a Tuesday evening would be at least a step in the right direction, rather than giving them the graveyard slot of a Friday, which massively inconveniences those of us who put a premium on Fridays and who live a considerable distance from Westminster?

Jeff Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It is quite correct that Members should be able to spend some time on a weekday in constituencies, visiting schools and businesses, doing advice surgeries and meeting residents, and it is sensible to allow one weekday a week for that. There should not necessarily be the need, therefore, to attend Parliament on a Friday. If we were to move consideration of private Members’ Bills to another day, that would give all Members the opportunity both to take part in debates that consider those Bills seriously and to have time in their constituencies.

There are options. We could take private Members’ Bills on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening or morning, or we could use some Back-Bench business time. I think it is recognised that that time is not heavily subscribed, so we could use some of it more effectively to deal with private Members’ Bills on days when all Members are around Parliament. In addition, we should ensure that private Members’ Bills are properly programmed, with sufficient time to discuss each one that comes forward.

It is not just about when, but about how we deal with the business. Here are three things we could do. First, there is no reason not to have time limits on speeches in other debates, so why should we not have them in private Members’ Bills? We have them regularly in other debates, so why should we not have them in those? Secondly, we could bring in rules to guarantee a vote on a private Member’s Bill on Second reading.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. As he knows, the Procedure Committee is undertaking an inquiry into this matter and in our evidence gathering it has transpired that on a sitting Friday the Chair can indeed impose a time limit—there is nothing to stop them doing that. Without questioning the Chair’s decision, the fact that they have not used that power is a question for the Chair, but the residual power is there for them to respond if they so wished.

Jeff Smith: The point is that that does not happen. My understanding is that under Standing Order No. 42 the Chair can direct a Member to discontinue their speech, but between 1945 and 1999 that was used on only 21 occasions, so that parliamentary procedure was used rarely. I also think there are better ways of organising our time. As I have said, if we moved the debates to a Tuesday or Wednesday, we could have a fuller debate, and all Members could be there. This is about a package of measures, not just a single measure.

We should guarantee the vote on Second Reading and, thirdly, if a private Member’s Bill is agreed on Second Reading, we should guarantee time for it to be considered in Committee. Those are not difficult things to do, but if the measures are too revolutionary to bring in at once in this place, we could even introduce them as

Jeff Smith: Seventeen minutes at the end of the session. That was hardly enough time for the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to introduce the Bill properly. There was no chance to vote on it and now it is lost in the parliamentary wilderness. There is a fundamental dishonesty in a system that allows people to believe that a private Member’s Bill will make a difference, when we parliamentarians know that the system will not allow that.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Seventeen minutes.

Jeff Smith: That is absolutely right, and I will come to time limits shortly.

We have two key problems. The first, which is widely acknowledged, is of Bills being talked out. Other hon. Members may want to speak about their experience of that. I have no doubt that Members who indulge in that practice will say in their defence, “We are working within the rules.” If that is the case, we must change the rules.

It is not just about MPs talking Bills out, however. The second problem is that it is very difficult for a private Member’s Bill to make any progress without the Government’s support. If a Bill gets a Second Reading, even if the will of the House is clear, there is no guarantee that it will get parliamentary time to enable it to make progress. Back-Bench Members from all parties find it incredibly difficult to make a difference unless they have Government support and co-operation. It is therefore dishonest to pretend that Members can bring in a Bill without at least tacit Government support. Those are the two key problems, but we could introduce a combination of measures to tackle them and allow a culture change in this place in which private Members’ Bills are taken seriously and given proper consideration. They relate both to when private Members’ Bills are taken and how they are dealt with.

The key question, which has already been identified, is whether private Members’ Bills should be confined to Fridays, because when they are, it is almost inevitable that they will not receive the consideration they are due. I am a new MP who came in last year, but from speaking to long-serving colleagues it seems there has been an increasing expectation in recent years that hon. Members should spend more time in their constituencies being available to their constituents.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. As a Member in this House since 2001, I have put a high
a pilot and see how they go. They would be easy ways to improve the way we debate and vote on private Members’ Bills.

The reason I was keen to debate this issue today is not solely the extensive negative publicity that the current process has generated in the media in recent months—and we have all seen such negative publicity, which reflects badly on Parliament. There was a more personal reason. I was sitting in the Chamber on a private Members’ Bill Friday a few weeks ago, as hon. Members talked out a Bill, and I looked up and saw a group of school students in the Gallery. As a student of parliamentary oratory—I take an interest in it—I have to acknowledge the extensive skill involved in talking out the Bill. It was a masterclass in filibustering. However, to the group of school pupils in the Public Gallery the speeches must have been as boring as the process was mystifying. I remember thinking, “Is this the impression we want to give those young people of our Parliament? Is this really a positive image of politics and politicians?” I was, frankly, embarrassed to be in the Chamber that day.

We are sent here by our constituents to try to make a positive difference to their lives. They have a right to expect our discussions to be honest, realistic and serious. It is dishonest to the public to maintain the illusion that every Friday’s private Members’ Bill debates are proper legislative process. Members bring forward private Members’ Bills on serious and important issues. It is about time we recognise that that is the reality. A Member whose Bill is flying in the face of the policy of the Government of the day will have a very hard task. However, that is not to say that over a period of time a good idea sown in a private Member’s Bill may not be taken up and eventually gather support and become the law of the land.

We recognise that there are different types of Bills: there is the off-the-shelf Bill that is fairly innocuous in itself and gives a private Member the opportunity—the prestige, if you like—of having piloted a Bill through Parliament, and there are the new ideas that will vary in their attractiveness to colleagues and the public. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington about the absurdities of Fridays, which do no good to Parliament’s image and are wearisome even for those who are here. I think I can make the claim, for what it is worth, that no other Member of this House has presided over as many Friday debates as I have, and it is a disgrace that we can find no better way of dealing with things.

As the hon. Gentleman said, false expectations are raised among the public. However, I would add the rider that, where campaign groups get involved, they should know through the people they employ as parliamentary officers when a Bill has a real chance of being debated and when it does not. They should know through representations. Numbers of people wrote to me about the National Health Service Bill, which has been referred to, and it was nonsense to suppose that it would get serious attention, regardless of its merits or demerits. We take a lot of time to lower the expectations that have been falsely raised.

Everyone who has spoken so far has, I think, recognised that Fridays have become ever more precious to Members as constituency days; so what fresh approach could we take? I do not pretend to present a completely thought-through package, but I offer some thoughts. The first question to ask ourselves is how many private Members’ Bills it is reasonable to suppose might be brought forward in any one Session of Parliament. Bills produced by the various means now available are accumulating all the time, and that is going to ridiculous lengths; we end up, at the end of a Session, with 50, 60 or 70 Bills. That is obvious nonsense. It is more than any Government produce in a Queen’s Speech.

We should also look at the means by which the Bills can be born. The ten-minute rule Bill should be subject to particular scrutiny, because many Members who have the opportunity of a slot to persuade the House to let them introduce a Bill have not got as far as drafting it. Yet the impression is created among the public that there is a Bill in existence. That cannot be right. Certain other Parliaments, many of which function according to systems that closely resemble ours at Westminster, find slots in prime time that allow a Member to raise an
issue but not necessarily to produce a Bill as a result. However, they can at least get prime time in which to reflect a matter of concern.

Another alternative, which the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned, is to think about Tuesday evenings; and I think I rather favour that. However, just as we have talked about whether Members want to be here on Fridays, we should recognise that quite a lot do not want to be here on a Tuesday evening—something that is reflected in the fact that we have advanced our sitting time to 11.30 with a finish time of 7. I am afraid that has been turbocharged by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority rule under which colleagues who, in its view, live sufficiently close do not have taxpayer-supported accommodation close to Westminster—they go home. That is unfortunate, but it is the truth of the matter. One can be bowled down in the Member’s cloakroom by people who are rushing to catch a train after a 7 o’clock vote. They would have no appetite to be here on a Tuesday evening.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that if a Bill could be guaranteed a three-hour slot at that time there should be a deferred Division. The whole House could then participate in Second Reading at some time. That might create a situation, depending on the number of Bills, as to how much time it will take to fill in the pink slip on the deferred Division—but it would mean the view of the House could be better reflected. I would say that only one Bill should be dealt with per Tuesday evening, so that a Bill—even if it is an off-the-shelf Bill that takes five minutes to go through—cannot be on the Order Paper as a means of holding up consideration of a second Bill. We should decide what is a reasonable number of Bills, and consider the number of Tuesday evenings that there will be in a Session. We could consider adding Wednesday evenings if we wanted to further multiply these opportunities.

If Bills get the chance of a Second Reading, should one have only one Committee channel for them, or should there be a second Committee channel? That is another option to consider. We then come to the more complicated business of Report and Third Reading. The hon. Gentleman hinted that the Backbench Business Committee might have some role in this. That is an elected Committee. A Member could appear before it as the promoter of a Bill that has got a Second Reading and negotiate to get time provided for Report. Third Reading, again, could be subject to a deferred Division.

We should think about the venue. Westminster Hall Chamber is now sufficiently mature. That matter is separate from the subject matter of this debate, but as part of any review of the use of this Chamber, we should consider whether there is a means by which there could be a proper ventilation of private Members’ Bills here, rather than necessarily in the main Chamber. I agree that time limits on speeches could, in the context of a more general reform, become a more common approach if demand is there.

Those are my thoughts. I hope they are helpful in considering the way forward. They are not perfectly rounded or anything of that kind. I add one final caveat: if I may: when we use the term “will of the House”, we must be careful to recognise that that should be the will of the whole House, not just the will of 40 Members who have managed to get something through at the present time. The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington is right to raise this matter. The public are now viewing our proceedings on a Friday, wondering what the heck we are all about at that time, and we have to do better by them.

10.1 am

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing this debate? It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst).

Members of the public who are following this might think it is a self-regarding, inward-looking debate about what we do as the House of Commons. That is perhaps understandable, but I argue that this debate actually strikes at the heart of our role as elected Members of this House. Errorneously, we are considered to be legislators, but the reality is that we are not legislators at all. Back-Bench Members of Parliament have little or no control over legislation and the progress of it in this House.

As the right hon. Gentleman just said, all Governments—I have served under Conservative Governments, Labour Governments and coalition Governments—take control of the legislative process. It is perfectly natural for Governments to want to use the time available in this House to their benefit, but that ignores the role of Back-Bench MPs altogether. The Government, in my view, hold far too many cards.

In my hon. Friend’s opening speech, he talked about some of the successful private Members’ Bills in the late 1960s. They were mostly social reform measures. He referred to them, so I will not repeat that, but the important thing about those Bills was that they were all Government handout Bills, mainly associated with Roy Jenkins.

I want to say a word about a solution to this problem that would put more power in the hands of Members of Parliament and take power away from the Government in controlling the process, but first I want to talk about the role of the Procedure Committee, to which reference has already been made. I am a great admirer of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who chairs that Committee, but I detect a singular lack of will on the part of that Committee to resolve this issue. I do not want to criticise any members of that Committee, and certainly not the Chair; but this issue has been outstanding and urgent for a long time, and yet the Committee has failed to come up with a solution.

Patrick Grady: There are several members of the Procedure Committee here. We are putting a lot of effort into the current investigation and did so on the previous one. A very comprehensive report was produced at the end of the last Parliament, and then the Government did not make time for debate. It is important to have that on record.

Mr Nuttall: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point, very briefly?

Mr Howarth: I cannot give way without responding to the first intervention. I will give way in a moment, if the hon. Gentleman exercises a little bit of patience.
Mr George Howarth

My criticism is not of the work that is being done, but of the lack of will there seems to be to bring the matter to a conclusion, not necessarily on the part of the Procedure Committee or of this House. My argument is that Members of this House have to take control of this issue and determine what they want to do. It is as simple as that. No amount of effort on the part of the Procedure Committee can, in itself, bring about that solution.

Mr Nuttall: I am truly grateful. I think I am right in saying that I am the only Member here who served on the Procedure Committee in the previous Parliament. That Committee did amend its proposals to try to meet the wishes of the Government. To be fair, it tried to do all it could to reach an agreement.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; I simply observe that we are no further forward on the issue. Despite the frequent and lengthy deliberations of the Procedure Committee and everybody else, we are still in the position that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington described, whereby the public look askance at what we do on a Friday in this House. Frankly, we need to do something about that. My argument is that no Committee of this House seems to have the will or the drive to bring the matter to a conclusion. We, as Members of this House, have to take control of this issue and determine a course of action that will resolve the problems.

The right hon. Member for Saffron Walden and I have been looking at this problem in parallel, from different points of view. We have, between us, some of the solutions to the problem. I thank the Clerks in the House of Commons for their advice. I have been working to try to bring a solution. Certainly in terms of when private Members’ Bills are considered, there is a solution, in principle. We could amend Standing Order No. 14. Unless we reduce the number of Bills, we would need to sit on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings—for a three-hour period to make up the necessary time. There are other consequential amendments, but with time being at a premium, I will not go through them. For example, we would need to amend Standing Order No. 12 so that the House would not sit on Fridays unless otherwise ordered to do so, and we would have to repeal Standing Order No. 19 altogether.

The right hon. Gentleman and I, between us, have some of the solutions, but other issues would need to be resolved. How would we timetable? I certainly would not be averse to the Backbench Business Committee taking control of the timetable. One thing that has not been mentioned yet is that any Back-Bench Member who had a serious prospect of bringing legislation to a conclusion would need advice about the drafting of private Members’ Bills. We all think that we could sit down and draft a perfect Bill. In reality, having been a Minister responsible for legislation in the past, I know that that is not the case. Any of us, in order to do that properly, would need advance advice from parliamentary draftsmen, to ensure we had a competent Bill.

If the House wants to control this issue, it is in our hands. One way forward might be for Mr Speaker to establish an advisory committee as to how to deal with private Members’ Bills. If he was minded to do so, I would certainly be happy to be part of that, and I am sure other Members would also. This issue can be resolved if we, as a House, have a will to resolve it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We can see the interest in this issue from the attendance today, and we are not going to have a lot of time to air our thoughts. The Procedure Committee is looking into the matter for the third time, yet nothing appears to have changed. Personally, I have experienced the problems with private Members’ Bills on two occasions. One was with the Off-patent Drugs Bill, on which every Member who spoke did so in support. The responding Minister then stood up and said, “I will speak for 27 minutes and this will be finished.” The other occasion was with the recent National Health Service Bill, which has been referred to. That got 17 minutes of debate after four and a half long hours on the previous Bill. People have written to me asking me to speak on a Bill that is 17th down the list and will never be aired. We are being disingenuous, and the system brings us into disrepute.

There are things to be said for timetabling private Members’ Bills on a different day, because for all of us who live out with a commutable distance, Friday is our time in the constituency. We cannot do a surgery on a Monday morning before coming to the House, and we cannot attend meetings in the evenings. Therefore, this is a big deal. Members must give up time to attend on a Friday, and the fact that it is such a farce, with Bills not coming to a vote and perhaps not even a debate, means that most Members simply do not attend. After they have attended a few Fridays, that is it—it is over.

We are often given the impression by the Chair that it cannot set time limits, yet when I attended the excellent debate on the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill, a time limit was set. Filibustering was not used and the Bill came to a vote. It was a really honest debate and the public response to it was incredible. The Bills that are looking for time tend to be on social reform issues and things that everyone would benefit from, which ought not to be controversial, and I feel that the procedure is partly about the Executive keeping Parliament under control.

In the Scottish Parliament, every Member has the option of two private Members’ Bills in an entire Parliament, and they must get support from a minimum of 18 other signatories from at least half the parties. Once that has happened, a Bill is given time and there are time limits on speeches, and it must be brought to a vote. The Non-Government Bills Unit provides the support to bring it through. Private Members’ Bills that come purely from a Back Bencher therefore result in legislation. I think we all recognise the many different things that could be done, but the time is now to actually do something.
One was what I consider to be Parliament at its best and the other was what I consider to be Parliament at its worst.

The first, which was referred to by my hon. Friend, was the Assisted Dying Bill, on which we had a full debate. Many Members contributed and we had a clear outcome. The second occasion, which has also been referred to, was when two Bills were debated: the Off-patent Drugs Bill and the NHS (Charitable Trusts Etc) Bill. Both were worthy matters for debate, but events were manipulated so that the Off-patent Drugs Bill was talked out.

The particularly frustrating aspect of that for me was that the first Bill, on NHS charitable trusts, was uncontroversial, but several Back Benchers used and abused the system to ensure that the second Bill was talked out. The charitable trusts Bill had a particular application to Great Ormond Street hospital and the legacy of J. M. Barrie, so that gave Members the perfect opportunity to talk at length about his work and, of course, Peter Pan. However, such was the garrulous nature of proceedings that the words “Peter Pan” were mentioned more times in the debate than they were in the original book—if that does not damage the reputation of Parliament, I do not know what does. Certainly by the end of the debate I was ready for a man in green to fly me away from the Chamber.

Most of all, the situation disappoints, frustrates and angers the many members of the public who will rightly feel that to some Members, the playing of parlour games is more important than proper debate and scrutiny of legislation that could change people’s lives. Of course, it is a matter for Members if they wish to attract the obloquy that follows if a well-intentioned Bill is defeated, but is that really what their time in Parliament should be remembered for? Is democracy not about engaging with the issues, trying to persuade others of the case and then testing that with a vote?

The nub of the issue is that we have a dishonest process. The 2013 report from the Procedure Committee identified the central issues, to which my hon. Friend referred. The report correctly stated that the overwhelming majority of private Members’ Bills fail because of a lack of time, but one only has to read the numerous press reports about parliamentary recess lengths to understand that the public will not be too sympathetic to the idea that we do not have enough time to discuss legislation. Even now, 60 private Members’ Bills appear on the latest Order Paper, despite the fact that there are no sitting Fridays currently scheduled for the rest of this Session. None of them have any chance of passing into law, so why are they there? It just gives people a false impression and does this place no credit at all.

If the Government of the day do not wish to see private Members’ Bills pass, they have the majority to ensure that they do not, and they should have the courage to say so. I am sure that most members of the public would prefer a straightforward response from the Government, rather than the games that are currently being played, which do us no credit at all.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing the debate. However, I have to say that I think it is slightly premature, given that, as has been referred to, the Procedure Committee is looking into the matter. It has conducted a number of evidence sessions and will shortly be issuing a report, about which I cannot talk this morning for obvious reasons.

However, I want to put a couple of things on record very briefly—I am conscious of the fact that others want to speak. My first point—I speak as a northern Member of Parliament who represents a northern constituency, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who is a frequent attender on Fridays—is that if a private Member’s Bill reaches the statute book, it affects my constituents in just the same way as a Government Bill. I therefore regard it as my job to give that Bill the same level of scrutiny as I would any other Bill.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Is the difference not that if we have a Government Bill, we know we will get to vote? If we come here on a Friday for a private Member’s Bill, we probably will not.

Mr Nuttall: The answer to that lies in Standing Order No. 36. The hon. Lady referred in her speech to the assisted dying debate. Because there were so many Members in the House that day, there was no need to have closure motions, because the parties agreed that it would go through. It was the will of the House that there should be a vote, so a vote took place on the merits of the Bill. The important thing about that Bill was that, just as in the case of the Bills that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington referred to, such as on the abolition of the death penalty and abortion, it was on a matter of conscience, on which Members have a free vote. To put it another way, the Government are neutral on such matters. As has been said a number of times this morning, no Back-Bench Member should expect their Bill to get through the House unless it has the support of the Government, or at least their tacit silent agreement to stand aside.

Mr George Howarth: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that although those are matters of conscience, the problem with the current procedures is that we are prevented from having the opportunity to exercise our conscience?

Mr Nuttall: Well, there was a vote on the Assisted Dying Bill. As far as I am aware, when any Bill on a matter of conscience has come before the House, it has generally been given a vote. However, I make no apologies for using the procedures of the House to oppose a Bill in any way that I can.

I am conscious of the fact that my three minutes have already gone, Ms Vaz—although I have taken a couple of interventions—so I will just say this: those who want to change the procedures of the House should be careful what they wish for. Anyone who thinks that simply changing the procedures will make it easier to get private Members’ Bills through is frankly kidding themselves. The reality is that if the time for consideration of private Members’ Bills is moved to a Tuesday or Wednesday evening, the Government will use their majority and a three-line Whip will be imposed on Government Members. Any Bill that the Government oppose will be voted down—that is the reality of the situation. I look forward to hearing what other Members have to say.
10.19 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), and I am pleased that his contribution was relatively brief.

I am a relatively new Member of Parliament, and when I started, the documentary “Inside the Commons” was being filmed. When I watched it and saw the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) filibustering, I thought, “It’s editing and artistic licence. They’re showing Parliament in a particular way, but surely that’s not really how it conducts its business?” But I witnessed it at first hand at the Committee stage of a private Member’s Bill, the NHS (Amended Duties and Powers) Bill. The hon. Member for Bury North took up the whole two hours of the first session talking about the difficulties of starting at 9 o’clock in the morning and people’s perceived travel problems getting to the Committee, and the Committee stage was talked out. The hon. Member for North East Somerset gave us all manner of information about his dietary habits. We all know that he loves Cadbury’s Creme Eggs.

Mr Nuttall: I served on the Committee, but the Bill was abandoned by its supporters. We would have been happy to debate it day and night, but its supporters decided to give up on it.

Liz McInnes: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would have been happy to carry on debating it day and night, but the fact is that no meaningful debate was allowed.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing the debate, because it is vital to do something about the charade on Friday mornings. I was present when the Hospital Parking Charges (Exemption for Carers) Bill was shamefully talked out. That was an absolute disgrace, and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) deserves an honourable mention for his part in not allowing that Bill to make progress. I was also present for the Compulsory Emergency First Aid Education (State-funded Secondary Schools) Bill. That was outrageous. I had been encouraged by constituents to be there, and as many hon. Members have said, we give up our Fridays to attend. I am a northern MP, and I give up time in my constituency to take part in discussing Bills that go absolutely nowhere.

This afternoon, I will present a petition to No. 10 Downing Street on the Criminal Driving (Justice for Victims) Bill. It is a private Member’s Bill and has no chance of being heard, so we must resort to presenting a petition with 20,000 signatures.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Three more hon. Members—Margaret Ferrier, Nick Thomas-Symonds and Julie Cooper—have written in asking to speak. After that, two more Members want to speak. I aim to start the wind ups at 10.35 am.

10.23 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on bringing forward this important debate.

For me as a new Member, the past year has been a steep learning curve. I have had to become educated in not only the rules and procedures of the House, but the unspoken courtesies and quirks. Tradition is evidently important, and it is not hard to see why. The parliamentary estate is impressive and rich in historical significance, and it perpetuates tradition and keeps some of that history alive. However, there are signs that the House is unafraid of moving with the times. The widespread availability of live and on-demand video feeds show not the willingness to do that but an earnestness to make the process of democracy more transparent. The example of ParliamentLive.tv is apt, as it is a wonderful illustration of how an emerging technology can wonderfully complement the existing Hansard without replacing it.

Coming to this place with a fresh perspective, I have also found myself growing frustrated with some of the more time-honoured traditions. The most frustrating procedure has been that for debating and voting on private Member’s Bills. My chagrin seems to be shared by the wider public, because social media has recently become alight with talk of Bills being talked out, and the word “filibuster” seems to be used more frequently.

There seems to be greater public awareness of the democratic process. In Scotland particularly, it seems that the Westminster system is observed by the public in almost forensic detail like never before. The independence referendum had the wonderful effect of engaging many people who had come to feel disfranchised from politics but who now tune in regularly to parliamentary proceedings at Westminster. Comparisons are also being made with the Scottish Parliament, from which important lessons can be learned. The private Member’s Bill system in Edinburgh could be adopted and adapted for this place.

Some private Members’ Bills have led to wonderful moments of consensus recently. Video footage of the successful passing of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, with unanimous support from the parties, went viral. The public gallery, which was filled with people whose lives would be made profoundly different by the legislation, erupted with joy. However, in this place, I am disappointed that some Bills have been the victim of what can only be described as party political pursuits.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Would the hon. Lady say that the fact that statutory instruments are now being used with gay abandon—that was criticised by Lord Judge this morning—is part of a wider pattern that includes the cutting of Short money and the Trade Union Bill? It is part of a wider pattern of an attack on democracy?

Margaret Ferrier: I take the hon. Lady’s important point, and I am sure the Minister will respond to it.

As a sponsor of the Food Waste (Reduction) Bill, I was eager to hear it debated and scrutinised, and for the House to be given the opportunity to vote on it. The measures in the Bill had widespread public support, and for it to be talked out was an affront to democracy. Similar legislation has been passed in other European countries, such as France and Italy, and the Bill warranted fuller discussion by the House. So too did the NHS reinstatement Bill. No time limits were imposed on speakers during the debate, and one speaker alone was able to orate for more than one hour and 20 minutes.
The system is clearly in need of reform, and I propose that time limits should become a regular part of the discussion of private Members’ Bills. There also needs to be proper timetabling to ensure a more equitable method of dealing with Second Reading debates. There must also be the presumption of a Division on Second Reading. It is incredibly frustrating to take time away from my constituency on a Friday for an important debate, only to be denied a vote. That may not be a problem for some Members with constituencies in closer proximity to Westminster, but the logistics mean that Members based in Scotland must sacrifice an entire day in their constituency.

I hope that careful consideration will be given to the points I have raised. Reform of the current system will not only lead to a fairer process but create one that is much more accessible to the electorate.

10.27 am

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing such an important debate.

As a new Member, I was delighted to be drawn in the ballot for private Members’ Bills in June 2015 and to introduce the Off-patent Drugs Bill, the central aim of which was to bring about more consistent access to drugs for which new indications had been found. That Bill was talked out on 6 November, as hon. Members have said. Since then, I have been delighted to work on a cross-party basis with the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences to make progress in obtaining pledges from the Government and achieving legislative change through a different private Member’s Bill.

None the less, the events of 6 November 2015 did a great deal of damage to Parliament’s reputation. It is simple to see why, if one looks at what happened that day. Parliament starts at 9.30 on Fridays, and the first Bill under discussion was the NHS (Charitable Trusts) Bill, which was to bring about more consistent access to drugs for which new indications had been found. That Bill was talked out on 6 November as, hon. Members have said. Since then, I have been delighted to work on a cross-party basis with the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences to make progress in obtaining pledges from the Government and achieving legislative change through a different private Member’s Bill.

None the less, the events of 6 November 2015 did a great deal of damage to Parliament’s reputation. It is simple to see why, if one looks at what happened that day. Parliament starts at 9.30 on Fridays, and the first Bill under discussion was the NHS (Charitable Trusts Etc.) Bill, a laudable but simple Bill to allow Great Ormond Street hospital to continue to benefit from J. M. Barrie’s “Peter Pan” royalties. The exchanges on that day sum up the issue. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who introduced the Bill, said:

“The Bill is purely about 16 NHS charities and their move to independence, and about Great Ormond Street.”

Madam Deputy Speaker responded that “the hon. Lady is right to point out that the Bill is narrow.”—[Official Report, 6 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 1257.]

Yet it took from 9.30 am until 1.8 pm to discuss that Bill. So uncontroversial was it that there was not even a Division. My Bill was then discussed, and things proceeded very quickly until just after 2 o’clock, when the Minister for Community and Social Care got to his feet and said:

“In the time available before half-past two—I make it very clear that I will talk until then, because that is the procedure here.”—[Official Report, 6 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 1304.]

There is no doubt about it: the Government were deliberately talking out the Bill.

I believe in the private Member’s Bill system. It is very useful, because we have an Executive fused into our legislature and the Executive dominate parliamentary business. This procedure gives Back Benches an opportunity to make a difference. Also, there were social changes in the 20th century that were regarded as being better brought about by this route than by Government business. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) pointed out, the 1960s changes came about because the Home Secretary from 1965 to 1967, Roy Jenkins, either tacitly or overtly supported the Bills. Therein lies a double problem: first, there is the Executive dominance of the system, but secondly, there is the filibustering. The fact that the Executive exercise their dominance in that non-transparent, arcane way is equally a problem. The time has come for reform.

10.31 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for raising this very important subject, and grateful just to have a few minutes in which to speak. It is ironical that when my name was selected and I was given the opportunity to introduce a private Member’s Bill, five hours were available, but some Members took the opportunity to speak for more than 90 minutes on that occasion, with the deliberate aim of talking out the Bill, and the Minister who responded talked to the very last minute, half-past 2, so that there could be no possibility of a vote.

I chose a very serious subject that mattered to a lot of people in this country. I was trying to help, in a small way, the carers who give so much to so many, and 1 million carers and their families would have benefited had my private Member’s Bill progressed. However, from the outset that was not to be. There was no pretence even of serious debate on the Government Benches. The opportunity was taken by three Members—the same three Members. I note, who regularly attend private Member’s Bill debates on a Friday, so I have to ask the question: do they feel so strongly about every private Member’s Bill? That was hugely disrespectful to the public who watched the proceedings. It brings Parliament into tremendous disrepute. Hundreds of people contacted me. They just could not believe it. They did not understand the system. How can the great British democratic system behave in this fashion, sometimes week after week?

The point has been made that if a private Member’s Bill is introduced and is against the will of the Government, it cannot hope to succeed. I accept that; we live in a democracy. But should not we have the opportunity of a democratic vote? What is happening is dishonest. Members from across the parties gave their support to my Bill privately. I spoke with Conservative Members, Scottish National party Members, Liberal Democrats and the representative of the Green party, and they all said, “This is a fantastic Bill and we would like to see it implemented,” but they, more experienced Members than I, had seen how the system works. Some of them were not able to be here on a Friday, and quite understandably. How could I expect an SNP Member to stay and have a long journey afterwards, knowing full well that the Bill would be talked out?

It is particularly dishonest when Government Members pledge support for carers to their constituents and out in the wider community—that is fine; they are entitled
to their opinion—but then come into Parliament and deliberately deny the public the knowledge that they are not delivering on that pledge. If the Government did not want the Bill to proceed—they clearly did not—let us be honest about it. Let us have a vote. Let the Government say, “We do not support carers,” which was what really happened on the day. If there is a will to sort this, we can do it.

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** I think the hon. Lady needs to be careful. Just because not enough MPs chose to come to support her Bill in Parliament does not mean they do not support carers. She has to be careful about differentiating between her Bill and the issue of carers.

**Julie Cooper:** That was how it appeared to the wider public, and many people were tuned in, watching the debate. Carers and their families were watching the debate. But there is a will to sort this. Time is pressing; I will not. We can change this situation. If there is a will to do it, we can restrict the length of speeches. We can look at the days on which the debates are held so that Members from across the country can attend more easily. And we can ensure that every private Member’s Bill comes to an honest democratic vote.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Before we hear from the Front Benchers, let me thank all hon. Members who have spoken. We have had nine speakers, and every one has been very good with their time.

10.35 am

**Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on initiating this important debate. It has been said by many hon. Members that private Members’ Bills perpetrate a deception on the public. We need to think hard about how to address that, because we know that people are becoming increasingly disengaged from politics and this system does nothing to remedy that; in fact, it simply adds to it. There is no silver bullet to restore trust, faith and engagement with this place, but we could do something about this issue to help to address that problem. Addressing the outmoded, outdated, convoluted and obfuscatory way in which private Members’ Bills are dealt with in this place could restore a little bit of faith in the Westminster parliamentary system.

Like my colleagues, I cannot help but look at this system through the prism of the Scottish Parliament. We look at it as new MPs, admittedly, but with utter bewilderment because it makes no sense, and perhaps—I throw this out just as a suggestion—that partly explains why the people of Scotland feel much greater affinity with, and ownership of, the Scottish Parliament than they do with this place. Like the rest of the UK, the people of Scotland are very detached and disengaged from what happens in this place. There is much that this system can learn from the Scottish Parliament if it is serious about addressing the disengagement that constituents feel.

We have talked a lot today about the NHS reinstatement Bill—the National Health Service Bill. Like my colleagues and, I suspect, the hundreds of thousands of people across the UK who are concerned about that Bill and the wider issue, I watched what happened in the debate. There is no point in blaming it on procedure and saying, “That is how it works.” We looked at the response to the debate and what we saw was what very much appeared to be contempt and disregard for the very important issue that that private Member’s Bill was trying to address. What that tells those of us who were frustrated on that day and what it tells the public is that there is little or no opportunity for MPs or groups of MPs to introduce a meaningful debate on something that does not have the support of the Government, so I ask: where is the balance between the Parliament and the Executive? We watched the debate that day on the NHS reinstatement Bill with utter despair, because we know that all it takes is three or four MPs to filibuster, chunter, ramble and obfuscate in order to throw the entire issue that the private Member’s Bill is trying to tackle into chaos—into the long grass.

**Mr Nuttall:** Will the hon. Lady not accept that if any Member in the Chamber attempts to behave in the way that she has just described, the Member would be immediately brought to order by the Chair and told to get back to the topic under debate?

**Patricia Gibson:** I sincerely wish that the hon. Gentleman were correct. When I watched what happened that day—admittedly, as a new MP with fresh eyes and all the rest of it—I said to myself and a couple of my colleagues, “If this is the mother of Parliaments, God help the others.” The hon. Gentleman was present in the Chamber that day and I know that he knows that there was a clear attempt to talk out the NHS reinstatement Bill. That is evidenced by the fact that 17 minutes were allocated to the debate of that Bill, and 17 minutes is not even a proper debate.

**Dr Huq:** I am a London MP so I do not have the Scotland problem, but even I have found the situation frustrating. On one of those frustrating Fridays, I went into a TV studio with a Conservative Member and explained what had happened. He sort of said, “You should have known better. That’s our hit squad. We send them every Friday.” For us, as new MPs, the honeymoon should not be over yet, but we are continually being frustrated on Fridays.

**Patricia Gibson:** I understand exactly the hon. Lady’s point. I am afraid that the honeymoon was over very quickly in terms of parliamentary procedure because what we see, and what we saw on that day, are shenanigans and parliamentary games, which do this place and our constituents no credit. It matters in the wider sense because the public do not understand the outdated procedures of this place. And why should they understand? I have been here for almost a year and I do not understand. I do not know what is going on because it makes no sense.

I know we are under time pressure, but I will leave hon. Members with this thought: this place is detached from the people it seeks to represent and we have to be very careful because this place is in danger, if we are not already quite there, of becoming an absurd and grotesque
carbuncle on the face of the UK. If we seek to represent people, we must take it seriously. We must treat serious debates that aim to do serious things with the respect that they deserve. Our constituents deserve better.

10.41 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing this important debate. I thank all my colleagues who have spoken passionately on this procedural subject. In particular, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) and my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and for Burnley (Julie Cooper) on their contributions. It has been valuable to hear the experiences of those who have tried to introduce their own Bills and who took part in the lottery that we were all excited about at the beginning of the Session, only to find that it is a cruel joke not only on the public, but on us as individuals starting our adventures in Parliament.

It is clear to the majority of us that the current system for debating and voting on private Members’ Bills is undemocratic. It looks outdated to the public and it needs to change. Individual MPs currently have virtually no chance of influencing legislative change. This place has nothing to fear from the duly elected representatives from all parts of this nation raising important issues that are a high priority for constituents or large sections of society.

As the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) mentioned, other parliamentary systems make specific provision for individual Members to be able to create, generate or better influence change to legislation, and now we have the opportunity to do that ourselves. Since the election, Bill after Bill that could have saved lives and money, and helped those most in need has been blocked. That is not only damaging to those pieces of legislation that have not passed into law; it is hugely damaging to our democracy, because they are blocked by filibuster and were not even voted on.

Dr Huq: Is my hon. Friend aware that there is currently an e-petition called “Reform the rules on filibustering or ‘talking a Bill to death’”? It has 50,000-plus signatures. This has gone beyond an anoraky issue of constitutional reform.

Melanie Onn: I am well aware of that. It just shows the importance of the issue to members of the public. I would urge anybody who is tuning into Parliament TV or “talking a Bill to death” to sign up. Maybe we will have a private Member’s Bill on private Members’ Bills at some point.

I do not want to echo comments that have already been made too much, but it is really not fair that one Member of this House can block legislation from being voted on and possibly becoming law. We never hear a defence of the filibuster rule. We hear objections to changes to the procedures and we hear Members justifying their actions by working within the rules, but very rarely do we have an outright defence of the system. That is because it is unjustifiable for one or two MPs to deny the representatives of the rest of the country a voice on important and potentially life-saving legislation.

Very often—we have heard examples of this—it is a Government Minister who does the filibustering and not some rogue Back Bencher, which often seems to be the general impression. An Edinburgh Central Minister blocked the Bill that would have made it compulsory for children to be taught emergency first aid at school, and the Minister for Community and Social Care talked out a Bill to allow the NHS access to low-cost medical treatments for conditions such as multiple sclerosis, cancer and Parkinson’s. The same Minister prevented a Bill from passing that would have exempted carers from paying hospital parking charges.

Simon Hoare: I have much sympathy with what the shadow Minister and her colleagues have been saying, but we all have to accept, whether we like it or not, that it is a misnomer to talk about private Members, because none of us is. We are all part of a party machine. If the Government of the day, irrespective of what stripe they are, do not support a Bill—irrespective of how we change the Standing Orders and whether we sit on a Tuesday, Saturday or Thursday—and do not want it to go ahead, it will not go ahead.

Melanie Onn: The important thing is that we should at least have the opportunity to vote on these things, which we do not have at the moment. If we are going to try to have a Parliament and say to people, “We’re here to influence change. We can properly represent you,” then be denied that, it is the time for change.

As long as the Government are able to veto private Members’ Bills before they are voted on, the only Bills that will be allowed to pass are the ones that the Government are in favour of, but if the Government are in favour of them, they could just as easily introduce the legislation themselves. Why do they not just do away with the nonsense—that is how it is viewed at the moment—of private Members’ Bills?

Other speakers have said that it would not be right to allow the small number of Members who turn up on a Friday to decide the laws of the country, but I think that the current system for private Members’ Bills actively discourages Members from being here on a Friday because, as there are no time limits on debates, it is impossible to know which legislation will be reached and debated, let alone what will be voted on. Most MPs, including me, would rather spend an extra day in our constituencies than stay in Westminster on the off-chance that their Bill will reach a meaningful discussion or even a vote.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I made clear my position on the need for reform, but we have to be careful. If we are going to say that private Members’ Bills should have the same degree of scrutiny as all measures brought before the House, Members will have to commit to rather more time at Westminster than there has been an appetite demonstrated for in recent years.

Melanie Onn: I am particularly concerned about the time we have to discuss this. We have changed the system. In the previous Session, there was a change so that petitions that reach 100,000 signatures can be debated in the House of Commons. We can make meaningful changes when we really want to. Although many people will be pleased that debates can take place,
what they really want to see is change. Our legislative process is long overdue an upgrade. Is it not time that we put an end to this cruel joke that we are playing on the public?

Hon. Members have suggested several different changes to the way that we debate and vote on private Members’ Bills, and I hope they will be heard fully. The suggestions are an improvement because the processes are based on the reality of the system as it operates today, rather than a notional way, as has been suggested by Conservative Members, that is just not based in fact or reality.

I await the Procedure Committee’s forthcoming report and recommendations because we are open to further suggestions. The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) suggested that perhaps this debate is in some way premature. I would say entirely the opposite: this is a very timely debate. We do not want yet another report that does not get anywhere; we would like some commitment to change, which will hopefully change things for society for the better.

To challenge the point about private Members’ Bills always being about matters of conscience, I am not clear where there is a matter of conscience in higher education information or the fitness of homes for human habitation. Private Members’ Bills are not always about matters of conscience. I support the comments of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford); some of them are about social reform matters and are important to many people.

The most important thing is that the Procedure Committee and the Government should recognise that the current system does not work and needs to change. The Procedure Committee’s second report said that it would not be putting its proposals to the House and that, instead:

“This is an idea whose time has not yet come.”

Following the passion Members have shown today, I entirely disagree with that statement. This is entirely the idea’s time, and I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will commit today to allowing the whole House at least to debate and vote on the Committee’s proposals once they have been published.

10.50 am

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) on securing this debate. I also welcome hon. Members who have participated, particularly those who have shepherded, or have tried to shepherd, a private Member’s Bill through Parliament—or, indeed, who have supported their hon. Friend’s words of encouragement are to be taken on board. May I give her an example? In a series of successive Sessions, I introduced a Bill to outlaw drug driving, which was eventually implemented by the Government.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that hon. Members should think about the outcome of what they are trying to do. Using their Bill as a device might not always result in an individual Act of Parliament but, as he says, such Bills often result in change.

The hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned her Bill. Carers UK has supplied written evidence to the Procedure Committee’s current inquiry, and it is fully aware of how to use private Members’ Bills. Carers UK rightly encouraged people to come along to support the Bill, but it is happy that it secured a change in ministerial guidance, which was committed to on the Floor of the House that day. Even though the Minister said directly that the Government would not support that Bill, he said that they would support some of the Bill’s outcomes through a change in guidance.

Mr George Howarth: I congratulate the Deputy Leader of the House on being successful in getting a private Member’s Bill through Parliament but, as a generality, does she agree that, in all seriousness, we are not legislators?

Dr Coffey: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. He has been a Minister, and he can use that experience in his role as a Member of Parliament. I believe that we can, if we wish, make a serious contribution to the progress of any law going through this House.

Traditionally, private Members’ Bills have been used to raise smaller issues, as well as big, significant issues of conscience, which have already been mentioned. The private Members’ Bills that have been successful have either changed an outcome in Government policy in due course or have made a modest and sensible change to the law with which people agree. In this Session, six
such Bills have passed through the House of Commons, of which three have received Royal Assent and three are in the Lords.

It is important to say that, although the Government do not, and should not, have a monopoly on legislation, they have a mandate to legislate, whereas private Members’ Bills do not necessarily have an elected mandate from the country. As a consequence, I support the fact that we should encourage people to write to us if they want to support particular legislation, and I will shortly address expectation management and the role that each of us can play.

It can be difficult to get legislation through if the Government are opposed to it, but it has happened. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) succeeded with the Autism Act 2009. She secured a closure against the wishes of the then Labour Government by getting a sufficient number of Members to come and support the Bill—those Members were not just from the Conservative party. She then managed to make progress through the House. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) knows that such Bills are in the control of hon. Members because we can get closure motions. There were several such closures in the previous Parliament, including on the Daylight Saving Bill, several on European Union (Referendum) Bills, on the Affordable Homes Bill, on the National Health Service (Amended Duties and Powers) Bill and on the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Bill. Members were ready in case a closure motion was needed on the Live Music Bill. There was an unsuccessful attempt to move a closure on the Tenancies (Reform) Bill, when not enough people were here. I understand that constituency days are in the control of hon. Members because we can get closure motions. There were several such closures in the previous Parliament, including on the Daylight Saving Bill, several on European Union (Referendum) Bills, on the Affordable Homes Bill, on the National Health Service (Amended Duties and Powers) Bill and on the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Bill. Members were ready in case a closure motion was needed on the Live Music Bill. There was an unsuccessful attempt to move a closure on the Tenancies (Reform) Bill, when not enough people were here. I understand that constituency days are

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Coffey: I only have two more minutes before the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington sums up.

On public perception, use and abuse, people have thrown about the word “filibuster.” I recognise that it is generic, but it is for the Chair to keep order in debate, and the Chairs do respond to filibustering. MPs and organisations need to be clear with their constituents, and with the people who contact them, about expectations. We have talked about the National Health Service Bill, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) presented on 1 July 2015. On that day, when she was asked, she said that Second Reading would be on 11 March 2016. There was zero chance of that Bill ever becoming law, and it was actually quite unlikely to get a debate. We have to remember that, historically, such Bills were the only way that Back Benchers could get debates in the House. We now have more opportunities, through the Backbench Business Committee, debates on petitions and a lot more Westminster Hall debates. In a way, we have other opportunities to raise issues, rather than just through legislation.

Having a dedicated day for private Members’ Bills matters. In the last Parliament, the House voted not to sit on Tuesday evenings, and I have heard it suggested that the House should sit on Wednesday evenings. There may be an opportunity for the House to reconsider its sitting hours, which I am sure the Procedure Committee is considering. There have been six written submissions to the current inquiry and five oral sessions, in which MPs, Clerks and journalists have contributed, and members of the Procedure Committee are here today. The Government look forward with eager anticipation to the publication of the Committee’s report, and there may be an opportunity to debate it in due course—it is open to any Select Committee to try to secure such a debate on a report.

This has been an interesting and full debate, and I encourage Members to recognise that they can help to shape legislation—it is not just about the Government. The Government have the mandate, but people can work together on other issues. As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, 11 September 2015 was one of the most powerful days that I have been in Parliament, and I was pleased with the outcome. Nevertheless, it was an opportunity for each and every Member, and a majority of Members came along and expressed their view decisively.

10.58 am

Jeff Smith: I do not have much time, so I will be brief in thanking all the Members who have contributed to this debate. We have had a respectful, interesting and mature debate, which is more than we usually get on Fridays. There is a consensus that there is deep frustration with the system on both sides of the House. The system is broken and change is needed. We have had some good suggestions, and I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) for their suggestions about ways forward. I hope that the Procedure Committee and, more importantly, the Government will listen to those suggestions and take them on board, because one thing is clear: the longer we continue with the current system, the more the reputation of Parliament will be damaged. The time has come for change.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the procedure for debating and voting on Private Members’ Bills.
Air Cadet Organisation and Gliding

11 am

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of gliding and the Air Cadet Organisation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Ms Vaz. I first became aware of concerns about the future of gliding after receiving a letter from the Air Cadet Organisation, which I assume was sent to many colleagues. I immediately took an interest as I have two local air cadet units—one in my constituency of Hornchurch and Upminster and the other just over the constituency boundary, in the part of Elm Park that lies in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas).

It is always a pleasure to see the air cadets march with the Royal British Legion in parades on Remembrance Day, Armed Forces Day and Battle of Britain Day. They are proud to wear their uniforms, and proud to remember those servicemen and women who have given their lives for their country. There is a close interest locally in the RAF because of the Hornchurch airfield, which played a prominent role in world war two, including in the battle of Britain, and local schools and roads are named in memory of pilots who flew in that conflict.

When I was at grammar school, which I am embarrassed to say was a very long time ago, it was in the days when it was not thought necessary for girls to know about current affairs, and when the only two respectable occupations for girls were teaching and nursing. At that time, it was usual for armed forces cadets to be run from most secondary schools: cadets wore their uniforms in school and paraded in the school playground. Sadly, over the years that became unfashionable and politically incorrect, and schools did not want to see pupils in uniform. I think that was a retrograde step and I, for one, would welcome the return of cadet corps in schools.

I am sure, Ms Vaz, that both you and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier)—appreciate the value and importance of armed forces cadet corps, and indeed of all young people’s organisations. That is because while young people are enjoying the activities arranged by those organisations, they are also learning qualities that will carry them through life and make them good citizens and good employees, such as teamwork, fitness, leadership, reliability, personal discipline, responsibility and self-confidence, plus the technical skills associated with their particular organisation. In that respect, the Air Training Corps is one of our strongest assets in youth development.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend for that valuable contribution, because she is absolutely right that young people’s organisations, and the air cadets in particular, are noted for joining in with community organisations, for volunteering and helping with elderly people, and for raising money for charities, which makes those young people very well-rounded good citizens.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I just put it on the record at the very beginning that although there are very few people present I am delighted that the hon. Lady has secured this debate? This issue is really important in Northern Ireland. That is because, of course, in Northern Ireland the air cadets have had to travel to England for what has been a short but very valuable training course; and the fear in Northern Ireland is that such training will be lost completely if we move to residential courses in England. Young people cannot afford to spend such a long period of time away, and parents cannot afford the cost of such a residential course in England. Therefore, may I encourage the hon. Lady to seek assurances from the Minister when he winds up that Northern Ireland’s air cadet corps will not be forgotten amid the changes that are about to be introduced?

Dame Angela Watkinson: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. The issue that she has raised about travelling distance and so on for air cadets is one that I myself will raise further on in my speech.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have already been in contact with the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) about this issue and I congratulate her on bringing it to Westminster Hall for consideration. In my constituency of Strangford, I have one of the RAF cadet squadrons, at Newtownards. However, it is the intention of the Minister and his Department that we will lose the opportunities for gliding at RAF Newtownards, which is operated out of Regent House School; the school has one of the largest cadet groups in the whole of Northern Ireland.

I will just make a point about cost. The cost of sending a student from Northern Ireland across to the mainland, which is the alternative to having the motor-glider in Northern Ireland, will be at least £80,000 for all those cadets, and it will cost £100,000, Minister, if the staff costs are added on to that. That is the price of a motor-glider that could be kept in Northern Ireland for 20 years. I say with great respect that the proposed change is not financially economical or viable. Does the hon. Lady feel that this debate enables the voice of people in Northern Ireland to be heard? If so, it will hopefully persuade the Minister to reverse his decision.

Dame Angela Watkinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and I will go on to talk about issues of funding and the value of investment in this activity, which will pay dividends in the future of the young people involved.

The concern about the Air Training Corps is the decline in cadet numbers, which were down 6.5% from 34,500 to 32,250 in the year 2014-15. That fall is predicted to become a 10% fall by April 2016 and is attributed, at least in part, to the declining opportunities for gliding.
The current air cadet gliding fleet comprises 81 Viking conventional—that is, winch-launched—gliders and 65 Vigilant motor-giders. In 2014, a glider airworthiness review took place for assurance reasons. Colleagues will understand that all sports and physical activities carry a degree of risk, and demand the proper training of instructors and maintenance of equipment for health and safety. Gliding is likely to be quite high on the risk scale, for obvious reasons.

It has been decided that at least 73 Viking gliders will be recovered, but for reasons of practicality and value for money, only 15 Vigilant gliders will be brought back into service, with this residual fleet being retired in late 2019. That will leave 10 volunteer gliding squadrons out of the current 25, all operating the Viking. The 614 Volunteer Gliding Squadron—based at Wethersfield, near Braintree in Essex—will continue to operate; I was pleased to learn that, because it is the closest volunteer squadron to Hornchurch and Elm Park. Currently, the Wethersfield squadron serves a total of 55 air cadet units from as far away as Suffolk, Cambridge and London. The maximum reasonable travelling time from an air cadet unit to a volunteer gliding squadron is set at two hours, to avoid fatigue.

Given the reduction in volunteer gliding squadrons, the number of units using 614 VGS at Wethersfield is predicted to increase from 55 to around 135 or 140. A significant increase in the number of volunteers, instructors and staff living within reasonable commuting distance will be needed to sustain the squadron’s contribution to the current national total of 50,000 flights annually, or to achieve the uplift of 40% in gliding—to 70,000 flights annually—that is planned by the Air Cadet Organisation.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give an assurance that the 10 remaining volunteer gliding squadrons, including 614 Wethersfield, will have a secure future in terms of airfield availability. As he knows, gliders may only be launched safely with cables given suitable airfield infrastructure, taking into account local airspace constraints and other airfield users. All those requirements limit the number of suitable venues, and alternatives would be difficult to find. Sustaining gliding opportunities would prevent worsening of air cadet numbers and ensure a strong base of air cadets and potential RAF recruits. In 2014-15, the Air Cadet Organisation accounted for 33% of officer intakes and 18% of RAF airmen intakes. It will become an increasingly vital source of high-calibre recruits with suitable experience and values for the service.

Common sense tells me that gliding is not only an exciting activity, but an expensive one. I am sure that budgetary constraints must play their part in decision making, but gliding is a worthwhile investment. Air cadets are the next RAF personnel. Alternatively, they might use their transferable skills acquired as cadets in other occupations, whether technical or engineering, where they will play their part in society and set an example to others. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give assurance to the air cadet gliding organisation that there is a secure future, albeit with a reduction in size, so that it can attract young people to join the Air Training Corps knowing that gliding opportunities will be included in their activities.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) for giving me some of her thinking in advance of the debate and I congratulate her on securing it. I am also grateful to other colleagues who have spoken. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is coming to see me shortly about the situation in Northern Ireland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) has just been to see me about the situation in Wales. I have been looking particularly closely at those two specific issues.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): On the issue in Wales, the Government are expecting young people to travel at least three and a half hours from west Wales all the way to Gloucestershire to have the experience of flight. There is some talk about synthetic flight, but that in no way compensates for the thrill of flight when young people are being introduced to flying.

Mr Brazier: If I may, I will come back to my hon. Friend’s intervention towards the end of my speech.

In November, I had the privilege of watching the cadets from 1838 (Elm Park) Squadron—it is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster—march proudly alongside the Royal British Legion at the Lords Mayor’s show. They are great ambassadors for the air cadet corps and for the future of the Royal Air Force. It is a sobering thought that some of the pilots who saved this country in the battle of Britain were the same age as some of the oldest cadets. Since I took over as Minister for cadets last autumn, I have been lucky enough to visit air cadet units from places as far apart as Perthshire and south London, and I have been consistently impressed by the cadets’ spirit of adventure, leadership and good citizenship skills and by the quality and dedication of their instructors.

Let us be clear that the recent restructuring of air cadet gliding is not a cost-cutting exercise. The Air Cadet Organisation remains hugely valued and the Royal Air Force is fully committed to offering flying training to all air cadets. My hon. Friend acknowledged that an in-depth audit of glider engineering in 2014 made it clear that the Vigilant and Viking fleets were not airworthy. The decline in numbers that she referred to reflects the fact that for nearly two years there has been no gliding in the air cadets. Indeed, almost half the air cadets I met recently at a 75th anniversary celebration event had not been in the air at all.

The blunt truth is that we were unable to find a sufficiently reliable contractor with the capacity to take on the bulk of the Vigilant fleet. Faced with no viable option but to draw it right down in the way that my hon. Friend described, we are increasing spending to get almost all the Viking gliders back into service, as well as offering an uplift of more than 50% in air experience flights. In addition, we can offer some excellent synthetic training through the generosity of the RAF Charitable Trust, to which I am most grateful. Let me reassure hon. Members that, following my recent announcement on the relaunch of air cadet gliding, we will get back to a position where all air cadets across the country have the opportunity to fly gliders and to participate in Grob Tutor air experience flights.

Jim Shannon: The cadets in Newtownards in my constituency operate out of Ards airport, where there is a lot of experience, skill and ability, which could provide the background technical expertise that is needed. Has the Minister considered offering such opportunities
outside the circle of companies that could look after the gliders? In Ards airport we have that ability, because there are already gliders there.

Mr Brazier: I am looking forward to the hon. Gentleman coming to see me shortly. I should say that we are setting up an air experience flight of powered aircraft in Ireland. Northern Ireland will be getting one of the two new offerings of air experience flights with Grob Tutors.

I appreciate that the loss of any volunteer gliding squadron will be disappointing, not least for the volunteers, who selflessly give their time to help to support and develop our young people, but it was essential to look again, given the grim background of what has happened with the gliders. Decisions have not been taken lightly or in haste, although when I took over, finding a resolution to this issue was my top priority from the cadet angle. I have taken advice from RAF experts, who are extremely committed to solving the issue. It became clear that our most sensible option in resuming sustainable cadet flying would be to provide a reduced glider fleet operated by fewer, but larger regional volunteer gliding squadrons. That was not an easy decision, but I believe it was the right decision.

While it is true that we are having to draw down the fleet of Vigilants, we are refocusing the resource on reinvesting for the future of the remaining volunteer gliding squadrons. We are extending the life of the Viking gliders by heavily rebuilding them. We are also building much improved infrastructure. Where cadets will have to travel longer distances, investment is being increased to include good quality residential accommodation for cadets and staff during weekends and camps.

I have been to see what will be the new Scottish centre of excellence at Kirknewton. The gliders will be as good as new. We have new winches for them. We have enhanced synthetic training, which we should remember means that each cadet does not have to spend the whole day waiting for their one go on the glider. The simulators really are good. I made a bit of an idiot of myself trying to fly a glider on a simulator, but they are remarkably realistic, and they are in addition to, not instead of, flying. There will also be a major uplift in the Tutor powered aircraft, with an increase of more than 50%, from 40 to 70, including the two additional new air experience flights.

Lady Hermon: Just for clarification for those air cadets in Northern Ireland who will be following the debate and who look for everything that mentions Northern Ireland, is it in the Minister’s mind that air cadets in Northern Ireland will have the choice between going to the new facility that will, I think, be opened at Aldergrove airport—the Minister has hinted at that—or going to England, Scotland or Wales for residential courses? Actually, I do not think there are any residential courses in Wales, which is disappointing. If it is a residential course, will subsistence funding be given to those young people who have to travel long distances for a residential course?

Mr Brazier: I will have to come back to the hon. Lady in writing on the last part of her question about the detailed position, although I may be able to answer it in a minute. As for the first part of her question, we envisage, as at present, cadets doing a mixture of gliding and powered flying. The powered flying will now be available in Northern Ireland, but the plan is for the gliding to have to be on a residential course. I should say, as the president of a sea cadet unit, that that is completely normal for kids going away with a sea cadet unit to sail or with an army cadet unit going off to a camp. We do not normally expect cadets to do everything in one day. [Interruption. ] We will have a more detailed discussion when the hon. Member for Strangford comes to see me. Perhaps he might invite the hon. Member for North Down to join him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster specifically mentioned Wethersfield and 614 Volunteer Gliding Squadron. The plan remains that the size of the squadron will be expanded—she mentioned that—to facilitate its role as a regional hub. As she mentioned, Wethersfield has been identified for disposal as part of the MOD’s programme of estate rationalisation by 2020. This is part of the Government’s commitment to provide land for 160,000 extra homes by the end of the Parliament, so the squadron will move to another site. I hope that my hon. Friend will appreciate that work to identify the potential future location remains at an early stage. I am confident that, throughout its transition to a future location, the staff of 614 Squadron will continue to ensure that the unit provides the same excellent training to cadets as it always has in the past.

In the last 48 hours I have talked to a former volunteer instructor who was with a unit that moved from RAF Lossing in Somerset to Hullavington in Wiltshire, which is a round trip of more than 200 miles. Almost all the staff moved there and they may now be moving back to somewhere closer to their original location.

People have asked how the Air Cadet organisation can offer the same amount of experience to cadets with a substantially reduced glider fleet. Many Members will be aware that front-line Royal Air Force pilots in our flying training system make very extensive use of real simulators to provide basic flying skills training on the ground, prior to consolidating that in the actual training. This saves on real flying hours without diminishing the trainee’s competence levels to operate the aircraft.

The Air Cadet organisation is following suit, developing a common syllabus so that every single flight in future will be focused on training—rather than simply providing a passenger experience—whether in gliding or powered flight. The air cadet aviation flying programme will remain unmatched by any other national cadet force worldwide.

The Royal Air Force Charitable Trust has generously purchased 25 simulators—part-task trainers. Although I did not do very well, I can attest to how realistic they are in preparing young men and women for flight, and I am most grateful to the trust for paying for those simulators.

The redesigned courses provide a cadet flying training structure built for the future, just like that used by our future RAF Typhoon and Lightning II pilots. When I was in Woolwich, I had a go on a very effective simulator for an F-22. I am sorry to recall I did not do particularly well on that, either. I am not the sort of person the RAF would ever want to recruit—parachuting and gravity do it all for you—but again I was impressed.
On the redesigned courses, cadets will learn basic flying skills from an early point in their air cadet careers starting with ground school lessons and realistic synthetic training. This smart use and integration of synthetic flying during the early stages will ensure that a much higher proportion of actual glider launches will be used for the consolidation of already learned skills and will get cadets ready faster to be able to go solo.

The planned uplift in the number of Tutor aircraft and the creation of two additional air experience flights will also enable us to fly a far greater number of cadets in this aircraft type. Again, this activity will be integrated into the wider aviation training programme. In future, all AEF powered flying will be phased to relate directly to the individual cadet’s level of experience, so each AEF sortie that a cadet undertakes will further enhance his or her aviation expertise.

The RAF and I are extremely grateful for the commitment and professionalism of the volunteers who support each Volunteer Gliding Squadron, and so a plan has been developed to offer alternative opportunities for the volunteer gliding instructors who are affected by the closures. This includes opportunities for Vigilant instructors to convert to Viking and in some cases to transfer to another Volunteer Gliding Squadron. Another option is to transfer to a formally established ground cadre within a VGS that provides the synthetic training and ground school elements. We aim to have a significant gliding programme again by this summer and to have the full programme in place by 2018.

This year, 2016, is an important year for the Air Cadet organisation, as it celebrates its 75th anniversary and the cadet expansion programme continues to provide new cadet units throughout the country in schools. This is indeed an important year. There are two parts to the programme that I am still looking at in more detail in relation to Wales and Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that we have a fair outcome, although, as I mentioned, Northern Ireland is getting a new AEF squadron to balance the loss of the gliding.

After this very unhappy, unprecedented period, in which we have had nearly two years with no gliding, the combination of getting the Vikings back in the air again with the expansion of the Grob Tutor powered flying, and building in the simulators and the good quality accommodation that will enable weekends and camps to become a reality, this is a really positive way forward. I believe that air cadet gliding will emerge to be safer and more resilient in the long run and that the volunteer instructors will continue to be the strongest part of it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster for initiating the debate and I thank all colleagues who have participated in it. [ Interruption. ]

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Does the Minister wish to check the note that has been passed to him?

Mr Brazier: Thank you, Ms Vaz. I failed to say how much I have enjoyed speaking under your chairmanship for the first time. The note says that cadets are assisted through squadron and wing HQ budgets. Similar to when they attend annual camps in mainland UK, food and accommodation are free to cadets.¹

11.28 am

Question put and agreed to.

¹[Official Report, 27 April 2016, Vol. 608, c. 1MC.]
the importance of research and data; the incentives, levers and payments for services in today’s NHS; and leadership in the NHS and across Government. The truth is that, to achieve our goal of transforming mental health services in Britain, we need urgent action in all four areas.

The report is clear about the challenge we currently face on commissioning. It states:

“The quality of local mental health commissioning is variable. We found a twofold difference in apparent per-capita spend by CCGs, a more than threefold difference in excess premature mortality in people with mental health problems in England and a fourfold variation in mortality across local authorities.”

The reality is that we need better and more effective commissioning at a local level.

The report discusses the model of commissioning set out by the “Future in mind” taskforce, which looked into child and adolescent mental health services and came up with recommendations for improving commissioning. Those recommendations, which are picked up in the “Five Year Forward View” report, speak to the need to improve commissioning across mental health services and across the age range.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for all he has done for mental health in his time in Parliament. He has been an absolute champion of it. Does he share my concern, which is shared by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, that there is currently no proper accountability for local clinical commissioning groups? The Bill on accountability in commissioning that I presented to Parliament last year would have required every CCG in the country to report back to the Secretary of State every year on the resources and spend in the local area. That way we would know exactly what was going on and could ensure parity of esteem in resources and allocation.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He is right, and I will come to the need for greater accountability later in my speech.

On commissioning, the “Five Year Forward View” report states:

“The transformation we envisage will take a number of years and without clear information about what the best care pathways look like and good data on current levels of spending, access, quality and outcomes, it will be hard to assess the impact of organisational change and ensure mental health services are not disadvantaged.”

Its very first recommendation is:

“NHS England should continue to work with Health Education England...Public Health England...Government and other key partners to resource and implement Future in Mind, building on the 2015/16 Local Transformation Plans”—

which I know are in the process of being implemented—

“and going further to drive system-wide transformation of the local offer to children and young people so that we secure measurable improvements in their mental health within the next four years.”

I dwell on those recommendations because—this speaks to my hon. Friend’s point—we need more transparency on what clinical commissioning groups are spending and where. The report is clear that there is currently simply too much variability across the country. I have long been an advocate of the importance of local, decentralised decision making. It is important that clinical commissioning groups have the freedom to commission services that they think are appropriate to their local population. The report is clear that we need a more consistent approach on mental health services that focuses on collaboration and more integrated commissioning across the spectrum.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reflect, in the context of the devolved settlement for services, on the importance of substance misuse services and on the impact that the fragmentation of those services away from other mental health services may have had on patient care?

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We need to deal with some of the issues to do with fragmentation in the system—he refers to substance misuse. The thrust of the recommendations in the report is about making sure we have a more integrated approach to commissioning mental health services across the piece.

The second important facet of the implementation challenges that the report throws up is research into mental health services. It mentions the need to have a proper, coherent 10-year plan for research into mental health to fill what are, as many of us would agree, big gaps in the evidence base.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he share my horror at the fact that the Medical Research Council spent 3% of its budget on mental health research in 2014-15? That bears no relation to the degree of disease burden in our country, yet it chose to spend just that much on research.

James Morris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention and pay tribute to him for all the work that he has done, particularly when he was Minister with responsibility for this area. I agree that we need to spend much more on mental health research, and we need to know what we want to research. For example, there is much talk about the power of peer support in mental health. There is an assumption that it is a good thing and that it works, but we do not have a particularly rich evidence base about whether it does.

On the efficacy of certain psychotherapies, the evidence base shows that cognitive behavioural therapy can be effective for people with mild depression and anxiety, but we do not really know about the effectiveness of other psychotherapies that we may want to promote and develop in the national health service. We clearly do not know very much about a lot of emerging areas that have an impact on mental health. For example, using technology and mobile phone and other apps to help people with mental health problems is a big emerging area, but we do not know much about its effectiveness. We certainly do not know in any coherent sense about the implications of genomic medicine on mental health care. A coherent strategy on mental health research is required over the next decade so that we can extend and expand the evidence base, because the truth is that we are often flying blind.
Overall allocation

health services each year at a level which at least matches their investment in mental health to demonstrate the commitment that from 2017/18 onwards. They should require CCGs to report on including for children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Annual Report and Accounts, by condition and per capita, CCGs to publish data on levels of mental health spend in their

move towards a payment-by-activity model in the NHS paid for in one way, and a mental health pathway, which

treatment in the national health service is effectively integrated of physical and mental health. How can we express that aspiration? To give an example, if I suffer from diabetes and a serious mental health problem, my

James Morris: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to support people with depression back into work. The report makes a number of recommendations, which he may be aware of, on the use of strategies such as individual placement and support to get people with mental health problems back into work.

The report also talks a lot about data, which underpin our decisions about where we should focus our efforts on mental health. It refers to a “black hole” of data and calls for a “transparency revolution” in mental health. As I said earlier, for a long time—probably 20 years or more—we have not been collecting sufficiently robust data about what is actually going on in mental health services. We need better data on what is going on to have a firm basis on which to understand what is working, what is not working and what is going on at local and national level. Recommendation 50 in the report—this pertains to what my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) said about accountability—is at the heart of the implementation challenges that we face. It states:

“The Department of Health and NHS England should require CCGs to publish data on levels of mental health spend in their Annual Report and Accounts, by condition and per capita, including for children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, from 2017/18 onwards. They should require CCGs to report on investment in mental health to demonstrate the commitment that commissioners must continue to increase investment in mental health services each year at a level which at least matches their overall allocation”

of funding. That goes to the heart of our data challenge.

For too long, mental health services have not been properly resourced because we do not have an effective data set on what is actually happening in the NHS or, as the report highlights, an effective model in the NHS for paying for mental health services. They tend to be commissioned on what is called a block contract basis, which often has the effect of focusing on the delivery of a low-cost service, rather than on quality outcomes. We certainly do not have a model of care that focuses on an individual care pathway or a cure for an individual patient.

We need a different model of payment for mental health services in the NHS that focuses on quality and outcomes and reflects our aspiration, which is written into the NHS’s operating mandate, for parity of esteem—the integration of physical and mental health. How can we express that aspiration? To give an example, if I suffer from diabetes and a serious mental health problem, my treatment in the national health service is effectively split in two: there is a physical health pathway, which is paid for in one way, and a mental health pathway, which is paid for in another way. I believe that we need to move towards a payment-by-activity model in the NHS that does not discriminate between physical and mental health. That will certainly not happen overnight, but the report goes some way towards arguing for it in recommendation 47, which states:

“NHS England and NHS Improvement should together lead on costing, developing and introducing a revised payment system by 2017/18 to drive the whole system to improve outcomes”.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think it is right that we have a separate payment model for mental health, or should physical and mental health be treated together? Separating them could cause the very division that we are trying to lose.

James Morris: That is precisely what I am arguing for. Over time, we need to move to a model that does not discriminate between mental and physical health, with integrated payment reflecting the fact that there are a lot of conditions and a lot of comorbidity. Getting the payment system right in the NHS is fundamental to everything about the aspiration for parity of esteem. “Parity of esteem” is an interesting set of words, which can be interpreted to mean that we want a culture change or a system change—all of which is right—but to achieve it we need to change the payment model for how services are commissioned and purchased in the NHS.

Rehman Chishti: I agree with the model that my hon. Friend is proposing. From my discussions with the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which has backed a Bill on accountability, I believe that such a model would achieve a more holistic approach for patients, which can only be a good thing for outcomes.

James Morris: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The model contained in recommendation 47 and discussed in the report should drive the achievement of parity by moving towards an integrated tariff or pricing model. A lot of detailed work needs to be done to achieve that—I am not saying it is something that the Minister will be able to implement in the next week—but it goes, fundamentally, to the transformation argument that is at the centre of the report.

Perhaps most importantly, the report talks about the importance of, and absolute need for, strong leadership in the NHS and across Government to drive the change and to make things happen. This is not only about the NHS, but about the whole of Government; it is about putting mental health at the heart of our thinking in many different areas. We need a cross-Government approach, with a strong grip at the centre. I say that despite being someone who believes in devolution, because in mental health policy we have reached the stage of consensus, with much agreement about what needs to be done, but we need political will and a grip at the centre of Government to make things happen. The truth is that the existing system needs to be challenged. We need a culture of challenge—if we say that we are allocating money to mental health, why is it not being spent? Why is it not delivering the outcomes that we need?

As the report highlights, successful implementation is about not only co-ordinating our healthcare response but what we need to do on mental health in education, criminal justice and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) said,
back to work programmes in the Home Office. Everything should be working together to achieve the goal of supporting the five-year transformation plan for mental health.

The last recommendation of the report, recommendation 58, might sound somewhat technical and bureaucratic, being a little obsessed with governance, but it is fundamental. It states:

“By no later than Summer 2016, NHS England, the Department of Health and the Cabinet Office should confirm what governance arrangements will be put in place to support the delivery of this strategy.”

That process of ensuring that the recommendations are followed through, that there is a performance and accountability framework, and that change is driven from the centre strikes me as fundamental.

The implementation challenges highlighted in the report are substantial and require action on multiple fronts. As I said earlier, the Minister has shown absolute commitment to addressing many of them. Will he give us an update on what progress has been made in the four areas that I have described today, namely commissioning, data and research, new payment mechanisms in the NHS and leadership in the NHS and across Government?

Getting this right is an historic opportunity. As I said at the beginning, to some degree the stars are aligned: we have a high-quality public debate; much more openness about mental health and its discussion; a mature debate at the highest level of Government, with the Prime Minister having made several speeches on and commitments about mental health and its discussion; a mature debate about mental health in the past few months. We have the opportunity to drive forward what a 21st-century mental health care system should look like and make it deliver for all the people out there who need care and support. They are relying on the opportunity being realised and on us getting it right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the first speaker, I will impose an informal time limit on speeches of five minutes, because so many people want to get in. Please will the next speaker and others keep within the timeframe, so that I do not have to reduce the time limit any more?

2.55 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I thank the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) for setting out the framework of this excellent report by Paul Farmer and his taskforce on addressing concerns about mental health. What stood out for me was that it was a very practical report—with time lines and specificity about how the debate should be taken forward, the resources required and the instruments we put in place to make the report a reality—but the hon. Gentleman was absolutely right: it is important that it should be accountable at every step of its journey. I will come to that later.

The report also sets out a clear action plan for some of the areas that need a focus, including the setting of key targets. I welcome the ambition in the report to improve access to services and the wider community than they do now. It sets out a new chapter in this journey about how we build capacity for mental health services in future. I doubt that there will be disagreement in the Chamber about some of the emphasis in the report on funding and the requirement to put more resources into the service. What stood out for me was the startling figure that poor mental health costs us, economically and socially, £105 billion, a figure that compares with only £34 billion being spent on the service.

There is a lot of opportunity to move the debate about funding and finances forward, as well as addressing issues to do with facilities. That has been a particular issue for us in York, as we have seen the closure of our acute service and the slow rebuilding of that service, with more emphasis on community delivery. It is important to ensure that we have the right number of beds as we put in a new facility for the people of our city. When we look at capacity issues, we should not look backwards at how a service was delivered, but look forward to the future needs and requirements of the service.

It is also important to reflect issues of workforce planning. We have seen a serious shortfall in people working across the mental health services. I welcome the recommended drive-up of, for example, 1,700 therapists. Will the Government be producing an action plan, as they did for health visiting, to ensure proper mentoring and support in the system to ensure that those therapists come online, while also ensuring a proper regulatory framework for the health professions across mental health? We do not have one currently, and I know that many of the professions are calling for proper regulation.

The other figure that really stood out for me concerned when people require support, with 50% of mental health problems established by age 14 and 75% by age 24. What stands out for me is the need to shift resources into early intervention and prevention services. I welcome the investment to be made into perinatal mental health, but we need to build up from those services, as we look at the provision that will be needed into the future.

In particular, if we are looking at that focus, I know from talking to teachers in my community that too much of the burden is being placed on them. We need to ensure that it shifts to the real professionals in the service, who are properly trained to provide support, diagnosis, signposting and screening for young people. There is urgent need to look across services for young people as they move out of school. We have also had specific issues with transition, and I still think there are cliff edges, as commissioning and service provision are done by different bodies. As a result, we get cliff edges—not smooth transition—based on a date of birth rather than clinical need. That really needs to be addressed.

In the short time remaining, I want to mention the raising of concerns in mental health services. The current system is quite inadequate—HealthWatch has contacted me today specifically about this issue. There are too many places where concerns can be raised. We have the Care Quality Commission and NHS Improvement; we also have regulators who look at the professions and other places, such as the healthcare safety investigation branch. There are so many different places. We need
one place where concerns can be raised, so that service users and staff know where to go and can get a clear response. I hope the Minister will address that as well.

3 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to speak in the debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) for bringing the debate, for his continued advocacy of the needs of mental health patients and for pushing continually during his time in the House on an important issue in ensuring that we hold our Government and NHS providers to account, so that genuine parity of esteem is delivered for mental health patients.

In the brief time available, I want to talk about a few points raised in the mental health taskforce’s good report, focusing on the need for more holistic care and joining up physical and mental healthcare for people with mental illness. I want to talk about access to care, recognising that some people struggle to access physical healthcare owing to their ethnicity or because English is not their first language. Such problems are compounded for those who have mental illness. I will also focus on some of the challenges in joining up what is a very fragmented health and care system, particularly for people with complex and enduring mental illness.

On holistic care, we know that somebody who is mentally unwell and has a chronic and enduring or severe and enduring mental illness can live a life up to 20 years shorter than somebody without that mental illness. That fact alone makes the point that we need to join up physical and mental healthcare better. My hon. Friend talked about a patient with diabetes. Such a patient may well develop diabetes because they are mentally unwell and do not have the right physical healthcare and support, or they may develop it as a side effect of some of the medication they are taking. We know that antipsychotic medications, for example, are linked with high cholesterol and developing diabetes.

We need to do much more to join up physical and mental healthcare. It is quite frankly scandalous and wrong that someone who is mentally unwell has a 20-year shorter life expectancy than someone who does not have that condition. That is something we must focus on and get right. We need to improve the physical and mental healthcare services for those with chronic and enduring mental illness.

We talked a little about the commissioning opportunities in that, and we must recognise that, at a local level, despite the Government’s best intentions, commissioners do not often put additional money into mental health services. Certainly in Suffolk, which I represent, the NHS funding increases—small though they may be—went largely to physical health and local CCGs failed to increase the money going to mental health conditions adequately.

The question is: how do we improve holistic care and join up physical and mental healthcare for those with long-term mental illness? We can and must learn lessons from the care in the community programme in the 1980s. The purpose of the programme—to deliver more care in the community and move away from the old asylums—was right, but the programme was not properly resourced. We must face up to that. Also, a lot of the money freed up by that was swallowed up by the physical healthcare sector and did not go into mental healthcare in the community. If we are talking about putting all the money for physical and mental healthcare in one place, we have to be careful that, by doing what sounds like a good thing, we do not effectively end up propping up the acute provider sector, which already consumes 55% of the NHS budget—that figure has risen over the last five years, as the Minister will be aware—and inadvertently further disadvantage mental healthcare, which receives only around 10% of NHS funding.

It may be appropriate—the report touches upon the importance of this—to improve liaison services on both sides of the divide between physical and mental healthcare. We could improve psychiatric liaison services for people with complex physical healthcare problems or enduring physical illnesses and, for people with long-term and enduring mental illness, we could improve medical liaison services in hospitals and properly involve and support physical healthcare in the community through GPs. I will not expand on that, as I do not have very long, but I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that point.

On access to services, we have to recognise that there is a fragmented care environment, in particular for people with chronic and enduring mental illness. Addressing that is not just about providing money for the health service, but about having appropriate housing—we know there is a shortage of appropriate housing to look after people with mental ill health in areas such as London—and dealing with the challenges in delivering proper social services care for such people. We also have to recognise that the state is often the only mechanism of support for such people. The only people caring for some of the poorest and most disadvantaged people in our society—people with long-term mental illness—work for the state; they are NHS and council workers. Unless we properly value and recognise their roles and properly fund—and increase funding—in a holistic, meaningful and long-term way, we will be unable to deliver the care that we need. There needs to be more money, more key workers and joined-up physical and mental healthcare. I endorse a lot of what the report says and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

3.6 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) and thank him for all the work he has done in advocating for mental health. I also congratulate Paul Farmer, Jacqui Dyer and their whole team on their substantial piece of work.

This is a historic injustice. The disadvantage suffered by people with mental ill health in accessing treatment is not the responsibility of any particular Government; it has always been there, but the report gives us the opportunity to end that historic injustice, and we have an absolute responsibility to ensure that that happens. It is both morally wrong and economically stupid to ignore mental ill health. The case is made so well on page 5 of the report, where it says:

“Those with conduct disorder—persistent, disobedient, disruptive and aggressive behaviour—are twice as likely to leave school without any qualifications, three times more likely to become a teenage parent, four times more likely to become dependent on..."
drugs and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. Yet most children and young people get no support. Even for those that do the average wait for routine appointments for psychological therapy was 32 weeks in 2015/16.” That encapsulates the problem. It is scandalous that children with such needs do not get access to treatment. It destroys their life chances, and the cost to society of the outcomes described in the report is enormous.

I am conscious of the time available to me, so rather than highlight a number of issues from the report I will address some key points directly to the Minister. First, we know that there will be £1 billion of additional funding, but it is due to come late in this Parliament. Between now and then, the NHS Confederation believes that mental health will lose out on funding and that in 2016-17 the bulk of the front-loaded money will go to acute hospitals. I have a real concern that the ambition in this document will not be realised unless that investment is made. Will the Minister ensure that that investment is delivered?

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I do not have time; I want to ensure that others can speak.

Secondly, there needs to be a clear implementation plan—others, including the Royal College of Psychiatrists and NHS Providers, have made this point. We need to understand exactly the practical mechanism for making these things happen. NHS providers say the plan should be delivered by August of this year. Can the Minister confirm that that will happen and that there will be reporting back on progress, so that we understand exactly what is happening? We need proper governance arrangements to make sure that these things happen.

Thirdly, the report endorses the approach that I took of implementing comprehensive maximum waiting times standards. That is an essential component of achieving equality—an equal right to treatment on time, whether someone has a physical or mental health problem. The Government have endorsed the report, yet there is no funding attached to ensuring we get comprehensive waiting times standards. How will the Government ensure that that happens? Is it fundamental to ensuring that we end the historic injustice.

I am delighted that there is now a commitment to end the outrageous practice of out-of-area-placements. It is outdated, it treats people appallingly, and we know that there is a higher risk of suicide among people who end up being sent out of area. To do it by 2020 takes too long. The Royal College of Psychiatrists report—Lord Crisp’s report—says it could be done by October next year, so I urge the Minister to follow that timescale. Will he also commit to implementing all the recommendations in Lord Crisp’s report, which has been widely welcomed? Everyone recognises that it makes sense, so I hope he will confirm that.

There is a responsibility on all of us to ensure that we do everything we can to implement the recommendations. I chair a commission on mental health in the west midlands. Is the Minister interested in a briefing on the progress we are making? There is a real opportunity to implement early some of the recommendations in the report.

Finally, I will make the case for preventive healthcare. Relate, the organisation, has made a powerful case for the value of couple therapy and ensuring that every provider of IAPT—improving access to psychological therapies—provides that among the other evidence-based interventions.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on securing this important debate and affording us the opportunity to look more closely at the excellent mental health taskforce report.

I want to highlight some issues from the report. First, I completely agree that more children and young people should benefit from an increase in high-quality mental health support when they need it. The pressures on young people in today’s climate have too often been ignored. Social media, education, home life and even peer pressure have an astounding effect on young people. Those are just a few everyday factors that are often overlooked and may result in young people suffering in silence.

The report’s recommendations would give individuals the support that they need to overcome their difficulties and continue to develop their talents throughout their education, and subsequently their employment. Crucial to tackling mental health illness across the UK is the need to tackle individuals’ problems at an early age, and certainly when the first warning signs are elicited.

The second point I want to touch on is the NHS’s approach to identifying what steps services should take to ensure that all deaths by suicide across NHS-funded mental health settings are learned from to prevent repeat events. The NHS would be wise to learn from previous events, and it must ensure that the right investment is provided to help prevent people from taking their own lives. I know what it feels like to lose someone to suicide, including for the family.

The figures in the report also strike a note with me. It states:

“A quarter of people who took their own life had been in contact with a health professional, usually their GP, in the last week before they died.”

Indeed, when my cousin took his life, he was in contact with a GP and awaiting counselling. Even if we could save only one life, that would be one less family who would have to experience the heartbreak of losing a loved one. I am therefore pleased to hear that the recommendations outline a system in which more will be done to help GPs further understand the issues surrounding mental health. That will hopefully help to reduce the number of people who take their own life even having seen a healthcare professional in the weeks leading up to their death.

I was recently appointed to the position of rapporteur on mental health to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and the first area I will be reporting on is self-inflicted deaths in custody among 18 to 24-year-olds. The taskforce report touches on the issue of mental
health in prisons and in the time following release from prison. There is no denying that prison should be a punishment. However, the criminal justice system is a difficult place for people with mental health issues, and I welcome the proposals to improve mental health provision both for those currently serving a prison sentence and those who have recently been released. We need to ensure that we provide the appropriate support to help ease people back into society and help them forge a life away from crime.

Nine years ago today, my mum died at the age of 67, having fought all her life against mental health issues—she was in and out of several institutions—and it strikes me that we could have had her for another 12 years had some recommendations in the report been adhered to.

The NHS taskforce report covers many aspects of mental health, which is an issue that is impossible to address overnight. We need a strong, detailed and considered plan of action to be implemented over the coming years. The Government have highlighted mental health as a key priority, and I hope that by working with the NHS and the organisations and charities at the heart of mental health, we can produce an effective plan to improve mental health provision across the UK.

3.16 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on securing today’s debate on the excellent report from the independent mental health taskforce to the NHS in England. I reiterate many of the comments made so far, especially those about housing, jobs and the immediate environment in which someone lives. My constituency has shocking health inequalities, and improving all those things could lead to good mental health.

The report contains a series of recommendations that, if implemented in full, will lead to the introduction of essential reforms and the additional investment that our mental health services desperately need and people with mental health problems undoubtedly deserve. To understand why we need this fundamental step change in mental health provision in this country, we need look no further than the human and economic costs associated with the poor mental healthcare that has far too often been the norm.

The human costs are self-evident. They can be counted among the many vulnerable people with mental health problems who have been left to suffer in silence, with no help at all, stigmatised and shunted to the margins of society, their lives simply put on hold or irrevocably changed and ruined. I am talking about the many people for whom mental health provision has for too long been a second-rate, second-class service, and those who have been let down by the inadequacies of a system that is supposed to be there to support and care for them yet treats their body and their mind unequally. Regrettably, that has all too often been the reality for far too many people, simply because the way we think about and treat mental illness in this country has been woefully inadequate.

I reiterate that there are economic costs to such neglect, which are as unsustainable as the human costs are unacceptable. Failing to address mental illness through poor care has been a significant problem for decades in this country and costs the economy, the NHS and society dear. The taskforce’s report makes it clear that the economic cost is estimated to be £105 billion a year, as we have already heard. To address the challenges, we must, as the taskforce recommends, seek to transform services and support for people with mental health problems and ensure that everybody gets the right help at the right time, in the right place and from the right people.

Similarly, we must ensure that mental health is recognised as a priority for the NHS, Government, businesses, schools and society as a whole. That will enable us to promote good mental health, prevent poor mental health and respond effectively when mental health problems occur. If we are truly to achieve the ambition of parity of esteem for mental and physical health in the NHS we must, as a first step, ensure that the taskforce’s recommendations are delivered and funded in full. Transforming the way we deal with mental health is an enormous challenge, I know that, but one that we, as a country and a society, must tackle head-on for the future.

3.20 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on securing the debate. It was a pleasure to listen to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and the Minister speaking at the launch of the mental health taskforce report last month.

Since I was elected, constituents’ concerns about mental health provision have caused me to immerse myself in the issue and further my education on this most harrowing of subjects. I want to focus on concerns about early-stage treatment for young people. At Prime Minister’s questions recently, I mentioned visiting three families in one day in my constituency, each of whom had a child who they felt had not been given the early-stage intervention that they expected by child and adolescent mental health services. I asked the Prime Minister for more focus on early-stage treatment, so that young people do not find their condition becoming more acute. I work closely with my local CAMHS team, and I have the highest regard for the many excellent specialists who do their best. However, it is of concern to me that constituents face lengthy waiting times and that some have been moved from pillar to post when receiving treatment.

Building up trust is a key ingredient in successful diagnosis and treatment. I hear stories about young people finding the courage and trust to open up about their condition only to find that there is a new practitioner at the subsequent session, and it disappoints me to find that the young person has then regressed because of the change in personnel. I would like a commitment to treatment being given on a fixed one-to-one basis. If we can do that for maternity provision, surely we can do it for mental health treatment.

At the mental health taskforce launch, I was buoyed by the commitment by the Minister and the chief executive of NHS England to implement the excellent report. I pay tribute to the chief executive of Mind, Paul Farmer,
and his team for the review. An aspect of it that cheered me was the commitment to funds to ensure that our non-mental health NHS hospitals have adequate mental health expertise on site to deal with those who are hospitalised as a result of mental health issues or who have such a condition in addition to a physical illness. What drove my concern about that was the experience of a family in my constituency following a suicide attempt. The NHS staff did not have the ability to deal with the mental health condition and my constituent, a young man, was forced to wait until CAMHS staff could make their way over from another town miles away. I understand the need for specialist treatment, but it strikes me that there is a need for a culture change across the NHS, and that all staff should be trained to understand mental health and provide a basic level of treatment in the area. Specialisation in health is important, but if the NHS becomes overly specialised it can lead to a lack of general involvement in care for patients in such areas.

I welcome the news that the Government will fund 24/7 mental health provision in our hospitals, but I was somewhat alarmed at the suggestion by my local trust that the funding may not stretch far enough. I also want to ensure that that specific coverage will not mean that other NHS staff with the necessary levels of technical understanding and empathy feel that they are not empowered to help the many patients in hospital who need help with their mental health care in addition to their physical wellbeing.

Getting early-stage intervention right is a key part of getting proper diagnosis for people with a mental health condition and lessening the chances of acute difficulties. It is the most important investment not only for people’s welfare and wellbeing but to enable young people to fulfil their hopes and dreams in their careers and make something for themselves and their country. We should not misdiagnose young people who are suffering growing pains, and who need families’ and friends’ coaching and guidance to overcome the problems of adolescence. However, I have met too many young children who face a difficult future because their mental health condition was not treated at an early stage. I applaud the work of the CAMHS and the Government’s response. They are leading the charge to ensure that we can support all who are affected by this terrible condition. I look forward to a better mental health service in the years to come.

3.24 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. Congratulations are due to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on securing the debate.

The report is very important. In the short time available I want to touch on two problems that people with mental health issues have, which the report focuses on and which many of us will have encountered in our constituencies. If people are young their problems are with schooling, family disruption and access to services. If they are older they may struggle to get work. There is often a lack of support to enable people with mental health issues who are in work to keep their job, and a lack of employers who understand the often sporadic nature of mental illnesses.

I am a patron of Mind in mid-Hertfordshire and a supporter of its “Time to Talk” campaign, and I welcome the investment in talking therapies discussed in the report. However, the employment rate for people with mental health issues is still far too low. In 2012 I and, I am sure, many other Members of Parliament, supported the “Way to Work” campaign that Mind championed. I presented a little trophy to an employer that took on employees with mental health conditions, but sadly the take-up among employers in St Albans was very low, and nothing further happened.

It is worrying that too many companies find ways not to employ someone with mental health issues, particularly if an episode of ill health has resulted in absenteeism. I would like to know what more the Government can do to work with employers and show them how they can manage a workforce in which there may be mental health issues in much the same way as they would if there were people with disabilities. I do not think enough is done to bring people into the workforce and show how they can be supported in their periods of good health and ill health.

On the subject of young people, I have been told of people having trouble in dealing with CAMHS. A recurrent theme is having sporadic meetings with a lot of different people. I learned of the case of a very young lad who experienced extreme mental health problems. He had problems going to school, and in the end it became too difficult for him to get there. With regard to getting home schooling, he has almost dropped off the teaching rota. The lad is housebound because of his severe anxiety. There is not enough support for his parents, or for other families with young people living with mental health issues. The mother had to give up work, and the family could never go anywhere. They could not go on holiday. There was no real support for the family in their situation. We need a more holistic approach that deals with the family rather than just treating the young person with the mental health issues.

I have a few questions for the Minister. What will the Government do to improve access to talking therapies and specialist back to work support for older people who have mental health problems? What more is being done to help people find and stay in work? What more is the Department for Work and Pensions doing to integrate services for young people, to make sure that when they have problems with the education system and getting access to services, they get the right information in a timely fashion? If someone recovers from a mental illness that they had when young, whether that was self-harming or, as in the case I mentioned, agoraphobia, they may be set up for a life of failure because their education went out of the window during a formative period.

What more can be done to help people who had mental ill health when they were younger and did not have a good experience in the education system? What more can be done to support them to get their lives back on track when their mental health improves? I would like a co-ordinated approach. At whatever age a person presents with mental illness, they should be assessed holistically. If there have been gaps in their training to get into work or in their education, extra resources must be put in to ensure that when they are well, they can move on with their lives like the rest of us. That would be much like our approach to people in prisons, who often have mental health issues.
We are subjecting many young people to a life in prison if we do not allow them to be trained up and get the help they need. Otherwise, they will end up in a life of crime, because when they leave school or are at school leaving age they will have little to offer any employer. We need to ensure that those people’s lives are not sniffed out and wasted at an early age, and that they have the chance to form a life for themselves and their families.

3.30 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) on bringing this important and timely debate to Westminster Hall.

Although the report pertains to NHS England, the Scottish National party very much welcomes it. It is an opportunity to share best practice recommendations right across the UK. I would like to declare an interest: I worked in mental health as a psychologist for 20 years prior to coming to the House. I am particularly glad that the report has been produced. It is excellent, and I commend the work of those involved. The report is detailed, thorough and, importantly, based on inclusivity and service users’ views. It addresses key issues of prevention, access and parity.

In terms of prevention, we know that half of mental health issues are established by the age of 14, and three quarters by the age of 24. A new focus on young people and effective interventions designed for that age group via CAMHS are clearly required. More widely, we should look at mental health awareness training for teachers, so that we can pick up on early warning signs and refer on. Mental wellbeing could also be part of the curriculum, so that young people can develop positive, adaptive coping strategies, which are key to preventing the onset of mental illness.

We are dealing with the young generation, so the use of technology and modalities that young people like and use—for example, apps, which I am not particularly familiar with—will be really important. We have to get up to speed. Evidence-based interventions are required in particular for self-harm, eating and conduct disorders, depression and anxiety, which are common problems within the younger age group.

I welcome the fact that crisis teams will be locally based, 24/7, but I wonder if we could have some more detail. Will that involve specialist clinicians, nurses or doctors on call in each area who are trained in working with young people? More widely, in order that people present, should we have more public health awareness campaigns to reduce stigma?

Mental health care needs to be targeted across the lifespan, from younger people in CAMHS to adults and older adults. The report establishes that 40% of older adults in care homes are affected by depression, yet I read little information in the report about services provided or required for older adults, who may have co-morbid dementia, physical frailty or have suffered stroke, adjustment problems or loss. That area needs some more work and detail. Access to psychological therapies in the community, in hospital and in residential care appear to be key. Experts in psychological therapy for older adults are likely to be required, because people will be working with complex presentations.

I welcome the taskforce report’s recommendation of an integrated approach, looking at housing, employment, social needs and physical health. That suggests the need for integrated and holistic assessments in mental health, as well as in physical health settings. We need a formulation-driven approach, with an understanding of the precipitants, problems and exacerbating factors, but also of the protective factors. All those factors need to be targeted and integrated into treatment, in order to evidence improvement. Fundamentally, we are talking about a biopsychosocial approach, which means a change in assessment procedures across the system. We will have to evidence how that will happen and how it will be implemented across both mental and physical healthcare, but it links well to the integration agenda of health and social care.

I caution that although obtaining work is a very positive step in reducing depression for many people, pushing someone who is acutely unwell into work will invariably set them back, so this is about clinical judgment and timing. One of the major differences since I began working in the NHS more than 20 years ago is that there are now waiting time initiatives in Scotland and across the UK. That is significant. It challenges services to focus, and monitoring leads to an improvement in standards, but it must have ongoing underlying investment.

I welcome the recommendation that crisis care be provided 24/7. However, that will require specialists to be trained to work with individuals who have co-morbid substance abuse and mental illness problems. All too often, people are turned away because they are intoxicated at hospital when they present. I understand that it is difficult to properly assess people in that condition, but unfortunately research indicates that that may be when they are at highest risk of suicidal behaviour and at their most impulsive.

I particularly welcome access to psychological therapy for new mothers. One in five have depression, which impacts on the self, the family and the baby. I also suggest the extension of counselling to those who have suffered miscarriage or stillbirth, and who experience great trauma in that regard.

I am unsure of the fit of the recommendation on specialist GPs from my reading of the report. Does that mean treatment through minimal interventions or assessment by GPs? Does it mean specialist nursing staff in GP surgeries who could engage in treatment? My concern is about the cost-effectiveness of GPs engaging in therapeutic work, but training and assessment at a primary care level is a welcome idea.

The report highlights that nine out of 10 people in prison have mental health problems or drug or alcohol misuse issues, but it does not clarify how recommendations on criminal justice will be implemented. Cross-party and cross-Government agreement on how to implement the recommendations will be required across the country. Is it about access to psychologists in prisons? Again, more thought is needed on the detail of integration.

I will sum up, because I am running out of time and I want the Minister to be able to respond. I am pleased to see the inclusion of technology in the report, which I believe will be one of the key issues in transforming
mental healthcare. The use of Skype, email and online treatment packages can increase access and links to therapists and improve access for rural communities.

Data collection is excellent. We need it, and we need to evidence outcomes and waiting times, but I appeal for balance. Drowning mental health staff in paperwork is not the answer. That reduces time for clinical work and time with patients, and we do not want this to become a tick-box exercise.

In conclusion, there is much to welcome. There is much to do. We need more strategy on integration plans. We need more detail on older adults and criminal justice. I was not able to touch on learning disability today, but that is another area to be considered. We do not want a postcode lottery, so it is important to look at local commissioning and share best practice, to ensure high-quality mental healthcare across the UK.

3.39 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):
It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) both on securing this vital debate on the final report of the independent taskforce on mental health and on his excellent contribution. I am pleased that we have the opportunity to examine this incredibly important piece of work and to hear a detailed response from the Government. I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate; the quality of the speeches we have heard is testimony of the strength of feeling on both sides of the House on the issue of mental health.

I echo previous contributions today in saying that the taskforce report is an extremely comprehensive piece of work. I pay tribute to all those who were involved in delivering it. The recommendations it makes are robust and wide-reaching and signal what the chair of the taskforce—Paul Farmer CBE from Mind—has rightly described as a “landmark moment for mental health”.

I also thank vice-chair Jacqui Dyer for her commitment and passion.

If implemented in full, the changes could make a huge difference to a system that is under increasing and unsustainable pressure. The real challenge lying before us now is ensuring that the aspirations set out in the report are actually delivered. For too long the rhetoric on mental health has not matched the reality on the ground. Members today have reflected the concerns felt by the people whom we represent across the country—people who themselves suffer from mental health conditions, their families and the services and professionals that care for them—who are anxious to ensure that the opportunity we now have to transform mental health in our country is not wasted.

I will focus my remarks on implementation and three key areas where unanswered questions remain—funding, transparency and accountability. Turning first to the money, the taskforce identified a £1.2 billion funding gap in mental health services each year by 2020. The Government responded to the publication of the report with an announcement of an additional £1 billion of investment for mental health services up to 2020. That is, of course, very welcome but I understand that the £1 billion will be taken from the £8 billion set aside for the NHS up to 2020. If that is the case—perhaps the Minister can confirm that for us today—I struggle to see how it will meet what the taskforce says is required.

Given that mental health receives just under 10% of the total NHS budget, it is difficult to see how the funding announced could be considered as additional, particularly in the context of the £600 million cut that mental health trusts have experienced over the course of the last Parliament. I should have thought that the Minister would have allocated that proportion of the £8 billion to mental health anyway, so I am keen to hear his response on that point.

There are also real concerns about how this funding will be distributed and what systems will be in place to ensure that it reaches the front-line services for which it is intended and not siphoned off to plug the deficits of acute trusts. That point has already been made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). The Minister is right to prescribe that CCGs must increase the amount of their budget that they allocate to mental health at a rate that is at least in line with the general growth in their budget. However, as that budget information is not published centrally, I have yet to see any evidence from the Government that they are able to guarantee that CCGs are fulfilling that commitment. In fact, I have had to make freedom of information requests, which have exposed the fact that more than one in three CCGs are not meeting that expectation.

Just before Christmas, the Health Secretary announced that from June there will be independently assured Ofsted-style ratings for mental health provision by CCG area that will expose the areas that are not making the commitment to mental health that they should. I asked then if he would clarify whether that commitment would include publishing a clear picture of mental health spending for every CCG. I am still awaiting a response to the follow-up letter I wrote seeking clarification on that very important point, and I would be pleased if the Minister were able to confirm that for us today. As he will know, the Opposition strongly believe that the annual survey of investment in mental health must be reinstated. It was stopped in 2011, and it is an absolutely crucial piece of information.

That is especially important given the concerns that have been raised not only by many hon. Members today, but by the Mental Health Network, which represents mental health trusts, who have said that providers of mental health services are yet to see the difference from the investment in child and adolescent mental health services that the Government announced last year. During this debate, many hon. Members have raised specific concerns about CAMHS and the imbalance in the amount that they are allocated from the overall mental health budget. It is less than 10%, and it is a significant challenge. I am interested to hear the Minister’s response both to those very serious concerns and to the proposal from many mental health leaders that the cash should be ring-fenced—I am very keen to hear what he thinks about that.

That brings me to the second key theme of the report—the startling lack of transparency and accountability in our mental health system, which was
mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti). The significant gaps in the information that the Government collect on mental health present a significant obstacle to their ability to deliver what they have promised on mental health. On Monday we saw further shocking evidence of that information gap during the BBC’s “Panorama” programme, which highlighted the discrepancy between the data that the Government hold on the number of children who have died in in-patient mental health trusts and units and the figures from the charity Inquest’s research. I raised that in the House yesterday.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the point that the hon. Lady is making. I always took the view that I was operating in a fog, without access to the proper data. The “Panorama” programme made reference to the fact that I gave a parliamentary answer saying there had been no deaths in children’s mental health services—an answer that was wrong, because I was given the wrong information. I have asked the Secretary of State for a full investigation into how that happened. We have to have absolutely accurate reporting of these things.

Luciana Berger: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I believe it is absolutely imperative that we are able to see how deaths in psychiatric care are not only treated and recorded, but investigated and learned from. We have heard from the Minister that there will be progress on that front.

The situation is particularly concerning given the ongoing case of Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, which was found to have failed to investigate more than 1,000 unexpected deaths of mental health and learning disability patients since 2011. Only last week, more than two years since the very tragic death of Connor Sparrowhawk, Southern Health trust was found by the Care Quality Commission not to have addressed serious concerns that were raised about the safety of its patients and was issued with a warning notice. I would be grateful if the Minister shared with us what the Department for Education—to deliver on that strategy.

Many recommendations in the taskforce report also require Government Departments—such as the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education—to deliver their own areas of work that relate to mental health. I was very pleased to see those recommendations, and as I have said and will continue to say, we will not address the challenges of our nation’s mental health just from the Department of Health. Prevention and early intervention are absolutely crucial, which was a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher).

Take the work of the Ministry of Justice, for example. The report calls for the completion of the roll-out of liaison and diversion services, as well as the increased uptake of mental health treatment requirements and improvements to prison mental health care. At a time when, as a country, we are seeing one person take their life every four days in our prisons, it is absolutely crucial that we address this very serious issue.

Another point made by the taskforce was about housing and the local housing allowance, which the Government seriously need to address. During today’s debate other Members have talked about the importance of employment and what more needs to be done to support employers to help people with mental health conditions into the workforce, and to support people who might be experiencing those issues. It was disappointing that the Government accepted only formally the taskforce’s recommendations relating to the Department of Health and its arm’s length bodies. I hope the Minister will confirm today whether other Departments will accept and implement the other recommendations.

In conclusion, for the many thousands of people who could benefit from these changes and the others set out in the taskforce’s final report, Ministers must keep their promise and deliver the vital reforms that are overdue and desperately needed. We have heard a lot of rhetoric and warm words on mental health. Now is the time for real action and to translate parity of esteem into reality. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

3.50 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) for this debate.

Among several impossible jobs I have, responding to a debate of this quality in 10 minutes simply cannot be done, so in accordance with my normal practice, if I do
[Alistair Burt]

not answer any question, I will write to the hon. Member and, with colleagues' permission, I will link the questions so that everyone gets the same letter, so that virtually everyone who has spoken will get a letter. I will put a copy in the Library so that other colleagues can see it.

There are many things on which there is no disagreement. To give some one-liners. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said that we now deal with mental and physical illness in an holistic way; that is absolutely right and ensures that money goes to the right place. I will cover that later, but no one disagrees.

On psychiatric liaison, we are on to that. The importance of housing and so on is now understood as part of dealing with mental illness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis spoke about valuing the public sector; yes, that is not said often enough and it is vital to do. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) spoke of the economic case for dealing with mental illness. No one now disagrees with that. The priority that the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) mentioned is absolutely right, and when it comes to waiting times, we are on to those. We are funding waiting times differently from where new tier 4 beds should be. The situation is unacceptable and they have got themselves into a complete mess. That must change and be done properly, and I am determined to do it sooner if possible. I am determined to do it, that we act on out-of-area placements by 2021. I would like to do it sooner if possible. I am determined to do it, but it takes time and the attitude to tier 4 will need to change. My recent experience in Hull showed me how inept current NHS processes are in deciding where new tier 4 beds should be. The situation is unacceptable and they have got themselves into a complete mess. That must change and be done properly, and I am determined it will be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) rightly spoke about the importance of early intervention, as did the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I pay tribute to the knowledge and work of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) in this area. Perinatal care is very much on everyone's agenda.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) talked about the importance of work. There is now a joint unit between the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions to do more of that. A White Paper or Green Paper is expected later this year and will show its importance.

On the importance of young people, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned our work with the Department for Education on new technology, apps and earlier intervention. She is absolutely right.

I do not want to dwell on any of those matters, although I could spend 10 minutes on each, but we have all grasped how important they are. I would like to respond to the key issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I can cover transparency and implementation right up front.

I thank Paul Farmer, Jacqui Dyer and colleagues for their very important report. I am determined that it will not gather dust and as a way forward I have suggested—and we will do it—that an implementation plan is published by the end of the summer. I am not sure whether that will be in August, but it will be by the end of the summer. It will detail how we intend to implement the recommendation. There will not be one response; there will be a series of responses, and there will be a website where people can see what is being done and monitor what is planned. It will be transparent. There will be monitoring by all those who have been engaged but there will be constant reference back to the taskforce's work, so that people can see that what is being done is related to that. The Department is putting in place a robust process with people to monitor it. That is how we will do it.

I want to cover the cross-Government issues not by interministerial committee, but by way of bilateral with colleagues to drive things forward. I think that is the right way to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis mentioned data, particularly in the context in which the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree mentioned them. I think there is recognition that the way in which data have been collected in the past has not been good enough, and there is also recognition that we are trying to lever up standards in all places. The “Panorama” programme and the hon. Lady's questions over a period exposed the difficulty of getting all the data in the right place. This needs a separate debate and a separate set of answers. I have put in place an investigation into where the deficiencies in the data are, and how data that are collected elsewhere but centrally can be brought together. That will not be necessary in some cases and a written question may not provide all the answers.

In relation to the matters raised in “Panorama” on Monday and the difficulty for the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, it should be possible to answer the question. The problem is in terminology and deciding at what point a young person might be in the mental health system. I have agreed to meet Deborah Coles of INQUEST to talk about the information they have gathered. Plainly, it cannot be right that one Minister says “none”, I say “one”, the NHS says “four” and INQUEST says “nine”. That cannot be fair to the people involved.

A lot of attention is paid to the death of any young person with mental health problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway) raised this in a personal context. I can reassure colleagues. There are serious incident reviews, a child death overview panel, and the Care Quality Commission is involved.

Oliver Colvile: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Alistair Burt: If my hon. Friend will forgive me on this occasion, there is just too much to cover in a short period.

There is a national confidential inquiry into suicide and homicide by people with mental illness and the Office for National Statistics is involved. Unfortunately,
there is a gap in the data between national and local sources due to commission arrangements changing. That is an explanation; it is not an excuse or an answer, so my officials are looking urgently into how we can make sure our data collection is more unified and that we are working collaboratively with INQUEST to make sure we get an accurate number and resolve any discrepancies. Most importantly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis said, we must make sure we learn from every tragedy so that we can apply the learning to make things better. We are on to that. I promise the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree that I will find a way of responding to the House to put that right. I will be in touch with her further.

I thank my hon. Friend for his work with the all-party mental health group. He and other colleagues have been responsible for raising these issues over a period.

A figure from the National Institute of Health Research indicates that it spent £72.6 million on mental health research programmes in 2014-15, which in terms of particular research is £27.7 million higher than in any other disease area, including cancer. We are determined to do more research, but I am not convinced the figures are quite as bad as people say None the less, we need data and we need research. Again, the taskforce is right. The Department has accepted all the taskforce's recommendations.

I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a need for better commissioning. We are changing the tariff terms. He said it could not be done from tomorrow, but it is being done from April 2017. To end the block payments, there will be two new payment approaches with two different tariffs. I agree with him on leadership.

The funding will be there, but it must build up over time. The money is being delivered through the spending review and how we intend to fund the national health service generally. The commitment for the £1 billion of extra funding the taskforce asked for is very important and I believe it will make a significant difference.

Commitment, money and determination from the whole of Parliament will be of huge importance in this area and I thank colleagues for their engagement.

3.59 pm

James Morris: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this debate. We have got to the stage of knowing where the problem is and what the solutions are. We need the will in Government and across Parliament to make them happen. We owe that to all the people out there who are relying on us to get this right and I think the stars are aligned to make it happen. Let us get it right.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the report from the independent mental health taskforce to the NHS in England.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Personal Independence Payments

[STEVE MCCABE in the Chair]

4.11 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to be in a debate that you are chairing, Mr McCabe—I think this is the first time it has happened for me. I apologise to all my colleagues because I have a great deal to say on the issue, and I propose to say it and then, hopefully, to take some interventions. I am very grateful to them for attending to listen to the debate, which has provoked an awful lot of interest not just from fellow colleagues, but from individuals who have contacted me. I thank all the people and organisations who have contacted me; I have read all the submissions they sent.

The Government’s present agenda on disability is to reduce the number of people receiving disability benefits and the amount of money they receive. There has been a marked increase in the number of constituents coming to my office to seek help in connection with disability benefits, particularly with the personal independence payment process. In preparing for this debate, I have worked very closely with, and I am very grateful to, Wrexham citizens advice bureau and the welfare rights service of Wrexham Council.

In recent months, it seems that the Department for Work and Pensions has targeted the Wrexham postcode, inviting large numbers of working age, pre-existing disability living allowance claimants to move to the replacement benefit, PIP. Failure to respond to the invitation results in the existing DLA award ceasing, with an associated knock-on loss of any premiums—for example, means-tested benefits, Motability car tax, blue badge entitlement and so on. At any time in the Wrexham area, about 10,000 people have been in receipt of various combinations and levels of DLA, and considerable numbers of them are now going through the migration process, which is almost entirely driven by DWP, not by the claimants themselves.

The DWP invitation gives people a limited amount of time to claim PIP and return the paperwork, with a claim form of about 40 pages in length. Many claimants struggle to complete social security benefits claim forms and seek help to do so. If constituents do not respond, the DLA stops. That is one way of the Government achieving their objective to reduce the benefit paid.

One constituent of mine—a former nurse—has a degenerative neurological condition, yet her PIP assessment resulted in her losing her Motability car, an outcome repeated and experienced by sufferers of Parkinson’s disease, according to a briefing sent to me before this debate. This does, of course, secure the Government’s objective of reducing the benefit paid to disabled people.

The changes to the system are being made against a backdrop of withdrawing specific benefits advice, reductions in legal aid eligibility and reductions in funding for citizens advice bureaux, welfare rights advisers and other sources of advice. The result is that little advice is available for vulnerable people, which further helps the Government to reduce the benefit paid. In any event, the system operated means that applicants invariably complete the long, complex forms without advice and without any knowledge of the criteria applied to award
[Ian C. Lucas]

PIP. As a consequence, it is very often the case that the initial application results in previous recipients of DLA being awarded PIP, if at all, at a lower level.

When an application is made for mandatory reassessment, again the applicants have no detailed knowledge of the criteria, and the reasoning applied by assessors and communicated to the applicant is set out without specific reference to the points awarded for each individual disability. DLA was assessed by health professionals. The Government now contract private businesses such as Capita to carry out assessments. In Wrexham, the largest town in north Wales, there is no geographic base for personal assessments to be carried out and applicants are requested, as a matter of course, to travel more than 40 miles to Rhyl for an assessment. That is a disincentive to vulnerable people to proceed with the application.

On Monday evening, in the excellent “Dispatches: The Great Benefit Row”, presented by Ade Adepitan, we saw the shocking mindset of a number of the assessors. However, the views expressed in that programme reflect what I am told by my constituents. Individual applicants are subjected to rudeness from assessors when they question the obligation to travel distances. When one constituent of mine asked to have an assessment in Wrexham, rather than travel the considerable distance to Rhyl, the conversation went: “Do you receive DLA?” “Yes.” “Use the bloody money to get to Rhyl.”

When the mandatory assessment is completed, the appeal process is complex and difficult and, again, there is a paucity of advice available to applicants. There has been a huge increase in the number of individuals seeking advice in my office, and there are real capacity constraints in handling the quantity of them. Applicants are often vulnerable, stressed and upset by the whole process, and are intimidated by the complexity of the forms.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian C. Lucas: I am sorry but I am going to continue. I will try to take interventions later.

Applicants are also intimidated by the manner of the assessors and the way in which assessments are set out when they are presented to applicants. Having considered a number of the assessments personally, I find it difficult to draft responses to the assessments effectively. The process is much more difficult than drafting court pleadings—I am a solicitor—and, without training and support, it is very difficult even for those experienced in drafting documents.

It is essential to have detailed knowledge of the points awarded for individual actions in order to respond properly to assessments made. The reality is that most applicants do not have that information themselves and do not have adequate access to expert advice to help them. I quote the experience of one of my constituents, Lindsay Usher, who sent an email to me earlier this week. She says:

“I am a carer for my husband John who had a major stroke, aged 55, in October 2010 that left him with various disabilities. He was awarded indefinite DLA...and recently had correspondence to say that he had to now apply for PIP. I made the initial telephone call on his behalf and then the 40 page booklet appeared. We duly completed it and that in itself is stressful. John could not have done it on his own due to the complexity and ambiguity of the questions. They repeatedly try to trip you up and the stroke has left him with a degree of cognitive impairment. We returned it by the due date, 24 March. The receipt was acknowledged by the DWP by text message.

John then received a letter from Capita dated 28 March informing him that he would be assessed face to face by a ‘health professional’ at his home address on 11 April at 08.00 a.m. John takes about an hour and a half to get up, washed and dressed independently in the mornings (this information was written on the PIP claim form) but even though the timing of the appointment was not ideal we decided to accept it as the wording in the letter from Capita includes, in bold, ‘It is important that you go to this appointment. If you fail to go without a good reason, the decision-maker at the Department for Work and Pensions is likely to refuse your claim’. It’s quite intimidating. A further reminder letter dated 2 April was received from Capita confirming the appointment with the same ‘It is important that...’ sentence. Finally a text message was received from Capita on 6 April once again confirming the appointment...Roll forward to the appointment day...Alarms set for 06.00 a.m. Ready, waiting, stressed and nervous by 07.45 a.m. No sign of ‘health professional’. No email, no phone call, no text message. So I telephoned the Capita ‘Enquiry Centre’ at 08.56 a.m. The lady who answered had no idea why John had been ‘stood up’. I said we would give it a while longer. By 10.32 a.m. I phoned again. We got the obligatory ‘sorry’ but I told the young lady I spoke to that she could not be held responsible for the ‘health professional’s’ failure to appear.”

Another constituent became enmeshed in an argument over whether he was able to fully wash the top half of his body, as he has the use of only one arm due to a stroke; the assessor accepted that he could not wash the whole of the bottom half of his body. Parliamentary colleagues have approached me since this debate was listed to tell me of similar accounts affecting those they represent. This degrading assessment process makes sense only if it is understood that the policy’s central objective is to reduce the benefits of these disabled people. All these procedural steps work towards that end and make it more difficult for claimants to apply.

It made me sick to the stomach to see further personal independence payment cuts proposed in the Budget and to see the Minister defending them even before the Budget speech was made. At the same time, the Government cut capital gains tax and corporation tax. This rotten system endures and is often run by rotten people—we saw some of them on Monday night’s programme on Channel 4—who treat vulnerable people and their families with absolute contempt.

If the Minister wants to help disabled people—I respect him, and I am telling him what my constituents are telling me—will he now ask his Secretary of State to carry out a fundamental reappraisal of this appalling system? If he wants to salvage his reputation, that is the only way he will be able to do so. If he wants respect, he and his Department, and those who his Department employs and commissions, need to start treating vulnerable disabled people with the respect they deserve.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Everything my hon. Friend has said is applicable to the Delyn constituency in north-east Wales. It might help Members and the Minister to know that the value of the contract to Capita over 60 months in central England and Wales is £121 million. We can get better value and better, more compassionate performance out of that contract.
Ian C. Lucas: I agree entirely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He is right that this is a massive issue. “Dispatches” highlighted the concerns that many people have about the PIP assessment. The same firm is contracted to carry out PIP assessments in Northern Ireland, where we have one of the highest DLA claimant rates in the whole United Kingdom because of the troubles. Like me, does he feel—perhaps the Minister will respond to this—that there is a great need for those who carry out the tests to have a higher level of competency?

Ian C. Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is clearly a major problem, and MPs are seeing that in their constituencies across the United Kingdom. The purpose of securing such debates is to draw to the Minister’s attention to the mistakes made by Government. All Governments make mistakes—mistakes were made under a Labour Government—and there is a real mistake in this particular case that he needs to address.

Dr Lisa Cameron: Given the information that we have, this is an extremely valuable and timely debate. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, I have particular concerns about the lack of involvement of individuals such as mental health professionals and general practitioners in gathering the information. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that should be standardised as part of the procedure?

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely. These assessments, which often deal with vulnerable people who in many cases have particular complex medical needs, need to be carried out by individuals who know what they are talking about and who have not just been sent on an away day to establish whatever criteria Capita want to apply to let as few applications through as possible.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. One of my West Lancashire constituents had their mobility car repossessed following a PIP assessment, but that was before a mandatory reconsideration or a tribunal to reconsider the case. Where is the natural justice? Does he agree that that is just one more area where the PIP process is ineffective? It is not always cost-effective, and it is certainly uncaring in its treatment of people. All of that has consequences for those being assessed, and it is time for the Government to reconsider their absolutely appalling approach to this problem.

Ian C. Lucas: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The Motability issue is important and is causing concern on both sides of the House.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech and on securing this debate. Are not the shortcomings that he rightly describes underlined by the success rate at first-tier tribunal appeals? The Barton advice centre in my constituency has an 82% record in overturning such wrong decisions.

Ian C. Lucas: That is absolutely the case, and it is important to realise the impact of determinations, such as the withdrawal of Motability cars, which are taken back within days pending an appeal.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Everything my hon. Friend says is happening in Neath. What is the Department for Work and Pensions doing to ensure that the healthcare professionals who undertake the assessments are mental health specialists, as Capita claims? What exactly does “mental health specialist” mean? Are they qualified mental health nurses, doctors or carers? In one case in Neath, a report was done by a paramedic.

Ian C. Lucas: I am sure that the Minister will address those points in his response, which I will now allow him to make. I am grateful to him for being patient while I have taken interventions.

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who cares passionately about his constituents. I have enjoyed working with him on a wide range of issues relating to my role. I genuinely understand why he takes such a close interest in this subject, and I will do my very best to address the points raised both by him and in the interventions that he kindly allowed.

I want to make a few basic points absolutely clear at the beginning. This is not about reducing the number of claimants or the amount of money spent; it is a fact that the number of claimants and the amount spent will increase in every single year of this Parliament. PIP is a modern and dynamic benefit to help cover the extra costs faced by people with disabilities. By way of comparison with the old system, 16% of DLA claimants would expect to get the highest rate of benefits; it is 22.5% under PIP. An example of where there is a big difference is in hidden impairments, such as mental health conditions. Only 22% of those with a mental health condition would qualify for the highest rate of DLA, but under PIP it is 68% because the system is better designed to take such cases.

That situation comes about because, under DLA, claimants were predominantly assessed on the form they filled in—it was a long, complicated form. I accept that the PIP form is still not the simplest form, but it is better than the old DLA form. Some 70% of people who were given a benefit under DLA had no medical evidence, and the problem with that is that people will often under-diagnose, particularly if they have a hidden impairment. They might take for granted the challenges that they face and think that they are the norm and not something for which they should get support, whereas we recognise as a society that they should get that support.

The job of the assessors is, in effect, to help people fill in their form to a better standard than under the old DLA system. The Government determine how much is paid and how many points people need in order to qualify, so we are at the end of the system, but the assessors are there to assist claimants in making the very best case that they can make.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I appreciate that people with mental health conditions or learning disabilities are likely to do better, but the 2010 Budget clearly set out, on page 40, table 2.1,
line 23, that DLA reform was solely designed to reduce spending on working-age DLA expenditure by £360 million by 2013-14 and by more than £1 billion by 2014-15. To claim that PIP is about being more generous to disabled people is just plain dodgy.

Justin Tomlinson: No, it is the reality that every year the number of people either on DLA or PIP—as Members can imagine, people are increasingly switching to PIP from DLA—is rising and the amount being spent is rising. That is what is happening. As things stand today, 1.32 million people have gone through the PIP process. About 745,000 claimants are now on PIP, and about 1.5 million claimants remain on DLA.

Christina Rees: Will the Minister explain why people who have been in receipt of DLA for more than 10 years are no longer eligible to receive disability benefit? Why are they no longer classified as disabled under the current Government guidelines?

Justin Tomlinson: I say gently that that is a little muddled, but I will come on to explain things. Under DLA, not only was the form complicated and people did not necessarily have the medical evidence, meaning that they could be under-diagnosed, but they were not reassessed. Many Members have implied today that we should not reassess people, but the reality is that every year the condition of one in three people will change so significantly that they should be on a different level of benefit. For the majority of those people, their condition is getting worse, not better.

Under DLA, we found that people were on a lower rate than they should have had for decades. Under the PIP process, there is a lot more evidence, which we use to say, “Right, this person has a fluctuating health condition, or a degenerative health condition, that will probably get worse, and they are currently only on the standard rate, but we have an expectation that they will probably progress to having a requirement for an enhanced benefit at a certain period of time.” We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time.” We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time. We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time. We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time. We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time. We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time. We flag that up in the system, and that person would then automatically benefit at a certain period of time.

People who are already on the highest rate and have a degenerative condition are not likely to have intense reassessments on a regular basis. It may very well be that many years pass before there is a telephone call to ask, “Are conditions still the same?” That is something that the old DLA system failed—

Christina Rees indicated dissent.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady can shake her head, but that is why only 16% of claimants on DLA received it at the highest rate, yet the figure for PIP is 22%.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does the Minister appreciate that my constituent Linda Isaac, who is currently receiving chemotherapy for bowel cancer, who has waited for 19 weeks only to be denied PIP and another nine weeks for a mandatory reconsideration, will not appreciate the modern “dynamic” PIP system that he is talking about?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand that point. It is difficult to comment on an individual case, and I am happy to look at such cases after the debate. The hon. Lady and I have worked together carefully on a number of cases, and I am happy to extend that invitation again.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Minister is giving the impression that people on the old DLA are all being upgraded under PIP and retaining their payment. What we see in our constituency casework, however, is people coming off benefits altogether, and he is not addressing that point. Some of those people’s conditions are either getting worse or remaining the same.

I will make one final point, if I may. Will the Minister or his Department take action after the “Dispatches” programme on Channel 4?

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) rose—

Justin Tomlinson: In fairness, I am trying to respond to those points. I will make some progress, then I will cover the TV programme that was shown on Monday.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to the Minister. He talked about the increase in the number of disabled people claiming PIP, but can he explain the impact assessment of the 2012—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but in a half-hour debate it is not customary for a Front Bencher to intervene.

Debbie Abrahams: Apologies.

Justin Tomlinson: I am sure there will be many other opportunities for the hon. Lady to ask me questions, and I look forward to them. Perhaps I have got a foresight of what her next question at Work and Pensions oral questions will be.

I acknowledge that when we first introduced the PIP process there were major problems with timings, but there has been a settled position for about a year now. It currently takes seven weeks for an assessment and 13 weeks—median end to end—to get a decision. The time taken has been reduced by about three quarters since June 2014. I will now touch on the TV programme, which is obviously topical. I was as appalled as everybody else who watched that programme. To the credit of Capita, it has reacted quickly and the individual concerned—Mr Barham—has been dismissed, and rightly so. We have not been made aware of any evidence that this is a significant issue; it seems to be a disgracefully appalling but isolated one. We have been told, “The overwhelming feedback gathered so far is one of frustration, disappointment and anger about how this individual has let everyone down, undermining the hard work and effort that everyone puts in daily to deliver and continually improve the level of service provided both to the Department and the PIP claimant community.” Capita has assured me that it will conduct further checks to
make sure that this incident was an isolated one, and I was genuinely as appalled as everybody else who saw that programme.

Ian C. Lucas: Before the programme was screened, individuals had been saying to me that the assessors’ attitudes were wrong. I recounted one particular case, and I have been given other examples that I did not have time to cover today. Will the Minister please speak firmly to Capita and tell it to start treating people with respect?

Justin Tomlinson: I will take one last intervention.

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely. That is happening; that is a given.

Rosie Cooper: Why not allow Capita to film those—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order.

Justin Tomlinson: I think we agree—

Neil Coyle: But you control the process.

Justin Tomlinson: We have just added a further 10 days to the process, recognising that point. We want to get the right decision for the claimant first time. That is an absolute given, but we rely on individuals to present evidence. Everyone is unique. Everyone involved is facing a different challenge, which is why they are applying for the benefit. In an ideal world, we would have access to all their information and no one would have to provide it, but as I have explained, that information is not available. My colleagues in the Scottish Parliament are doing some interesting work in this area, and we will
look carefully at how that progresses, but we have added that extra time and are trying to be as clear as we can in the letters.

Beyond this debate, I will be interested to look more closely at the points that the hon. Member for Wrexham made about how the information that comes back to people is sometimes not clear enough. However, all claimants can request a copy of the full health professional’s report at any stage in the decision-making process. That is automatically triggered at the independent appeal stage, but it is available before that if people wish to have it.

We are also working on the online application process, to put all the information in one place. A lot of people want to be able to apply online for convenience. An added benefit will be that we can put additional help and support online, but people will still be able to claim in the traditional way if they want to.

I do not have long, but I want to address the point that was made about locations. All claimants in north Wales are offered—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
last year. In fact, we owe it to the UK population to ensure that those rights are enshrined in British policy making. How can we as a nation turn to such countries as Kenya and preach about how they can enhance their rights when 58% of Kenya’s Parliament are women and only 29% of MPs in our Parliament are female? That seriously impacts our credibility as a nation. To ensure that we are not in that situation, we need to start acting now.

The Overseas Development Institute has done vast amounts of research into the goals, looking into what progress the world will achieve towards reaching them if Government policy across the globe stays as it is today. Through its detailed assessment, the ODI found that if current trends continue, none of the goals or targets will be met. The goals are set in a way that forces big change to occur if we are to reach them—I believe that is what makes them such an asset—but the research makes it crystal clear that urgent work is necessary. We cannot let the goals pass us by, and we certainly cannot afford to reach 2025, just five years from the deadline, and realise that we are too far away to be successful.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The goals are not legally binding on nations. Does my hon. Friend agree therefore that civil society, the media and academia are all important in holding nations to account?

**Ben Howlett**: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the goals are not legally binding, but they are internationally binding, and civil society and all parts of our society have a role to play in pushing them through. As a result of the sustainable development goals, I have seen many conversations in this place looking from an international perspective at how we can implement our sustainable development goals in this country. What we are missing is that crucial part, which I will come on to later, relating to who is responsible and when will the development goals be put into practice.

We need a well thought-out, holistic approach whereby we identify and tackle problems that still persist in our own country, while supporting other nations with their progress. It would be helpful to have a clear lead in the Government who can be held responsible for our progress, either in the Cabinet Office or the Department for International Development. Questions already need to be answered, such as why there has been such slow progress. We need to ensure that the Secretary of State for International Development is not sitting on the next high-level UN economic panel feeling awkward that Britain is without a clear implementation plan.

The Overseas Development Institute put together a scorecard showing how much effort is needed to achieve each goal. The scores did not make for good reading. Three of the goals were given a B rating, meaning that reforms are still needed to reach the target, but that we are none the less on the right track. Most of the targets received a C to E rating, meaning that reaching them needs a revolution in attitudes and policy, with radical approaches and innovation needed for us to have any chance of success. Five goals received an F rating, meaning that the world is moving in the wrong direction to achieve them. I hope the Minister will address what the UK is doing to improve those grades. At the end of the day, this is not something we can fail and resit.

The ODI research makes it clear that we have much to do over the next 15 years to reach any of the goals. As I have said, following my recent visit to the CSW, my personal focus, and that of the Women and Equalities Committee, is on seeing us reach goal 5, which is to:

“Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

That is a big statement. It seeks equality. That is not just a bit of equality, or a step forwards or a 2% reduction in the gender pay gap or a few more girls taking science, technology, engineering and maths; it states “equality”, and we must remember that we signed up to that. As the UN document says:

“Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.”

At this point, I would like to pause and pay tribute to the superb work being done by the UK’s mission to the UN. Its ability and passion for the delivery of the sustainable development goals was totally apparent over that week at the UN. Much more must be done to ensure that that work is not done in vain. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, and Baroness Verma in the other place also took a superb lead at the commission, focusing on tackling goal 5.

Because of Britain’s significant soft power, other nations are looking to us to make a stand and implement the sustainable development goals. Further delays will risk our credibility in the world’s eyes. The Select Committee will be doing more internationally to hold our Government’s feet to the fire and more to put equality legislation in an international context. We will be doing more work with other European and international equality committees and with other Parliaments to fight for the delivery of the goals by 2030. Of course, I look forward to reading the International Development Committee’s report on the sustainable development goals in the coming months.

It is clear that the world has a lot to do to reach the goals, but it is still not clear what the world is going to do. It is crucial throughout the next 15 years that we remember that the goals are interrelated. We must understand that the policy to reach one goal may affect our attempts to reach others. I see equality and goal 5 as pivotal. The latter is central to ensuring that no one gets left behind.

We cannot be left behind in the implementation of the goals. Other nations are already being proactive about reaching them. Colombia set up an inter-agency commission on the preparation and effective implementation of the SDGs to oversee their implementation. Even before the goals were agreed, Sweden recently embarked on a delegation to support and stimulate the implementation of the SDGs, and it will develop a comprehensive action plan for their implementation. We must take similar action and create a cross-departmental strategy to reach each of the targets.

The SDGs certainly contain a bold commitment: to leave no one behind when it comes to change and progress towards an equal society. If we begin to create a plan today, we can ensure real progress around the world and in our own country.
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a great honour and privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing such an important debate, and at the right time too.

Friends, in September last year, one could have seen a strange sight on a bright but crisp New York day. An unlikely crowd had been drawn together. I was stood with parliamentary colleagues from around the world at the announcement of the finalisation of the international negotiations. Alongside my colleagues were other, better-known faces: Beyoncé, Coldplay and Ed Sheeran. What could bring such unlikely allies together?

Building on the successes of the millennium development goals, the sustainable development goals have the potential to lift 800 million people out of extreme poverty. That is no mean feat, and on its own would be a success of broadly unmatched effect in global development. I have been campaigning on goal No. 3 in particular, which is to ensure “healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages”.

Too many children and older people around the world are left behind when progress is made. That is why I am so proud to have supported our commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international development. That commitment has provided long-term stability to the programmes we support. Department for International Development programmes have helped to save the lives of 44,000 women during childbirth and 97,000 newborn babies, and provided food security to 3.5 million people. That is the real effect of the money we spent and an indicator of what a comprehensive, integrated implementation of the sustainable development goals can achieve. Let us make success a reality, rather than just a goal.

The MDGs were plagued with questions; they did not offer a truly international solution to global problems and they created two classes of country. That is why such a diverse group joined together in New York last year. Where the MDGs were successful was in their fight to stop the global increase in the incidence of TB, malaria and HIV and AIDS. We now look to end those three epidemics by 2030. The fund has the chance not only to eradicate infectious diseases, but to save a further 8 million lives by 2019.

The Global Fund needs replenishment. As part of our implementation of the SDGs, I want to see a commitment to keep the fund well supported. In the last round, we pledged £1 billion and, in line with most donor nations, we need to increase that by 20% to keep up with the aims of the goals to eliminate the diseases by 2030. The fund has the chance not only to eradicate infectious diseases, but to save a further 8 million lives by 2019.

The new SDGs offer a better way forward, and our Prime Minister threw his support behind them in New York. Implementation must be universal—universality is what makes the SDGs as promising as they are. The British Government should not merely choose a few goals and targets to focus on; all 17 goals and 169 targets should guide our strategy. However, this is not just an international development issue, because the SDGs work even more broadly than that. Along with, I am sure, others present in the Chamber today, I want to see the Cabinet Office given the role of co-ordinating the work across not only DFID, but the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. We are falling behind other countries, but we can do better, and co-ordinating action across Government to fulfil the promise of the Prime Minister’s words in September is how we do that.

Mr Sharma: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is a proactive member of the International Development Committee and we all agree that a partnership is needed, with Governments, the private sector, the third sector and all non-governmental organisations working in the field coming together to find a solution and the resources, which will be a huge amount.

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Several hon. Members rose——

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): May I check that everyone who wants to participate is standing? I will call the Front-Bench speakers at 5.20 p.m. and there are four of you, so if you take about five minutes each, we will get everyone in.

5 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing the debate on sustainable development goals, which are now referred to as development goals. Along with other Members here, I am a member of the Select Committee on International Development and I am also the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sustainable development goals. I take a particular interest in this matter and the International Development Committee has an ongoing inquiry on it, so I welcome the chance to speak.

The SDGs are the successors to the millennium development goals. There were eight MDGs but there are 17 SDGs, which were agreed to at the end of last year. They are much broader than the MDGs and I was pleased to see that they gave particular focus to women and girls as well as to health, governance and much more. In fact, there is much more in the SDGs than in the millennium goals. They also require a fundamentally different approach to sustainable development from the UK and beyond. Like any plan, strategy or agenda, the
goals are all down to the delivery and implementation on the ground and the difference that will make to people’s lives. That is how they will be judged, be that in the next few months and years or in 15 years’ time.

In broader terms, the UK is taking a leading role in international development. I, too, am a supporter of the UK’s commitment to 0.7% for international development, but it is not enough just to commit to spend; we must commit to deliver and achieve value for money and accountability for the British taxpayer. Good and effective international development is the right thing to do, and it is the smart thing to do as well. It is in the country’s interests to do good international development, be that in responding to humanitarian emergencies and disasters, building resilience in countries that are prone to crisis, building stability or using influence. All of those are linked to goal 5 on women and equality, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) referred to today. The goals are very much interlinked. It was often said when they were agreed that perhaps there were too many, but I would not have liked the job of trying to remove one of them.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about women and equality, on which the Government have made a huge contribution. In particular, the girls’ summit in 2014 showed the way and the importance of putting women and girls at the centre of international development, especially in education and in health. They have also done work on preventing sexual violence against women in conflict. Of course there is much more to do. I, too, would like to see greater clarity as to how the SDGs are linked into other Departments’ plans as well as the broader official development assistance-defined projects.

I take the opportunity to highlight a couple of projects and campaigns that show the importance of SDG 5 and women and equality. First, as some Members know, I spent many of my summers in Rwanda with Project Umubano. I was there a number of years ago and I had the pleasure of visiting a project organised by ActionAid, helping to empower women—I often refer to it as the bee project. A group of women were shown how to farm beehives, which produced not just an income and livelihood for them but enabled them to educate their children, empower themselves and improve the future chances of their families, which is really important.

More recently, the Select Committee was in Nigeria, where one of the most humbling experiences was to meet some of the campaigners from the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. They hold a daily vigil at the Unity fountain in Abuja and we could not help but be moved by the stories they so bravely shared with us. These are just two examples.

These are two very different stories. The bee project is a story of great hope, but Chibok is one of great sadness and tragedy. That is why SDG 5—achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls—is so important. I hope that in today’s debate we are able to continue to raise the importance of DFID’s work, the SDGs, women and diversity and, crucially, implementation and accountability. The success of the SDGs will depend upon the collection of data to analyse and assess the results, which is a challenge in itself. We need to be robust, because accountability matters. However, there must also be a recognition that although the UK is putting huge effort into the SDGs and playing a significant part, these are universal goals and it is up to everyone to play their part in them. Others must also step up to the mark.

5.6 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on bringing this extremely important debate to Westminster Hall. The sustainable development goals are universal and therefore must be applied both at home in the UK and internationally. I do not wish to reiterate the information that has already been relayed so well by colleagues, so I will focus briefly on some issues that have been highlighted as part of my work on the International Development Committee, which is currently undertaking an inquiry into the sustainable development goals.

One very pertinent and important issue that I would like the Minister to comment on is the collection of data—from a variety of sources, both governmental and beyond. We must be able to evidence the implementation of the goals and indicators that we have set. There are a great many ways to collect informative and necessary data in the UK and in developing countries. In many countries where such data have never been collected, we must first gain a baseline to show where we are now, but we must also have data that give us an understanding of the progress that is being made towards full implementation.

Mrs Helen Grant: The hon. Lady is making a very good point. Does she agree that many developing countries will have difficulty collecting such data, and that this could be a great opportunity for DFID to do everything it possibly can to assist those countries to meet the required standard?

Dr Cameron: I agree entirely. It is key that we show leadership in this area, in which we historically have very good ability and understanding, and we can certainly lend our expertise to the rest of the world, including developing countries.

Data must be gathered from various sources. For example, if they exist at all, governmental data on child marriage are linked to the legality of child marriage. In countries where child marriage is illegal but still exists, such marriages are often not conducted in registered settings; they are cultural ceremonies and therefore unrecorded. People know that they are happening, but they are excluded from the data. We must therefore collect accurate data. Governmental data may not themselves be accurate. Household survey data are required,
as are data from technologies such as mobile phones, imaging and other sources, to make sure that the data are accurate, particularly for people—such as women—who may feel too vulnerable to provide accurate data to governmental agencies that are collecting such data. Will the Minister comment on the support that DFID is providing for data collection, and the use of technology in that collection, and the methods it uses to verify statistics, so that it does not just accept them at face value?

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): There is also the issue of the disaggregation of data. In terms of what the targets are—leaving no one behind—the data need to be articulate and specific, not least for groups that could easily be overlooked, such as ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. The way in which DFID deals with its own statistics is hugely important.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He shows his expertise in the area. Disaggregated data will be crucial in our understanding of whether we meet indicators.

Before I finish I will speak of another particularly important part of the implementation—the “leave no one behind” agenda. As a member of the International Development Committee, I have been fortunate to visit a number of developing countries, and I must say that I have visited few projects that reach out and undertake interventions for people with disabilities. Many of those people continue to be left behind and marginalised, and are missing from the programmes that I have visited. Do we have data on their numbers? The data may vary across countries. What are we doing to ensure that people with disabilities are not continually left behind, and to ensure that we do not think we are doing enough because we are simply not reaching out and noticing that they are there? That should be integral to DFID’s programmes.

Summing up, because I am aware of the time and want the Minister to be able to respond, the SDGs are a welcome step forward. Their implementation is complex and requires funding, although I agree with other hon. Members that there should be investment, so that it is a partnership. Data collection and verification will be key, but what a worthwhile aim it is to make sure that we implement the sustainable development goals, and that the most vulnerable people across our world are no longer left behind.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I ask the last two speakers to divide the final eight minutes between them.

5.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If there are eight minutes, I have four. It is a pleasure to be called to speak today and congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on setting the scene, and other hon. Members who have made valuable contributions.

I am going to focus on the issues of health and the sustainable development goals, which the Minister will reply to. I know how much progress has been made in responding to epidemics. The dual impact of HIV and TB continues to be devastating for millions of people and their families. Of the 1.5 million people killed by TB in 2014, 400,000 were HIV-positive. AIDS-related illnesses claimed some 1.2 million lives in 2014, which included 400,000 TB deaths among HIV-positive people. Malaria causes hundreds of thousands of deaths every year, predominantly among young children.

To put it in Hansard and on the record, the incidence of HIV and of TB in London has increased; I am not sure whether hon. Members are aware of that. They are probably coming from some of the people who have moved here and maybe their contact with others. We have issues here at home that we need to address, but that is not for this debate.

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria plays an essential role in reducing these upsetting statistics, and will be part of the drive to eradicate them in future, but it needs help from Governments across the world. The Global Fund is asking Governments, the private sector and other organisations for a total just short of £10 billion for the period 2017 to 2019, which would save millions of lives and avert hundreds of millions of infections and new cases of HIV, tuberculosis and malaria. The debate we had in Westminster Hall yesterday on HIV in women and girls also highlighted that. The Minister responded, as he always does, in a very positive and helpful manner; I am sure he will do the same today.

Responding to the Global Fund’s call for additional resources, UNAIDS executive director Michel Sidibé said:

“We have to invest additional resources today to end these epidemics, otherwise the deadly trio will claim millions more lives, as well as costing us more in the long run.”

We need to be an integral part of the global efforts to eradicate the deadly trio, with the United Kingdom making a positive difference across the globe. Ensuring our commitment to the future success of the Global Fund will deliver that, as well as security and support for a global organisation that makes a positive difference.

When it comes to addressing the deadly trio, perhaps the Minister could give us some idea of what discussions have taken place between DFID and pharmaceutical companies to ensure that some of the very necessary medications and drugs get to where they need to be—at the source of the problems. Of course, that will not be free, but the Global Fund’s plan can work to end this pandemic. The Global Fund has been successful and is ready to continue its life-saving work if funded.

I attended an event today on the persecution of Christians in Nigeria. Tomorrow is the second anniversary of the kidnapping of 200 young girls in Nigeria, to which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr. Cameron) referred. We have to speak out for women, for diversity and for equality, and on issues such as child marriage. There is a systematic abuse of women and girls, and that issue has to be raised and spoken about today.

Seventeen million lives have been saved globally because of the work of the global partnership; 8.1 million people living with HIV/AIDS who would not otherwise receive any treatment are receiving ARV therapy as a result of the Global Fund; millions of people who would not otherwise have been tested for tuberculosis have been treated; and 548 million insecticide-treated nets have been distributed. We are trying to address the
issue of the number of people dying from malaria. We have a chance in this debate to highlight the issues, and I ask the Government and the Minister to do their best.

5.17 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for initiating this debate, and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for speaking with even faster delivery than normal, to ensure that I can say a few words.

I am speaking on the back of an event we held in Speaker’s House yesterday with the all-party group on global education for all, which I co-chair, ParliREACH, Results UK and the Malala Fund, following an incredibly inspirational showing of the film “He Named Me Malala”.

I want to talk in particular about education. First, I commend the far greater detail of the SDGs on educational issues—something on which civil society has been campaigning for years. We have heard about goals 3 and 5. I want to talk about goal 4 and the necessary depth that the SDGs have gone into. I will remind Members of goal 4.1:

“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete”—
“complete” being the key word—
“free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”

Goal 4.5 is:

“By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations”—something that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) mentioned. Finally, goal 4.c is to increase the supply of qualified teachers by 2030, which is essential.

We have built on the success of the MDGs, but we must now set a target to ensure that the term we used in those goals—out-of-school children—is made redundant in the next 15 years. Globally, 200 million young people still have not completed primary school education, with 60% of them being women. It is about ensuring quality primary and secondary education. The Malala Fund is adamantly that we should ensure 12 years of education—not just primary, but meaningful secondary education as well.

Our all-party group has been to Kenya. We talked to many people there who asked us, “What happens then?”—“then” being when primary education finishes. We need to ensure that schooling is adequately resourced in terms of both physical and human resources. While the old MDGs had an emphasis on quantity, we had a healthy debate in New York, and we won talking about quality.

Malala was clear in her film about discrimination against young girls and women. Of course, we must ensure that we address the biggest minority of all: the disabled. In the few seconds I have left, I commend to hon. Members the all-party group’s report entitled “Accessing inclusive education for children with disabilities in Kenya”. I reiterate the point that many hon. Members made today: the Government’s objectives need to be data-related. In other words, data need to be the starting point and we need to know how the Government’s intentions will be sustainable Development Goals.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I ask the Front Benchers to follow the example of the Back Benchers and confine their remarks to about five or six minutes to give the Minister and Mr Howlett time to respond to the debate.

5.20 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing this debate. This is first debate on various aspects of the SDGs since the goals were agreed but—I have used the shiny new Hoursand search facility—about the fourth since the start of the Session. There was, not least, my own debate in Westminster Hall on 16 June last year. There was a debate on the educational aspects led by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) a few weeks later in July, and a very useful Back-Bench business debate on 10 September led by the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips). Just yesterday, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) led a debate on tackling HIV and AIDS in women and girls, in which a number of the issues that we have heard about today were touched on. I suspect that we will continue to revisit these issues throughout this Parliament and the lifetime of the SDGs. That is appropriate, because the effective implementation of the sustainable development goals will require considerable and ongoing scrutiny and monitoring from Parliaments around the world.

I should declare an interest: until the election last year, I was an employee of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the chair of the Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland and a member of the Scottish Government’s working group on the implementation of the sustainable development goals. I will perhaps touch on some of those things if time allows.

I want to look briefly at how the structure was arrived at and the opportunities that it presents, at the approaches that have been taken in Scotland—because there are lessons that DFID can learn—and, more generally, at the options for prioritisation and implementation of the goals by DFID. The process by which the goals were arrived at was incredibly inclusive and consultative. The SDGs are not simply the millennium development goals mark 2; they are a complete refresh. They represent a global consensus on the kind of world that we know is possible and that we have the resources, the knowledge and the technical ability to achieve. The most important thing that is needed is political will to get there.

The universal, comprehensive nature of the goals is significant. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) talked about goal 3; the hon. Member for Bath and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) talked about gender equality; and the hon. Member for Ceredigion talked about goal 4, on education. In the context of this debate, perhaps the most important goal is No. 17, on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development, because it will encourage all the Governments of the world to work
together to implement the goals in their own countries and internationally. As we have heard, no goal is met unless it is met everywhere and in full. That is the important universal nature of the goals.

The Scottish First Minister committed Scotland to the SDGs last July while they were still in draft format. She committed to the principle of achieving them at home and abroad and of using the Scottish Government’s powers to meet them in Scotland to eradicate poverty and achieve gender equality, which is very close to her heart. A great deal of work is going on at civil society and civil service level to see how the goals can be integrated into the national performance framework and the Scottish national action plan for human rights. Incredibly encouraging progress is being made. It would be interesting to hear how DFID plans to take forward a similar approach and, more broadly, the attempt at policy coherence for development.

This issue also came up yesterday in the HIV debate. A number of us were disappointed at the Command Paper published by DFID. The Government had showed commendable leadership in the development of the goals, in the negotiation process. Then last November they published a Command Paper that mentions the global goals only four times in its 28 pages. It would therefore be useful to hear from the Minister when a clear strategy for implementation of the SDGs will be published and whether that will happen before the high-level political forum in New York in July—the first key milestone—what the cross-Government role will be and whether they see a role for the Cabinet Office in co-ordinating across Government how domestic policy has an effect overseas, but also how the goals can be met at home, as well as how this will complement other commitments that have been signed up to, not least the Paris commitments on climate change.

Hon. Members have raised a number of operational points, in particular about data collection and disaggregation of data. There are questions about the funding cycles that DFID introduces, given that these are 15-year horizons and many projects perhaps receive only two or three-year funding. I am conscious of the time, so I will conclude simply by reiterating what I said earlier. We have the knowledge, the ability and the technical know-how to reach these goals. What is needed is the political will.

5.26 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett)—as a northern English MP, I have been looking forward for quite some time to addressing the hon. Member for Bath, because we know that there are no stray r’s in the name of his constituency. I say well done to him for securing the debate and focusing on holding Governments to account, because that is the job of all of us, no matter which party we represent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) made an extraordinarily powerful speech, as he has done on a number of occasions, and reiterated the consensus across nearly all parties about the 0.7%, but it is interesting that, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, goal 17 refers to strong institutions. That is also about collecting tax. In the week of the Panama tax release, we know that we need to be doing more, because we know that three times the global aid budget is held in developing countries, in offshore tax havens. We all have to work harder to ensure that we get more transparency, because we would not need international development aid budgets if companies at source paid their taxes in those developing countries.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) made a very powerful speech. I commend her work and her leadership as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sustainable development goals. I sort of say that with a smile on my face, because I think she has her work cut out over the next few years, if she does not mind my saying so. We have made a start, but we have a long way to go.

Data are massively important, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) stated and as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) said in an intervention. As a clinical psychologist, the hon. Lady will know that mental health is an absolute Cinderella service in developing nations. We try for parity in this country, but it is almost nowhere to be seen in developing countries. We will have to work much harder and do much better on that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked, as he does every time, about the big three: HIV, AIDS and tuberculosis. I do not think there has been a debate to which he has not contributed. I commend him for his campaign work.

It was great to visit the jungle in Calais with the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) recently. Both of us, as former primary school teachers, felt the passion for education coming through.

The goals set out ambitions not just for the UK Government, but for all nations. The UK and DFID need to take a leading role in promoting the SDGs and implementation of the goals, as they did for the MDGs under Labour and the coalition. Realisation of these goals by 2030 is a significant challenge. That is why regular updates and scrutiny must accompany them—in order to hold all Governments to account.

What has come through in this debate is that the Government need to outline a clear strategy on how we implement the goals as soon as possible. It is important for the credibility and reputation of the UK as an international leader, especially in the light of the high-level political forum meeting in July, that we get that strategy out there. The point I want to press the Minister on is that I think the UK should be represented at that meeting at Secretary of State level. I hope that he can answer that point.

The implementation strategy should include a detailed review of what is required of the UK to achieve each goal. That could be achieved through a gap analysis. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow went on about data and the hon. Member for Foyle talked about data aggregation. We need to know the baseline and how we are moving forward. DFID and the leadership, through the Cabinet Office, need to show that.

Furthermore, the UK must commit to implementing the goals in their entirety, not picking them off one by one. Although it is recognised that political and economic
developments might necessitate a greater focus on certain goals at a given time. I urge the Government to ensure that the SDGs are continually maintained on the policy agenda as a whole—a commitment in line with the pledge to “leave no one behind”, as already mentioned. That and sustainability are the two key ideas that the public and civil society must be encouraged to engage with, as the hon. Members for Bath and for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out.

I want to make a point about local government representation. My political party in Manchester will achieve 50% representation in May, if the results go our way. It is not just us, as national politicians, but civil society that is engaging.

The SDGs are an integrated and indivisible package of targets that should be delivered for all people, in all countries, with all institutions of civil society being engaged. We have an enormous opportunity before us to shape our planet as we take this journey to 2030. We must grasp that opportunity with both hands.

5.31 pm
The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): I will endeavour to speak quickly, but I am afraid that I will not be able to reach the word count achieved by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Ceredigion (Mr Williams).

I commend the sense of urgency and haste brought to the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett). However, I want to introduce a sense of proportion. His accusation was “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin”—somehow we have already been weighed in the balance and found wanting. We have been scored already.

There are 17 goals, 169 targets and, the last time I looked, 250 indicators—the indicators have yet to be agreed by the General Assembly. It is rather too soon to start scoring anyone for doing anything. I accept that there is a challenge and that there has to be urgency, but equally we have to do such things properly and proportionately.

I commend to hon. Members the departmental goals set out by DFID on our website. They should look at those 10 goals, which have delivered a portfolio for DFID that is highly relevant to the 17 goals now adopted as the global SDGs. We are compliant with them in what we are attempting to do, which is no coincidence. The reality is that it is precisely because we had a leadership role in fighting for the goals that have been accepted that we are already doing much of what we need to do to achieve those goals.

We are working across Government and with our development partners to determine where our comparative advantage is and where we can make the greatest impact. There will, of course, be rather more formalised objectives once the whole review season is over.

First we had the spending review, which sets out the envelope in which we have to operate—the money that we will have in order to deliver the goals, which are central to everything that we do. Then we had the strategic defence and security review, into which our own aid strategy fits intimately, in our national interest—I have no difficulty facing any audience to defend the fact that the achievement of the goals is intimately connected with our national interest. Now, we are still going through the bilateral aid review and the multilateral aid review, which determine how we can achieve the best value for money in how we operate in the countries we operate in, and through the organisations and partners that we operate through, in order to achieve the goals most effectively. I know that it is frustrating and takes time, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bath will know that time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted. These are important decisions and it is important that we get them right.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) raised the vital point about data, which is worth a debate in its own right. The reality is that we spotted this coming. There has to be a data revolution. She is absolutely right. The earliest meetings and conferences on that were organised by Lynne Featherstone when she was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in this Department, and we continue to lead on it.

We set out in the Conservative manifesto that preceded the election a series of 23 initiatives that are highly relevant to the achievement of the goals. I do not anticipate, given all the work that we are currently doing, that there will be a separate goal strategy document. The goals are intimate to everything we are doing at the moment through the bilateral aid review and the multilateral aid review, which will be published.

On the question of no one being left behind, we saw this coming ages ago. We had published our framework for disabled people, and we were already driving forward an agenda on women and girls and ensuring that our development partners were delivering on that. Before even the General Assembly adopted that principle, we had spotted that it was an important tool for resource allocation within our Department, and had produced two papers to instruct staff on how to use it. It is central to what we do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath was absolutely right that we have to implement the goals universally, which means doing so here. If we do not do it successfully here, we will have no credibility as an international development force to see that they are developed elsewhere. That is an essential point, and my hon. Friend asked a number of important questions about it. My prejudice is that we are pretty well compliant, but it is not my prejudice that will count.

This is a matter for departmental responsibilities. Departments must take ownership of the goals that fall within their terms of reference. However, cross-Government responsibility will be taken by the Secretary of State for International Development—that is appropriate because we are the Department that fought for the goals and we are passionate about them—and she will be supported in that role by the Cabinet Office.

It is early days. There have been a number of conversations across Government, and I suspect that we will know more shortly when the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), appears before the International Development Committee. That evidence will be instructive.

Responsibility for measurement will be with the Office for National Statistics. It has already contributed hugely and taken a leadership role in the determination of the 250-odd indicators that have yet to be agreed. We anticipate that they will be agreed shortly. We currently
measure social progress across the United Kingdom against 60-odd indicators, so there will need to be a measure of mapping.

On the “no one left behind” agenda, which is central to everything we do and will determine whether the goals have been met, we in DFID are setting up a cross-Government committee, together with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Office for National Statistics, to drive that forward and ensure that the lessons we have been learning internationally are applied nationally.

I need to give my hon. Friend the Member for Bath a moment or two to sum up, but I hope that in my very short speech I have been able to convey both a recognition of the urgency and the fact that there is indeed a plan.

5.40 pm

Ben Howlett: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his response, and I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this crucial debate. Whenever I follow a speech by the Minister, I always need to go back and learn a little more Latin, which I will do with the utmost urgency.

Mr Swayne: It was Hebrew.

Ben Howlett: It was Hebrew; I apologise—even more so since I am visiting Israel later this year.

There is clearly some sort of confusion here. I look forward to seeing the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), give evidence to the International Development Committee. It is sensible that the Secretary of State for International Development is leading the way.

5.41 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 April 2016

[SIR DAVID AMESS in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Pubs Code and the Adjudicator

1.30 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Pubs Code and the Adjudicator.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I also thank colleagues. This is very much a cross-party motion, with its lead Members being the hon. Members for Lincoln (Karl McCartney), for West Bromwich East (Mr Bailey) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), but it is also supported by a large number of Members from across the House. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who is one such Member, cannot be with us today, but he asked for his support to be recorded,

“not just because I am a life member of CAMRA but because better practice reduces exploitation, promotes better hospitality and allows fairer rewards to those who work hard building good pubs around the country.”

In my parliamentary experience, this issue is quite unique in how it has united Members from across the House irrespective of party or political perspective. It has united Liberals, the left, the right, Conservatives and Labour Members and, whether we look at the social, economic or personal argument, there is broad agreement over the need for a statutory code that works and for an adjudicator who enjoys the confidence of publicans in addressing the historical imbalance of power between pubcos and their tenants.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and it is great that we are having this debate. On the Pubs Code Adjudicator, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that all sides, and particularly pubco tenants, have confidence in the adjudicator? Such is the nature of adjudication, and many tenants in my constituency have expressed concern about getting actual fairness and not mere unfairness.

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman expresses the views of his tenant constituents. Tenants’ organisations and tenants throughout the country have expressed that same view. I will come on clearly to lay out why the appointment of the pubs adjudicator is simply untenable.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to pay tribute to the cross-party nature of the campaign. I am someone who voted with him in 2014 and am very much on his side, but, in fairness, to balance things out, does he concede that our coalition Government between 2010 and 2015 realised the necessity of a new code and regulatory framework to address the issues that he has raised over many years?

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I want to thank him personally because he has been a real champion for pubs in Peterborough and his support of the Save the Pub group and the Fair Deal for Your Local campaign has been warmly welcomed. Today is precisely about trying to finish a job that dates back to Select Committee inquiries, the first of which was in 2004—that is how long the issue has been on the political agenda. We are finally getting to the stage of a statutory code of practice, but that, still, is flawed and contains loopholes.

In the spirit of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, that is an issue about which tenants have asked: is this conspiracy or cock-up? I am clear that what has happened is a cock-up. There was an excellent leading article in the Publican’s Morning Advertiser on 7 April in which Mike Berry, who is a neutral person on such issues, said:

“The Government has not covered itself in glory throughout this entire process. From accusation by campaigners of acting in bad faith by removing or amending parts of the legislation, to U-turns over the original omission of parallel rent assessments, to the latter part of this saga has been particularly fraught. And that’s before we even consider the furore from some over the appointment of Paul Newby as the pubs code adjudicator”.

I say to the Minister that this is not personal, but the change of civil servants at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills after the election has clearly led to mistakes being made and a lack of understanding of some of the complexities and technicalities of this legislation, to the extent that in a meeting with a group of tenants, one of the people who has been involved in drafting the pubs code and was on the panel that interviewed the adjudicator said, “I don’t really know much about this.” That being the case, how can tenants possibly have confidence in the Department? I have also been informed that one of the civil servants who had previously worked on the code and who did have experience and the confidence of tenants was brought back in to work on it.

Mistakes have been made, and those mistakes must now be rectified—that is all that we are asking for today—so that, when the pubs code comes in on 26 May and the Pubs Code Adjudicator starts work at the beginning of June, people will have confidence that that has been done properly and that the will of both Houses has been abided by. The legislation was subject to votes in both Houses, and Ministers in both the last Government and this Government, including the Minister here today, made clear promises to abide by those votes and introduce the pubs code and the market rent-only option.

I will address the concerns about the pubs code, the first draft of which was published on 29 October 2015. I declare an interest as chair of the British Pub Confederation, which represents 13 organisations, 11 of which are licensee organisations. The confederation and the Fair Deal for Your Local campaign, which many hon. Members supported, were appalled at the first draft, which included the outrageous clause 8.12. I have given credit to the Minister and her team, and to the Secretary of State, for being prepared to listen and to drop that provision, and we ask them to do so again to address the issues highlighted by an amendment that I tabled to the Enterprise Bill and by one tabled in the name of the shadow
Minister, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson). Unfortunately, we did not get the chance to discuss or vote on either of those amendments, so we urge the Minister to make those changes herself.

The first loophole in the draft code is that, as it is currently written, any tenant seeking to take the all-important market rent-only option that we voted through the House on 18 November 2014 will be forced to give up their lease for a shorter, five-year one. That is simply not acceptable. Clearly, all that the market rent-only option means and ever has meant is that tenants have the simple right to seek an independent assessment of their commercial rent on a free-of-tie basis and then pay that sum—and only that sum—to the pub-owning company for the entire remainder of their lease or tenancy. That loophole is simply not acceptable and must be removed if BIS is to stick to its commitment to introduce the market rent-only option that was voted for. As the person who tabled that clause, I can say that the code simply does not do that as long as that loophole is there.

The second loophole is an extraordinary one that allows a waiver in exchange for investment for people who have not even taken on a tenancy or lease. There has been much discussion about investment, but I think many hon. Members fail to understand the reality of pubco investment. A Federation of Small Businesses survey of its licensee members found that 68% had not had any investment from their pub companies in the past 12 months. Indeed, the costs of investment presented by pubcos are often inflated. Many tenants report that they have had cheaper quotes from other suppliers but are forced to use the contractors that the pub company insists on. There is a problem with allowing a waiver for people who have not yet taken on a pub. We accept that there will be a waiver to allow for investment—it must be limited, substantial and genuine investment—but we strongly say that it should not come in until someone has been in a lease or tenancy for two years.

The reality is that when pubs are vacant, frequently because of a failure of a previous tenant due to the tied pubco model, there is a need for repairs and basic investment simply to make the pub fit to let to someone else. If someone is forced or encouraged to sign a waiver before they have even taken on that pub, there is a real danger that that will be used and abused, with people able to say, “We have invested in this pub that you are about to take, and therefore you have to give up your right to an independent rent assessment for another five years.” That would be the case, and they would therefore not get that assessment for 10 years. There is also a great danger of encouraging pub companies to seek to force out sitting tenants who have the right to a market rent-only option, in favour of someone new who will sign away their right to it.

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong, detailed and comprehensive argument. He will know that paragraph 127 of the impact assessment produced by the Department specifically references a non-gaming caveat. Rather than waste valuable time and energy and the efforts of civil servants and others, including hon. Members, down the track in producing secondary legislation by the Department specifically references a non-gaming loophole now before the code comes in on 1 June?

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman is correct. That is why we are doing this. The British Pub Confederation and other organisations have clearly written about these two glaring loopholes. In the wording of the pubs code, BIS must ensure that any waiver is limited, reasonable and entered into willingly by both parties. The code must also restrict waiver-free investment to a tenant who has been in a substantive agreement, not a tenancy at will, for two years, and must clearly forbid any waivers for investment for new tenants.

I have brought the attention of the Minister and her Department to pubco gaming and some of the behaviour at the moment, and have not really had any response. Paragraph 127 of the impact assessment says:

“Some specific risks include...That pub owning companies find a loop hole in the statutory code that allows them to continue acting as they do currently. To mitigate this risk the rules will be written in terms that are difficult to game. The code, which is likely to be set out in secondary legislation, will be amendable in certain circumstances which will allow it to reflect new developments in the industry and close any loop holes that are found.”

We have already identified these two loopholes, which must now be closed if people are going to have confidence in the code, and if it is going to work in the intended way.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I am certainly a supporter of this code, but I note that codes like this can have unintended consequences. One unintended consequence might be that pub owners would be put off from investing if they were discouraged by the changes that the hon. Gentleman recommends. Would it not be wiser to allow the code to bed in and then review it? The risk is that gaming and unintended consequences could occur, which we would need to monitor anyway.

Greg Mulholland: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, though I do not agree with him. With respect, I feel he has always been slightly confused on this issue. These are clear loopholes that could have very damaging consequences. I can tell the hon. Gentleman, the Minister and the House that pub companies are currently doing all they can to avoid the legislation and the code before 26 May. They are applying pressure on lessees to take up a rent review before 26 May, in advance of scheduled reviews, in order directly to circumvent the code and the market rent-only option specifically.

Some tenants are being coerced to relinquish long leases and take up five-year contracts that are not renewable, so that they are not subject to a market rent-only option. Some pubcos—I have seen one such case myself—are cynically issuing section 25 notices, ending existing tenancies or leases by 31 March to escape the impact of the market rent-only option. The Government must make it clear that the pubs code and the market rent-only option apply to all agreements that have renewal dates or rent reviews from 1 June 2016, because there is some confusion. I hope we will hear that from the Minister today.

Some tenants are also being bribed to sign an agreement without a market rent-only option. One tenant contacted the Save the Pub group to say that she had been offered a 20% drop in her dry rent if she signed a new five-year non-renewable tenancy, which therefore will not have the market rent-only option. It is funny, however, that the pub company did not mention that last bit. It simply
The appointee, Mr Paul Newby, is a chartered surveyor to the clear flaws and untenability of this appointment. Of this role, yet BIS has clearly and demonstrably failed and acceptance. That is clearly the basic, essential nature the post to be taken up from outside the pub sector, if 2013 that to ensure impartiality, it would be sensible for from all sides of the pub sector noted as long ago as 2009. He owns 100 ordinary A shares in Fleurets Holdings, and a director and shareholder of Fleurets. He clearly has a conflict of interest, and it is clearly a disqualifying conflict of interest. Fleurets is the largest surveying practice operating in the very sector that the pubs code is being introduced to regulate. Of course, the reason for that is to protect tenants from abuse by their pubco freeholders.

Mr Newby’s CV, which is publicly available—although, interestingly, it has been taken off the Pubs Independent Rent Review Scheme website—openly advertises for whom he acts. Let me list the six companies that Mr Newby is required to regulate: Enterprise Inns, Punch Taverns, Marston’s, Greene King, Heineken—which is Star Pubs & Bars—and Admiral Taverns. Who do he and his firm currently, and boastfully, say they act for? Enterprise Inns, Punch Taverns, Marston’s, Greene King, Heineken and Admiral Taverns. He clearly is conflicted and biased. Of course the Minister will say, “But he has also operated and acted for tenants,” but actually, given the nature of this appointment, that equally would mean that he is conflicted.

Mr Jackson: Mr Newby may be an exceptionally gifted and talented man to have appointed, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that just the appearance of a conflict of interest is difficult? In this respect, it would circumscribe due process on those occasions when he was required to act in his official capacity. In that sense, it is not fair on him or the taxpayer, or on all the other stakeholders in this situation.

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I actually believe that Mr Newby has been let down in this process, because clearly his application was never tenable and should never have been proceeded with.

The Minister will say, “Oh yes, Mr Newby has represented tenants,” but does she realise that some tenants are actually pub companies themselves? It says that in Mr Newby’s own CV. I was in such a pub last night—the excellent, award-winning Eagle Ale House in Battersea. The award-winning licensees there lease it from Enterprise Inns, but Enterprise Inns are themselves tenants of a property company, so some of the “tenants” that Mr Newby has represented may well be pub companies.

Let me deliver this message as clearly as I can. Let me tell the House about the Fleurets website, and I would urge hon. Members to look at it. Fleurets widely advertises, including on its website and in trade publications, that it acts for all six of the large pubcos to be regulated, and boastfully, say they are from whom Fleurets make from pub companies and from tenants? We know the answer. Companies House records show that Mr Newby has been a director of Fleurets Ltd since 1995 and of Fleurets Holdings since 2009. He owns 100 ordinary A shares in Fleurets Holdings.
amounting to 11.79% of the ordinary share capital in the company. Fleurets Holdings Ltd wholly owns Fleurets Ltd.

The Fleurets website makes it plain that the thrust of the company is to market its services to corporate entities, not to individual tenants. The logos of Fleurets’ corporate clients appear on various pages of the site but there is no mention of tenant clients. There are quotes from satisfied clients. The only ones from the tied pub sector are from Star Pubs & Bars—owned by Heineken—Fuller Smith & Turner, Marston’s, J.W. Lees and Daniel Thwaites. None of the CVs of the nine directors on the website shows any specialisation in acting for individual tied tenants or mentions doing so. Mr Newby’s own CV does not mention his acting for any individual tenants. His CV that was on the PIRRS website—strangely, now taken down, as I said—confirmed that for the last five years, he has worked most closely with Enterprise Inns, Marston’s and Punch Taverns. In 2008, when Martin Willis, the current chairman of Fleurets, was questioned by the Business and Enterprise Committee over a conflict of interest, he said:

“I think we represent just about every pubco”.

That is clearly very true today.

Interestingly, I noticed that among the logos of companies that Fleurets has represented was that of Criterion Asset Management, the director of which is Theo Osborne, brother of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Did the Minister and her team know that? Mr Newby’s company website provides an interesting indication of the preferences of Mr Newby’s firm in relation to the pros and cons of the tied model, which he is now expected to regulate. In 26 pages of news and information articles on the Fleurets website, as of yesterday, there was no criticism at all of the tied model. In contrast, the website is effusive in its promotion of that very business model, the one practised by so many of Mr Newby’s clients—the very companies that he is supposed to regulate.

Let me read some of the headlines. Under “Leasehold pubs are an Attractive Option”, the article states:

“There are some excellent businesses on offer from most Pub Companies”.

Under “The Leasehold Pub—The route to success”, the article states:

“With very little capital needed, tied and free of tie leasehold pubs offer the opportunity for passionate people to build spectacular businesses”.

Under “How Do I Go About Getting Into The Pub Trade?” the article states:

“Whilst getting into the licensed trade can seem quite daunting it must be remembered that breweries and pub companies are continually on the look-out for enthusiastic new partners to run their pubs...For the first time operator this route can often be the best as it comes with various support and training packages and it is invariably the lowest cost of entry”—that is something that many tenants who have struggled with the tied pubco model would strongly dispute.

Another interesting article, and something that has been missed entirely by BIS in its interrogations, is headlined, “Pubs sold for alternative uses in 2014 by Fleurets”. The truth is that Fleurets is not only a surveyor, but the estate agent of choice in the big pubco sell-off. The indebted companies, who got themselves into billions of pounds of debt through their own recklessness and their acquisition spree, are now asset-stripping their estates, often selling for non-pub use, sometimes against the wishes of licensees and often against the wishes of local communities. Fleurets is doing that for them and profiteering from it—and so, currently, is Mr Newby. Did BIS realise that? It does not appear so, because there has been no mention whatsoever of Fleurets—or Mr Newby’s—role and financial links in that respect.

I will give a powerful example of why tenants cannot and will not accept Mr Newby as the adjudicator. This morning I had an email from a former director of the British Institute of Innkeeping—an organisation that the Minister was keen to quote from, citing it as a licensee organisation. I need to correct the record because it is not; it is a charity rather than a representative licensee body. I think she was indicating somehow that it supports this appointment. Well, that former director is now an adviser to publicans and other small businesses, but during his years with the BII he worked closely with larger surveyors, specifically naming Fleurets. He has described the relationship between these chartered surveyors’ firms—again, specifically naming Fleurets—and their pub company customers. He says—I quote from that email—that it is “a gravy train”. He explains that there are chartered surveyors in the sector who use valuation methods that advantage their pub company customers, and explains how surveyors and pub companies work together, using what he says are—I quote again—“questionable” practices, to ensure the best outcome for the pub company and not for the pub tenant, because of course most of the surveying work and most of the income comes from pub companies, not tenants—which is inevitable when tied tenants are running a pub and can barely break even.

We need to put to bed the idea that somehow this situation is acceptable because Mr Newby has represented a few tied tenants in his time and has potentially even won some cases for them. Very interestingly, there was an admission at a roadshow by Fleurets that it delegates tenant cases to less experienced and less expensive surveyors—something that Mr Newby very clearly is not.

When we were going through the process, we were told that the Pubs Code Adjudicator would be like the Groceries Code Adjudicator and that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills would follow similar principles. It has clearly and demonstrably failed to do so. Paragraph 1 of the Groceries Code Adjudicator’s conflicts of interest policy and register of interests refers to ensuring “that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise, between the official position of the Adjudicator and private interests, financial or otherwise”. The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) has said clearly that that is not the case with the appointment of Mr Newby, who has a prejudicial financial interest. Paragraph 6 states:

“A conflict may arise whenever an outside interest might influence, or be perceived to be capable of influencing, a person’s judgment.”

The extraordinary thing is that the reply to the British Pub Confederation’s letter states simply, “We don’t think there is a conflict of interest.” When asked whether Mr Newby declared his clear conflicts of interest, the reply was: “We asked him about his conflicts of interests
at the interview and were told that there weren’t any and we accepted that.” That is extraordinary and should never have happened.

Let me share with the Chamber paragraph 18 of the Groceries Code Adjudicator’s policy and register of interests:

“Financial interests will generally arise from the ownership of assets (or other investments or sources of income) such as shares (whether bearing a right to vote or not)”. Just yesterday, the British Pub Confederation’s secretary, Simon Clarke, received a letter from the Secretary of State saying:

“I understand that Mr Newby will continue to hold a number of non-voting shares in Fleurets, as security whilst monies owed to him are repaid”. The situation is serious. Someone will be allowed to continue to have shares in a company that profits from the work of the very companies that he will be regulating. You could scarcely make it up.

This week, the Prime Minister has been keen to tell us that he divested himself of all shares before becoming Prime Minister, but that has not got him out of the hole he has found himself in during the last few weeks. Yet we are seriously discussing a statutory adjudicator with a quasi-judicial role and the Department seems to think it is fine for him to hold shares in such a company. That is quite extraordinary.

Just this week, the Premier League, which has much higher standards than the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, removed Kevin Friend as a referee for Tottenham Hotspur’s game against Stoke on Monday because he lives near Leicester and supports Leicester. That was a good decision by the Premier League to avoid any feeling of bias. Yet the clear perception of bias in Mr Newby’s appointment is being ignored. With respect, simply to say, “We don’t think tenants are concerned,” when tenants’ associations have written to make clear their concern, is extraordinary.

Fiona Woolf was unable to preside over the child abuse inquiry simply because she had had dinner with someone who at that stage might have been of interest to the inquiry. Yet in Mr Newby’s case, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has simply brushed under the carpet and dismissed his clear professional and financial links to the very companies he is supposed to regulate. How can the Minister possibly say that tenants can and will have confidence in Mr Newby, given that he will continue to receive share dividends from a company that has pubcos as its majority customer base?

Part of what the Minister will say today and part of what she has already said relates to her former career and profession of barrister, a profession I strongly admire. My sister and brother-in-law are barristers and I have huge respect for the work that barristers do. The Minister therefore knows that barristers are obliged to operate under the cab rank rule and to represent a client who comes to them with a legal problem in their area of expertise. As advisers, they are expected and mandated forcefully to advocate their client’s position. The role of adjudicators and judges is different.

The Minister has stated that a surveyor is like a barrister—another form of professional—and simply takes cases. That completely misses the point. Surveyors do not operate under the cab rank rule. Mr Newby and his company, Fleurets, actively market themselves to pubcos, including two of those he is supposed to regulate in a matter of weeks, boasting on his company’s website of his expertise in representing them. If the Minister is under any impression that there is some equivalence between the way barristers operate under the cab rank rule and how a director and shareholder of a commercially active chartered surveying company would act, she is missing the reality of surveying, particularly in the pub sector.

The point is that Mr Newby will not be like a barrister. He will be like a judge. He will no longer advocate for his clients, but will adjudicate like an ombudsman or a judge, in this case like a jury and executioner. Why are the standards of public confidence that our excellent judiciary regard as essential to their legitimacy not applicable to Mr Newby in his new rule as statutory adjudicator, which is a quasi-judicial role? He will be judging contentious legal issues that would otherwise see the parties concerned in front of the judiciary.

At the heart of the problem—the British Pub Confederation has taken legal advice on this—is that there is a lack of protection in contract law for tenant publicans who may enter into tied lease arrangements naively or when the realities of their new circumstances have been misrepresented by pubco representatives. That is precisely why we are legislating. It is impossible for Mr Newby with his current position and links to be able to fulfill that quasi-judicial role.

I have mentioned the 11 licensee groups that form part of the British Pub Confederation. They all oppose this appointment. The Minister has suggested that some licensee organisations support the appointment, but I am not aware of any and certainly the British Institute of Innkeeping, a trade charity, does not. The Campaign for Real Ale, which she mentioned, has not welcomed the appointment and has said it will scrutinise Mr Newby’s activity. It is a consumer group and does not, as she wrongly said in the main Chamber, represent licensees. It is a consumer, campaigning group.

The Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers—which could be an organisation the Minister is talking about—represents multiple tenants, some of whom are individuals and some of which are companies, including Greene King, one of the companies the adjudicator will regulate. The Association of Licensed Victuallers Associations is run by a former Enterprise Inns employee and its 2015 dinner and AGM was sponsored by Enterprise Inns. I am afraid the Minister is kidding herself in saying that tenants’ groups and tenants may support the appointment.

Let me say clearly that British Pub Confederation licensee groups and their licensee members have made it clear that they will not accept Mr Newby adjudicating on their cases. They have a clear right to do that, which means he will be unable to act in a large proportion of cases, which will need to be dealt with by someone else, presumably a deputy adjudicator. What a farce. What a mess.

I am not the only one saying that. According to the guidance on conflicts of interest and the arbitrator’s code of conduct of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, in the majority of cases brought before Mr Newby, either party will be able to stall the process by citing his conflict of interest as a reason not to accept him as adjudicator. The adjudicator cannot be a surveyor, particularly not one from the pub sector.
[Greg Mulholland]

On that, I can do no more than read to the House what the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors told the Government in its response to the 2013 consultation on the adjudicator:

“Whether or not the Adjudicator is a chartered surveyor, he/she will require assistance from other specialist Chartered Surveyors... It is likely that many will have a conflict of interest having advised one of the parties on a range of matters”.

Was the Minister aware of that advice from 2013? Also, a pub sector surveyor might well wish, intend or need to return to their career surveying and acting for the pub companies and selling off pubs for them after their term as adjudicator, so there would always be the suspicion that they were worried about annoying the people from whom they would then seek to again be taking the majority of their income.

BIS was warned in 2013 by tenants groups. Simon Clarke of the Fair Pint Campaign and the secretary of the Independent Pub Confederation wrote:

“It would be catastrophic if the Adjudicator were a Chartered Surveyor”

because

“specialist Chartered Surveyors active in the market may have conflicts of interest and should not be put in positions where perception of independence or impartiality is a requirement of the parties”.

Mr Clarke is himself a chartered surveyor, a RICS member, so he knows what he is talking about. He knows that he could not be the adjudicator—the pubcos would certainly be screaming had he been appointed—but Mr Newby cannot either.

I hope that, having heard what I have shared with the House today, the Minister will reflect and realise that this appointment is untenable. However, let me make it clear: if Mr Newby is not removed from post, an initial early legal opinion taken by the British Pub Confederation is that there are indeed strong grounds for the decision—one that the Department has clearly made on a flawed basis, not taking into account the reality of the situation—to be judicially reviewed. I hope that the Minister will listen and accept that this was a mistake. We do not believe it was anything more than a mistake, but a mistake it certainly was—one that did not follow the previous knowledge that the very same Department had.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to listen at this late stage to people who have been involved in this issue for five, 10, 15 or 20 years—to experts in the sector. The pubs adjudicator cannot be someone from the sector, for the very reasons that I have laid out. It has to be someone who is impartial and has the confidence of all sides, or it simply will not work. The pubs code must be changed. The two loopholes must be removed. I urge the Minister not to make the mistakes that the Conservative Government made with the 1989 beer orders. That was very courageous and correct legislation to give consumers better choice in pubs, but there was lobbying by the large companies, which saw the opportunity to sell off pubs to their friends, giving golden handshakes and setting up the very pubcos that we are now talking about. We must not make the same mistake again. We must close the loopholes and we must see a proper adjudicator, so that we can finally have confidence that this long-running saga will come to an end and so that tenants can have confidence in both the code and the adjudicator.

2.13 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am sure that you have visited many pubs over the years in your constituency.

In many respects, the debate that we have been having ever since 2014, when we considered the Bill that became the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, is a microcosm of what it is to be a good, diligent Member of Parliament, because we have two jobs of course. One is to represent all that is best in our constituencies, and pubs are part of that social and business fabric. The other is to scrutinise, oversee and assist in the production of good legislation. I think it is only fair that we pay tribute, as I said in an intervention, to the previous Government for taking the action that was certainly necessary at the time and remains necessary, to address some of the very clear infringements and unfairnesses in the legal, operational and commercial relationship between tenants and pubcos.

As a Conservative, I understand—I think we all understand; certainly my right hon. Friend the Minister, as an experienced parliamentarian and Minister of the Crown, understands—that all markets have to be regulated. We cannot just let the market have free rein. There has to be some paradigm, some rules that govern the market. The previous Government, of which the Conservative party was part, accepted that and understood it very carefully. The legal framework needed to be put in place, and followed on from the Report stage of the Bill in November 2014.

The context was a dysfunctional market, and a dysfunctional market is not good for anyone. It is not good for the taxpayer; it is not good for the consumer; and ultimately, in terms of reputational damage, it is not good for the owner, the landlord, the big business. We therefore needed to address that. We had market distortions. One might even, if one were being pejorative, say that it was an example of crony capitalism. As a Conservative, I do not favour crony capitalism. That oligopolistic behaviour of the pubcos needed tackling, and it is to the credit of the previous Government that they tackled it. They needed to do that because we did witness, and are witnessing now, potential abuse of section 25 notices and full repairing and insuring leases and other loopholes that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) mentioned. I was remiss in not paying tribute to him for bringing this issue to the House today and for being a doughty champion over many years on it. I know that he has not always endeared himself to Ministers—this Minister or her predecessors—but he is not in the business of doing that. He is in the business of doing what he thinks is right and representing his constituents in Leeds, and he has done a fine job in that respect.

That dysfunctional market was the challenge we had. Of course, on a wider level, we were defending diversity, customer choice, fairness and individual decisions. We were right to take those steps, so essentially what we are doing now, as the hon. Gentleman said, is finishing the job. It will not be perfect. It will always be subject to
legal challenge and to tweaking in its execution. Nevertheless, I agree with him that we are looking at cock-up rather than conspiracy. I do not know Mr Newby; I have never met Mr Newby. I am sure that if I were in a pub, he would buy me a fine flagon of ale and talk about life and the universe and put everything to rights. But that is not the point. I think this has been a cock-up, and part of the job of being an MP is to point out where a Department might be going wrong and to accept the basic premise of the policy, but try to tweak it to improve it. On that basis, it is right that the Backbench Business Committee granted this debate today.

Before I go any further, I should say that there are some superb pubs in my constituency—I will be in trouble otherwise. Most notable, and not far from where I live, is the Hand & Heart in Highbury Street in Peterborough. I would be remiss if I did not also mention Andy Simmonds, the landlord of the Ploughman at the Werrington centre in the north of Peterborough. But I will not go through all the licensed premises in my constituency.

That is the background to why we are here. I do not want to recapitulate the very erudite, comprehensive and well researched remarks of the hon. Member for Leeds North West, but I do want to raise the issue of investment. That was one of the loopholes that he identified—the waiver of the market rent option for investing in pubs. If it were as simple as that—a symmetrical, rather than an asymmetrical, relationship—it would be all fair and good, but I do not think it is. One anecdotal fact that has come out of experiences over the past few months and years is that the burden of investment to keep a licensed premises going and to keep it viable falls disproportionately on the tenant. On that basis, it is quite demonstrably, obviously and self-evidently unfair.

Paragraph 141 of the Department’s impact assessment of the pubs code and adjudicator noted that “a FSB survey of their members found 68% hadn’t had any investment from their pub company in the last 12 months.”

As we know, the cost of investment that the pubco presents is often inflated. Many tenants report that they have much cheaper quotes from other suppliers but are forced to use the contractors insisted upon by the pubcos, which use their buying power to get low prices but, as with beer, on-charge it as a mark-up to their tenants.

Often, the investment is not an investment in any true meaningful sense. It is a de facto loan that the tenants are compelled to comply with as part of a contractual relationship. Any pubco money that is spent on a pub is often spent when the pub is vacant, in order to get the business back on its feet. Pubco money is not often spent to support a sitting tenant. Churn tenants—those who have to move—are often pursued through litigation over dilapidation clauses in the lease.

The concept of investment as a quid pro quo for waiving the rights that are established in legislation on the face of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act—or, certainly, in secondary legislation—is not as simple as it may seem. On that basis, it is an area that needs to be looked at. I referred to paragraph 127 of the impact assessment earlier. It is better to finesse and nuance the code to deal with the loopholes and problems that have been identified, rather than to wait for 12 months or two years to introduce secondary legislation to do that or, indeed, to have to defend the code in the courts if there is a judicial review. There is no hidden agenda. In the same way that the loopholes are possibly a cock-up, there is no conspiracy among hon. Members to do down what we agree is a superb piece of legislation that rights some long-standing wrongs. We just want to improve it.

I will not take up too much more of the House’s time, but I want to further develop the point about the Pubs Code Adjudicator. I was going to raise the issue of the comments of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, but I will not go into them now. The comments are pretty strong evidence from observers who do not really have a vested interest. I have had dealings with RICS, and it is a professional organisation. In this respect, it has been asked its honest, reasoned opinion as to whether something will give rise to problems in the future, and it has given it. That is something we should take very seriously.

The appearance of impropriety and of a conflict of interest is the Achilles heel of the appointment of the adjudicator. If we are discussing the methodology of the appointment, it is not good enough just to say, “Well, we had a nice chat and a robust interview. We all got on famously. Everything’s tickety-boo. He’s essentially a good egg. Job done.” [Interruption.] I exaggerate for effect, as the Minister knows, before she gets too concerned. The point is that the hon. Member for Leeds North West was quite right to make the distinction between the powers of the pubcos and the comparison with the supermarket adjudicator.

If the Department is to develop a methodology for important appointments, it has to be consistent. It is a serious issue when there is almost unanimous opposition and potential threat of a legal case, and when an individual is put in the difficult position of being unable properly to discharge his duties—the duties incumbent on him, which Parliament has given him—because the code circumscribes the workload and gives rise to potential problems.

Not everyone is as decent and honourable as everyone else. If people can find a way of winning a case by alleging that the adjudicator is biased or has a vested interest, they may very well seek to hold up legal proceedings and bring the whole thing to a juddering halt. We do not want that because we want the market to work effectively. I gently say to my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I have known for many years, that that is a consideration that she would be exceedingly unwise completely to dismiss out of hand.

The example we are debating probably supports the suggestion of many hon. Members that we need to move towards confirmation hearings before Select Committees or specially convened Standing Committees of the House to confirm the appointment of very senior people to regulatory roles. However, that is a bigger issue and we will not meander down that particular avenue of joy and excitement now.

In conclusion, we are right to have this debate because it is imperative that the Minister addresses the issues, and I am sure that she will do so in her customary combative but eloquent way. The hon. Member for Leeds North West has made some very strong points. My plea to the Minister is to think again about the Pubs Code Adjudicator and the loopholes. We still have a number of months—or weeks, at least—until the code
is formally published. I urge her to give it consideration, listen to the debate and make the legislation as efficient as it could be in righting the wrongs and bringing fairness to the market because it is something on which there is consensus and around which we can all unite.

2.27 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I appreciate you calling me early, Sir David, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I know that we should never start a speech with an apology, but may I apologise to the promoter and the respective Front Benchers? I am afraid that I will not be able to stay until the end of the debate. No disrespect is meant but I must be somewhere else in the House at 3 o’clock, so I do apologise. May I also acknowledge for the record that I chair the Unite group in Parliament? Many of our members work in the industry as tenants and in brewing.

I commend the hard work and terrific speech of the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), who set out the arguments in such a cogent and readily understandable way. Unusually for me—for the first time ever, I think—I found myself agreeing with the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson), who I had always assumed was a free marketeer, but he seems to recognise that there are faults, whether by accident or design, that need to be remedied before the code can be implemented.

The Minister asked what we, collectively, are asking for. This is not necessarily a partisan issue, although obviously there are strong interests. I thank my union, Unite, and its pub landlords section. I also thank the GMB, Justice for Licensees, the Fair Deal for Your Local campaign, the Fair Pint campaign and Mr Simon Clarke, who has been a stalwart defender of the interests of licensees in ensuring that they receive justice.

The things that we are asking for are not unreasonable, given that Parliament has debated and considered this issue at length and, on a cross-party basis, has agreed a way forward. We want to see the legislation implemented and the pubs code reformed. The hon. Member for Leeds North West identified specific concerns about the adjudicator, to which I will refer in a little while. The Government have an opportunity: to enforce the legislation that was passed with such overwhelming support; to close the loopholes that have been identified by the hon. Members for Peterborough and for Leeds North West; to protect tenants from being coerced or browbeaten into giving up their rights; and to restore confidence in the office of the adjudicator.

I mean no disrespect to Mr Newby—like other Members, I suspect, I have not met him—and I do not mean to impugn his personal integrity. I am sure he is a lovely chap, but there are issues of confidence and of conflicts of interest that must be addressed if we are to enjoy the confidence of the whole industry, not just the pub companies but the tenants and the people who rely on the adjudicator to act impartially so that there are no real or perceived conflicts of interest.

We have had many years of consultations—the former Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), and members of the Select Committee will, no doubt, elaborate on that—negotiations, debates and inquiries, but we would not be where we are without the co-ordinated efforts of the various organisations that have come together in the British Pub Confederation. Given that we are so close to the introduction of the new pubs code and the adjudicator, changes that have been long fought for, I am a little disappointed that Government Members have implied that nothing happened prior to 2010, which is not quite true. We had the first pubs Minister, and a lot of the groundwork was done in advance. I would like to think, although it is just supposition, that had the outcome of the 2010 general election been different, the pubs code and the adjudicator would have been implemented much more quickly. I cannot substantiate that but, having had conversations with many people in the know, I suspect that that may well have happened.

The changes have been a long time coming and, unfortunately, I regularly see figures in the trade press that 27 pubs a week are closing—that figure may be accelerating. Too many viable pubs and, indeed, working men’s clubs in communities such as mine have had to call last orders not just because of broader pressures within the economy but because of unfair and unsustainable rents, ties and profit-sharing arrangements, all of which should be addressed by the code and, if necessary, by referral to an independent adjudicator.

All we are asking, and it is nothing unreasonable, is that tenants should be able to secure a fair income. Given the time commitment that they give, it seems bizarre that the tenants of even very successful pubs—the hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned the Eagle, and I know a number of others—that, on the face of it, are incredibly popular seem unable to secure a decent living. Many tenants are struggling. When their income is aggregated and divided by the number of hours they work, in many cases they are actually working for less than the minimum wage. I have met a number of former tenants and landlords whose mental and physical health has been absolutely broken by their experiences.

We all know that the repercussions of pub closures are felt across communities, which lose not only vital community assets but the jobs and the contributions that such businesses make to the local and wider economy. I do not denigrate that contribution. Many of my union’s members work in the pub sector—in the pubs, in the breweries and in delivery, such as on the drays—and I understand that the sector contributes £22 billion to the UK economy. Taking into account the multiplier effect, and not just the people working directly in the pubs, the sector sustains nearly 1 million jobs, particularly providing opportunities for younger adults to find employment, so the sector is important. Links in the supply chains include retail, agriculture and brewing.

The product is the essence of what we are about, of Englishness. Dare I admit it? Is it a secret that I love to have a pint of beer and to socialise? The problem is that the business model operated by the pub companies has weakened, rather than strengthened, the industry. Our hope is that the new pubs code and the adjudicator will address the inherent unfairnesses in the exploitative practice of the pub company model, but it should be a step that strengthens the industry, ensuring: that tenants receive a fair living reward for all their hard work; that viable pubs can remain open; and, hopefully, that we can halt the decline that has seen significant numbers of pubs close over the last 10 or 20 years.
I would like to think that the pub companies are acting in good faith but, as has been alluded to, there is evidence to the contrary and that they are working to circumvent the pubs code and the legislation even before it comes into force. If the Government and the Minister are not aware of that, I hope that she and her officials will make themselves aware of it by looking at the evidence that is out there. The appointment of Paul Newby as the Pubs Code Adjudicator has not endeared the Government to tenants or won any trust from them.

Concerns remain that loopholes in the new draft pubs code could undermine the legislation, and if Parliament is to fulfil its promise to tenants, those loopholes must be removed before the final version of the code is implemented.

The hon. Member for Peterborough highlighted one particular loophole. The Government would undermine the fundamental principle of the pubs code, that tied tenants are no worse off than free-of-tie tenants, if they allow pubcos to force tenants to relinquish long-term leases should they opt for a market rent-only option. That is one specific thing that perhaps the Minister and her officials will take away. The loophole undermines the assurances offered by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills that tenants who take the market rent-only option should not be subject to discrimination by the pubcos. The Government should also make it clear that if a tenant chooses a market rent-only option, they will be entitled to the same length of agreement, terms and conditions as their old tenancy—the hon. Member for Leeds North West raised that issue—otherwise the right to trigger the market rent-only option would be undermined and such tenants would be discriminated against by the very nature of the agreement.

Another loophole that I would like the Minister to look at is the market rent waiver in exchange for investment. The hon. Member for Peterborough also mentioned that, and it is a real concern. I do not want to labour the point, because I do not want to be repetitive, but I can think of a number of pubs in my constituency—I will not namecheck them—where the tenant has gone to their pubco and said, “I want to develop my business. I want to convert the rooms upstairs into a bed and breakfast and to knock a doorway in that wall”—not that wall, but a wall in the pub—“to create access to the beer garden,” and the pubco says, “Yes, that’s a great idea, but you’ll have to pay for it. When you’ve done that, we are going to increase your rent.” That cannot be termed investment from the pubco. In a way, it is coercion. We have to close the loopholes on the definition of investment and on what can and cannot be referred to the adjudicator.

I do not want to repeat points made earlier, but pressurising tenants to take up rent reviews, in advance of any scheduled review, before the implementation of the code is unacceptable. Coercing tenants to give up long leases and take up new five-year contracts with no market rent option at the end and no renewal rights is not acceptable either. It is unacceptable to effectively bribe tenants with short-term reduced rents—the hon. Member for Leeds North West referred to a 20% reduction—to sign new agreements with no market rent option, to seek new five-year agreements from tenants into five-year non-renewable tenancies or to threaten to offer only such agreements to avoid triggering tenants’ legal rights to the market rent-only option. The pub companies are doing so while telling us that they want to move forward and draw a line under past disagreements, and that it is not their intention to exploit their tenants. I am afraid that the evidence does not really support that, so I am rather sceptical about the assurances that we have received.

I will refer to Mr Newby, if I may. We must ask ourselves what his intentions are, for after he leaves his role as the adjudicator. If he intends to return to the industry where he has fashioned his career and undoubtedly been incredibly successful, would a reasonable person not assume that the decisions that he makes while in post will inevitably bear on his future employment prospects within pubcos? If that is not a potential conflict of interest, I do not know what is. I am concerned that because of those links, every decision in which he agrees with a pubco will be questioned, even when legitimate, as will the fairness of his judgment. That is likely to happen as a result of his long-standing connection to pub companies.

I feel sorry for Mr Newby. He should never have been placed in that position, whether by accident or by design; I forget the exact terminology. What is more concerning—the Minister must take some responsibility for this—is that throughout the entire appointment process, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has seemed oblivious to the reaction that such an appointment would create. I was in the Chamber when the Minister made the statement, and there was uproar in the House at the nature of the appointment.

Anna Soubry: No there wasn’t.

Grahame M. Morris: I was there, Minister, with all due respect. I thought it was a rather heated and fractious exchange. The fact that it was not anticipated does not reflect well on the Department. If the Government insist on appointing Mr Newby, I fear that, intentionally or not, they will undermine the office of the Pubs Code Adjudicator from the day that he starts work.

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech. Does he agree that this debate also gives an opportunity for the Minister to clear up the confusion about whether the adjudicator has helped design the code since December? There have been mixed messages from BIS about whether he is coming in clean from May or whether he has been complicit, to use a pejorative term, in the construction of the regulatory regime. That is an important issue.

Grahame M. Morris: Once again—for the second time in one Parliament—I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is a completely reasonable question, and I hope that the Minister will be able to clear it up in her response.

There seems to be no doubt that the pub companies see Mr Newby as their man. Worse still, the tenants seem to agree. More than a dozen stakeholder groups have come together under the auspices of the British Pub Confederation. Collectively and individually, in the representations that I have received, all of them see Mr Newby as not independent. I am not saying that that is to force; I am just saying that it is their perception. I worry that the Minister cannot see that the situation is untenable. If she truly wants the pubs code to work, she will need to appoint an adjudicator who can command
confidence across the industry. Regrettably, I think that she should apologise to Mr Newby and rerun the recruitment process.

In conclusion, the pub and brewing industry makes an immense contribution to our local communities and our economy. I love pubs; I love the industry, and I want to see it flourish. I want community pubs to thrive and tenants and landlords to have successful businesses. The drive behind the pubs code and the role of the adjudicator is to strengthen the industry. It should be seen as a step towards addressing the decline and closure of pubs over the past 20 years. It is in the hands of the Minister to listen to the concerns expressed by hon. Members from all parties, and to take the issue forward in a positive way that addresses them all.

2.46 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is an unalloyed pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) on securing this debate and on his long-standing and tenacious involvement with the issue, which has played a vital part in bringing this legislation to the statute book.

My own relatively minor and insignificant involvement with the legislation stems from my involvement on the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills pre-2010, under the chairmanship of Sir Peter Luff, and subsequently as Chairman between 2010 and 2015. Significant parts of the legislation are based on our recommendations. Overall, I am absolutely delighted that we have got this far, as it has been a long and hard battle. Having got this far, not to get it all right would be a tragedy. This debate is particularly relevant in assessing where we are with it, the potential consequences of not getting it right and what we can do to ensure that we do.

Although I did not mention them, there were two previous inquiries into the issue even before my involvement, under the chairmanship of Sir Peter Luff, and subsequently as Chairman between 2010 and 2015. Significant parts of the legislation are based on our recommendations. Overall, I am absolutely delighted that we have got this far, as it has been a long and hard battle. Having got this far, not to get it all right would be a tragedy. This debate is particularly relevant in assessing where we are with it, the potential consequences of not getting it right and what we can do to ensure that we do.

The second theme is the appalling relationships between many tenants and the pub companies and the climate of fear that has prevailed. I conducted a survey prior to the last election on the proposed legislation, and on the incomes and conditions of some of the tenants operating in the pubs in my constituency. I got probably a 50% response and what was significant was that not one of those who responded said who they were or what pub they were in. One person specifically said they were not prepared to respond because they feared some sort of retaliation. To me, that was perhaps more representative than almost anything else of the climate that pub tenants have to work under.
given the constraints, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Selton Central (Bill Esterson) has written to the Minister and I believe there has been a response that sought to allay those concerns, but subsequent remarks by the hon. Member for Leeds North West indicate that there is still huge concern about the perceived level of conflict of interest of the person in this particular position.

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

My other query on this issue, and perhaps the Minister will allay my fears, is about the accusations—I would not pretend to know just how valid they are, but they appear to have come from a BIS source—that this particular person has been involved with the drafting of the code of conduct.

Anna Soubry indicated dissent.

Mr Bailey: I am quite happy for the Minister to intervene.

Anna Soubry: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. May I make it absolutely clear that Paul Newby has not been involved in the drafting of the code? To allay the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, let me say that the only dealings he has had with officials in BIS since the announcement of his appointment, which was made in the House in a speech—without any comment, if I may say so; there might then have been some fractious discussions as a result of an urgent question—have been in relation to the setting up of his office.

Mr Bailey: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I cannot remember her exact words, but I think that in her reply in Parliament she said something about helping the Department—

Anna Soubry indicated assent.

Mr Bailey: I suppose there is a dividing line—where does helping start and finish?—but no doubt the Minister will want to elaborate on that.

Anna Soubry: Let me make it absolutely clear that there has been no help at all in the drafting of the code. The only help has been in the setting up of the office.

Mr Bailey: It is very helpful to have that on the record. I am sure that the Minister will understand, because I am not on the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Committee—by its former Chair, I do not feel that it is my job to start recommending what it should be doing now—but it would certainly fall within the Minister’s remit to perhaps gently suggest that it would be helpful for the Department to have such a hearing. I know that often there are informal channels of communication between Departments and Select Committees, and their roles can be reinforced if those channels are used properly. I gently suggest that the Minister could look, if not at a BIS Committee pre-appointment hearing, then at some form of parliamentary scrutiny that would enable an adequate response to the questions that are circulating.

In conclusion, I reinforce this point. The legislation has been a long time coming and people have devoted so much work to it. A successful outcome is so important. Given its long gestation, we do not want the legislation to be damaged at birth. I stress the need for the Minister to listen to the comments that have been made today. She should take them on board and provide mechanisms and responses that will not only enable the wider participants—the tenants, the community pubs and the beer-drinking community—to be satisfied, but Parliament, too. Every opportunity should be given for scrutiny to deliver that satisfaction. The importance of the industry to the individuals within it, the communities they represent and the economy as a whole is so great, and we want to get the legislation right. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I ask the Minister to listen to everyone to ensure that we get it right.

3.3 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. May I start by saying what an excellent introduction we have had to the debate. Indeed, Members from all parts of the House have spoken in this timely debate about how we move forward and the next stage of a long and important process. I put on record my interest as secretary of the Unite group in Parliament.

The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 was passed before I came to this place, so I thank colleagues for all their work in bringing forth the legislation
over a long period of time to try to bring greater justice to the industry. That is obviously a welcome step forward. We are at the last stages of the process, and for Parliament to have a real function in that, it is important that our debates can change and influence things. I hope that today’s thoughtful debate will help move the situation to a happy conclusion for everyone. It is important to get it right, to ensure confidence in the process, and that we can sustain the industry to see good growth on all sides that serves all interests.

We have heard the statistic that 27 pubs are closing a week. Seventeen pubs have closed in my constituency, so I know that we have to get the issues right. From talking to tenants, I know that they are concerned about the future if we do not get the code right.

I am going to make a brief speech and will not repeat all the excellent points that have been made. First, I will talk about the impact on my constituency of York Central, which has 132 pubs. I am not going to name them, for obvious reasons, but they form a major part of our local economy. They provide jobs for 3,037 people, about a third of whom are young people. The pubs pay out £32.2 million in wages and bring in nearly £25 million to the Treasury. It is important for the economy, locally and nationally, that the industry is sustained in the future. The loss of community pubs shows how fragile the industry is and why it is so important to get the pubs code absolutely right.

We have heard about some of the issues facing tenants, and they are reflected by the issues that tenants in my constituency face. Shorter leases bring instability for tenants who want to invest in their business for the long term. That lack of security destabilises their opportunities, so it is important that we ensure that the loophole is closed. We do not want to see shorter leases exchanged if people want to move forward with the market rent-only option. That option is important for tenants who want to use their expertise to develop their business in a way that they know can succeed, particularly in difficult times.

The point on waivers has been well made. If people are asked to sign waivers to address other issues, that cannot be right. We know from so many other pieces of our law that waivers can be abused. I can think of so many other instances. I ask the Minister to consider removing waivers as an option within the code. Can we tighten up on that issue?

I want to talk through what a landlord from York told me. He specifically asked not to be named, which speaks to the fear among tenants that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) described. He went through a recent rebidding process in which his pubco came to him with a new rent that was 100% higher. The pubco wanted to double the rent for his business. Following that, there was some horse trading with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. It was not possible to move the situation forward, so a third expert accredited surveyor was brought in from RICS, and they were able to reduce the rent by a third. The cost of appealing and taking the process further was prohibitive for the tenant. As we have heard, tenants often earn around £15,000 a year. They are on very low wages and we will see injustice unless we get the whole system right. That is why today’s debate is so important.

Given those issues, we need to ensure that pubcos cannot abuse the system. I have heard about the issuing of section 25 notices, ending leases just before the pubs code comes in so that new terms can be set. That cannot be right. It is an abuse of the system. We should make the system watertight so that tenants have confidence in it and so that pubcos know what the rules are and where the lines are drawn and cannot exploit the system. We need rigour to be put back into the system.

It is important that the adjudicator has the confidence of all parties. When I think of comparable roles, that is so apparent. In fact, the adjudicator’s office states, “the adjudicator acts as a fair and unbiased referee looking into complaints”, so it needs to have people’s confidence. In so many other areas of arbitration—I have experience of ACAS—if people do not have confidence in the arbitrator, the arbitrator is changed. There is still an opportunity to make right this wrong and to ensure we get confidence behind the post.

I am not talking about the person. I am sure that Mr Newby is a man of integrity and probity. I do not know him and I certainly will not judge him, but it is important that we move forward with the confidence of all concerned, and I hope that Mr Newby will look at his own position if the Minister does not take steps to ensure that confidence can be built. It is absolutely crucial that this system works.

It is also important that future processes are scrutinised to ensure that such conflicts do not arise or can be detected at an earlier stage. Whether that is about clarity of the application process, or scrutiny of the appointment process, it is important for the integrity of the House that we get this right in future, and it is important that this is seen as a learning process to make sure that wrongs can be righted.

My constituents and tenants in York are concerned about the future of their industry. There is instability in their industry and they want to get the code absolutely spot on so that they can continue to build their businesses. We have an issue with drinking in York. Community pubs are the safest place that people can go to drink, but if the code is not right, those pubs could be vulnerable and we might see an escalation in the abuse of alcohol and the dangers that go with it. Even from a health perspective, it is important to get the code absolutely spot on. We have that opportunity. We have another six or seven weeks to go before the code is introduced. It is never too late to make things as tight as possible, and today’s debate is an opportunity to do that. We should make sure that the right person oversees the process and has the confidence of all concerned as he takes the code forward.

3.12 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I confess that I once went with a group of friends to York to sample the delights of the pub trade there, on the basis that we had been informed it had the highest number of pubs per square
mile in the country, I can tell my hon. Friend that I was not disappointed. At least, I think I remember that I was not disappointed; my memory was slightly affected that day.

I join in the tributes to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) not only for securing this debate but, as other hon. Members have suggested, for the constant and never-failing campaign that he has led and for the way that he has maintained this issue at the forefront of hon. Members’ minds. I largely support the position that he has advanced today. I could talk about the appointment of the Pubs Code Adjudicator, but the hon. Gentleman’s case was so compelling, so comprehensive and so forceful and forensic that there is little point in my repeating it. Suffice it to say that my concern is that the credibility of the pubs code and its implementation will be damaged if the appointment continues. Like other hon. Members, I do not know the gentleman concerned personally. To the best of my knowledge, I have never come across him previously, but it would damage the credibility of the operation of the pubs code itself if the appointment continues.

If I may caution the Minister, there is a danger that the lack of credibility and the damage to credibility might also contaminate to an extent the credibility of the Department and Ministers who made the appointment. For the sake of the Ministers’ credibility, they might want to consider that. Somebody might wish to take Mr Newby out for a pint in one of the nice pubs and say to him, “Paul, it is not going to work. Think about perhaps withdrawing your name from the process and handing in your resignation. It’s not you but the circumstances.” That might be one way forward.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned two glaring loopholes. I absolutely support him on this. From what the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) and others have said—they obviously know quite a lot about the process—I suspect there were simply errors of drafting, but I am particularly concerned about the idea of the waiver of the right to market rent-only options. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central alluded to this. When there is an imbalance in power in a relationship, the organisation with the greater power has the potential for abuse. To force waivers on to tenants in this way distorts what I believe was the original intention of the code and of Parliament. It reminds me of when the working time directive was introduced. Jobs were offered to job applicants Parliament. It reminds me of when the working time directive was introduced. Jobs were offered to job applicants. It has been implemented effectively, rather than on the

company of the year. It won the accolade from an independent survey of tenants, so it has a little more credibility than others.

Greg Mulholland: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech. I want to respond directly to him because I had a meeting recently with Kevin Georgel from Admiral Taverns. Kevin said that the difference that he perceives between Admiral and Punch and Enterprise is that Admiral does not have the catastrophic levels of debt that Punch and Enterprise do, on which basis Punch and Enterprise are continually overcharging and exploiting tenants on an industrial basis. That is what Kevin told me in a meeting, and I am happy to meet other people.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful for that intervention. Of course, the catastrophic debt built up by some of the larger.pubcos as they built their empires based on debt is now being passed on to the tenants. The financial planning of the pubs was catastrophically wrong. That completely wrong financial planning was not the fault of the tenants and landlords and it should not be passed on to them now in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central described.

However, looking at it from Admiral’s point of view—from a pubco’s point of view—because I have sought advice from the other side, Admiral is concerned about the implementation of the pubs code, which it absolutely supports and wants to happen, but, in its words, “the lack of any transitional arrangements is wholly unreasonable and will cause total chaos for pub companies, tenants and indeed the adjudicator”, whoever they may eventually be, assuming that the Minister has listened to hon. Members today.

Admiral points out that at the moment there are no transitional arrangements relating to the implementation of the pubs code. It had hoped there would be a minimum of six months from the implementation date to the market rent-only agreement, simply because that would allow time for negotiations with tenants and landlords. Negotiations can be quite complex and can last several months before the new arrangements are signed off. If the market rent agreement is to be signed off and handled fairly, that will require training, and full information available to both sides. However, at the moment, as things stand with the pubs code, I do not believe it will come in until May, and pubcos are still not actually aware of what the final arrangements will be. Nor, therefore, I suspect, are the tenants and landlords. There is the potential for a lack of transitional arrangements, and for upheaval without the time being built in for making the complicated arrangements; those involved are very keen for that to happen.

There is associated guidance from the adjudicator to consider, as well as the fact that tenants will have only a short window in which to get up to speed with the new legislation and apply for the market rent-only option. Such transition might also apply to other key aspects of the code, such as business development manager training obligations, code compliance officer appointments, and systems to deal with due diligence and the very substantial information requirements. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Leeds North West spoke to the chief executive, Mr Georgel, my constituent. He believes that it is in everyone’s interests to ensure that the much-awaited legislation is implemented effectively, rather than on the
[Christian Matheson]

hoof with the resultant chaos that he predicts. I remind the House of what the hon. Member for Peterborough said about getting things right first of all rather than having to review the legislation later. The same applies to the implementation of the code. We need to get it right and give due attention to what is being asked of landlords and pubcos before it is implemented. My constituents’ plea would be to encourage the Minister to have proper transitional arrangements put in place to ensure the minimum of disruption.

The main point of my speech is to endorse the powerful and compelling case made by my hon. Friends and, indeed, the hon. Member for Leeds North West. There is still time for the Minister and her Department to consider how the credibility of the appointment in question might affect the operation of the pubs code and, indeed, their own departmental credibility. I hope that they will take the time to do that, because, as hon. Members from across the House have said, the importance of pubs to communities and society should not be underestimated. It is a hard job running a pub. The hours are long, often for little return, and the pressure is constant. The hon. Member for Peterborough described pubs as important parts of our communities’ social fabric, and we need to make it as easy as possible for them to carry out their role and make our communities cohesive. I support the case made by the hon. Member for Leeds North West and I hope that his campaign will flourish and hit its goals.

3.22 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I add my voice to the congratulations that have been offered to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) on securing the debate, and on his apparent and well-documented tenacity over the past few years in keeping the issue at the front of hon. Members’ minds. His comprehensive, detailed and considered speech kicked off an enlightening debate. I must confess that before I attended the Chamber I was struggling to conceive how hon. Members could talk for three hours on this subject; boy, was I wrong about that.

I pay tribute also to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson). Like the hon. Member for Eastington (Grahame M. Morris) I found myself agreeing with him more than once or twice, which is a refreshing change. Of course, the hon. Member for Eastington, who is no longer in his place, alluded to the concept of loving a pint as something peculiar about Englishness. I might disagree with that, but I want to make it clear that he does not need to be a financial interest that pulls in itself, in my view, is the conflict of interest. There does not need to be a financial interest that pulls in itself, in my view, is the conflict of interest.

The hon. Member for Peterborough so vividly set out, there is an appearance of a conflict of interest, that in itself, in my view, is the conflict of interest. There does not need to be a financial interest that pulls in itself, in my view, is the conflict of interest.

Beyond that, there is the question of the appointment of the adjudicator. I echo what the hon. Member for York Central said: of course Mr Newby may be a very competent, intelligent and capable individual, but that is not the issue. The issue is his position and his history, and whether his career had characteristics leading to a position of conflict. As a former solicitor—the fact that I am a former one is not because of any conflict of interest, I urge the Minister to take that on board, “Richard, look—if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck and walks like a duck, the chances are it’s a duck.”

If, as the hon. Member for Peterborough so vividly set out, there is an appearance of a conflict of interest, that in itself, in my view, is the conflict of interest. There does not need to be a financial interest that pulls Mr Newby from an impartial adjudication position. There just needs to be a history of working for one side or the other. I urge the Minister to take that on board, given her experience as a barrister. She will no doubt be aware of those points.

My comments have been intentionally brief. If we are to have an adjudicator and a code, I urge the Minister to treat it as essential that they should have the confidence of stakeholders. It does not appear from what I have heard this afternoon that that is the case. I would hope that through the lengthy process that has gone on we would reach a point where everyone would have confidence and the system could work.

3.28 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, as it was to see Sir David in the Chair earlier. I congratulate
the hon. Members who applied to the Backbench Business Committee on securing this afternoon’s debate. It has been an excellent debate, and I want to mention the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) in particular. It is nearly 30 years since I attempted the Otley run, much of which is in his constituency. I was a Leeds student then, and cannot remember it very well. We can all guess some of the reasons why my memory is not what it was.

I value the country’s pubs, whether they are in Leeds North West or my constituency. Members of Parliament have a duty to look after them as much as possible, particularly the ones that are run by pub tenants, because this is about a fairer deal at our locals. At a time when pubs are closing at a rate that has not been seen in more than 100 years, there is an urgency about doing what we can to support the great British institution of the local pub. A fairer market would help local communities and economies as well.

The prearranged monopoly, which is what beer ties amount to, locks microbrewers out of almost a third of the market. The Society of Independent Brewers showed a 25% increase in the choice of cask beer available in the UK between 2012 and 2015. That is 4,000 cask ales—a huge industry with incredible potential for many small and micro businesses. Imagine the potential for sales and jobs in the industry if the market grew by up to 50%, and yet microbrewers are denied access to a third of pubs because of their ownership structures. I have three excellent new microbrewers in my constituency alone: Red Star, Neptune and Rock The Boat. Members will be able to sample some Red Star ale when it is on sale in the Strangers Bar in the week commencing 8 June. I encourage you to sample some as well, Mr McCabe.

Mr Bailey: Can I clarify whether my hon. Friend is offering to treat us?

Bill Esterson: I am not sure what the ethics of such a proposal would be, so I shall move on, but I would be happy to share a pint with my hon. Friend in that week.

There is real consumer appetite for quality, locally-produced real ale. The monopoly on beer sales for pub companies and the breweries they own really does not reflect what consumers want to buy. The landlords of pubs in my constituency, including the Corner Post, Stamps and the Freshfield, are seeing booming custom and will back me up because they are serving some of the beer that I mentioned from the breweries that have recently started up. We have heard many stories, not only today but over the years, about how pub tenants have been ruined or promises of investment have not materialised because of the actions of the pub-owning companies. That is why it is so important that we get this absolutely right.

Market rent-only is only an option. If the pub companies and brewers run a robust and positive business model, they have nothing to fear from the alternative. If pub companies feel that they are giving tied tenants the best option, they should be willing to put the options for their tenants on the table and convince them that beer ties are a sensible business decision.

We await the publication of the pubs code. When she responds, I hope the Minister will tell us when it is going to be published. It needs to be published soon, so that the industry has the time to analyse it properly and to address the weaknesses we have heard described today—I will come to some of those later—before it goes live on 1 June. Suspicion has often been raised about how the code has been handled and we need to see the final version to allay those concerns. Let us remember that it took an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Leeds North West for the market rent-only option to be included in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. That amendment received wide, cross-party support. To their credit, the Government accepted the will of MPs and peers and made the commitment to include market rent-only options and parallel rent assessment to go alongside them.

Parallel rent assessment matters because it offers a side-by-side comparison, so that pub tenants can determine whether to remain tied or to go free of tie. Pub tenants need parallel rent assessment so that they can make an informed decision, so having market rent-only without parallel rent assessment simply made no sense. That is why there was so much concern when the initial consultation that was published in autumn 2015 appeared to exclude parallel rent assessment. But, after a lot of fuss, including during exchanges with the Minister on the Floor of the House at BIS questions, the mistakes in the consultation were rectified. The Minister deserves some credit for her response on that occasion.

What a great pity, then, that doubts still remain about the effectiveness of the pubs code so close to its implementation. The Government say that the market rent-only options will be offered to landlords at rent review or lease renewal. They also say that the trigger will be the rent review or lease renewal itself, rather than, as seemed likely at one point, only in the event of an increase in rent. However, there are two interpretations as far as tied tenants are concerned. One is that the effective date for rent review is the date of implementation; the other is that it is the date on which the notice is issued and when the review process starts, which is six months earlier.

The market rent-only option will be enforceable only from 1 June this year. Only rent reviews or lease renewals made after that date will entitle a tied tenant to a market rent-only option. When she responds, will the Minister clarify whether renewal notices issued before 1 June will allow pub companies to avoid offering the market rent-only option, even when the reviews are agreed after 1 June?

Then there is the pubs code itself and the concerns raised by the British Pub Confederation and others. The draft code appears to allow pub companies to force tenants to surrender a long lease for a much shorter one in exchange for the market rent-only option. The problem with that is that a tenant who takes a short lease will face uncertainty about what will happen at the end of it. Running a business of any kind requires certainty, and when the building itself is so crucial to the business—in fact, in this case the building is the business—not knowing whether a lease will be renewed dramatically reduces the attractiveness of market rent-only. This approach certainly appears to be the very opposite of creating the level playing field that I think we are all trying to achieve.

The draft code also suggests a waiver of the right to the market rent-only option for prospective new tenants, so pub companies could decide to let pubs only to
tenants who waive their rights. Our concern about the loopholes that have been discussed today is that the combined effect of the two proposals in the draft code could mean business as usual for the pub companies, because tenants who want the market rent-only option will not have their tenancies renewed, while only those who accept the tie will be allowed to take on leases. Will the Minister clear this up and say whether those provisions will be included and whether the loopholes will be removed from the final version of the code? If they are not, pub tenants might start to think that the pubs code is not actually going to change very much at all.

All that brings me to the appointment of the Pubs Code Adjudicator. Like other Members, I think the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) made an excellent speech. I agree with pretty much everything he said. He made the points that, for a free market to operate effectively, it needs to be a fair market—I agree wholeheartedly with that—and that unless the code is drafted correctly, it will be unworkable. He also talked about conflicts of interest, which I will come to shortly.

In a number of our exchanges, not least when my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) was on his feet, the point was raised about whether the newly appointed adjudicator, Mr Newby, had been involved in the drafting. I think the Minister was trying to clear that up. Mr Newby may well have been involved in setting up his office, which of course is entirely proper; the problem is that the Business Secretary’s letter to the British Pub Confederation says that

"he shared his professional insights"

when the draft pubs code was discussed with him. I do not know whether that counts as setting up his office or as helping to draft the code. But there seems to be some blurring between where setting up an office ends and helping to draft a code begins. In the end, I am not sure we are much further forward on what his role has been so far.

On the point about conflicts of interest, the Fair Pint campaign’s submission to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill Committee was clear: do not appoint a surveyor to the post. Any surveyor with experience of the field will have potential conflicts of interest. They will have acted for the big pub-owning companies and will not be seen to be impartial in arbitrating as the adjudicator between pub companies and tenants.

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills said in his letter:

“I can confirm that Mr Newby has not been involved in the drafting of any part of the Pubs Code. My officials met Mr Newby after his appointment to provide him with a high level briefing on Part 4 of the Act and some areas of the draft Pubs Code in order to familiarise him with the key aspects ahead of him taking up this important role. During the course of this briefing there was a discussion of some technical aspects of the MRO arbitration process—for example, the length of time it takes to appoint an independent expert—where he shared his professional insights.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a correct reading of the full paragraph, which, I would suggest, he slightly misquoted?

Bill Esterson: I used the end of the quotation, which states that

“he shared his professional insights.”

I think it goes further than what the Minister said earlier about the work he carried out, because to me, if he is being asked to provide feedback on the code in a professional manner, that is very close to sounding like he is involved in drafting the code.

Anna Soubry: To remind the hon. Gentleman:

“Mr Newby has not been involved in the drafting of any part of the Pubs Code... During the course of this briefing there was a discussion of some technical aspects of the MRO arbitration process—for example, the length of time it takes to appoint an independent expert—where he shared his professional insights.”

Bill Esterson: It seems to me that if he is sharing his professional insights, he is giving observations and helping to draft the code. We can split hairs over this all afternoon, but I am sure others will draw their own conclusions about what his involvement has been in preparing for his office.

Greg Mulholland: As has just been demonstrated, the Minister has contradicted herself. She suggested that Mr Newby’s only involvement was in setting up the office, but then she read from a departmental letter or memo, which clearly stated that it was more than that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and many tenants that it is because of precisely this kind of confusion that people simply do not have confidence in the Pubs Code Adjudicator and, frankly, in the Department?

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman described it earlier as a cock-up. Unfortunately, as with so many other aspects of the way the pubs code was drawn up and the way the level playing field was supposedly being created, the Government have not handled it well. There is clearly a contradiction between setting up an office and what the paragraph that the Minister read out states. As I said, others will make their own judgments about that.

I was talking about the Fair Pint campaign’s submission, which, by the way, was made before Mr Newby’s appointment was announced. It said that surveyors will have acted for the big pub-owning companies and will not be seen to be impartial in arbitrating as the adjudicator between pub companies and tenants. What is more, it also points out that Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors members who deal with pub valuations depend on pub companies for a large portion of their fee income. That is a clear conflict of interest. That warning was made before the adjudicator’s appointment was announced by the Minister and her boss the Business Secretary.

In RICS’s response to the consultation on the adjudicator in 2013, it said:

“We also have concerns in relation to how the Adjudicator process might work on a practical level... It is likely that many such specialists will have a conflict of interest having advised one of the parties on a range of matters or as an Independent Expert or Arbitrator.”

So RICS made the same point, well in advance of the appointment, that a surveyor is almost certainly going to be conflicted. Si Clarke from the Fair Pint campaign told the Minister when he met her that appointing a surveyor would be “catastrophic”. As he told me this
morning, having an independent adjudicator can only mean not appointing a surveyor. He and others made that point extremely clearly to officials and Ministers throughout.

It is important to stress that the concerns about the adjudicator’s appointment are not a reflection on one individual. Nobody is suggesting that surveyors act in anything other than a professional way, with the utmost integrity. The concerns about the appointment of Paul Newby are not about Mr Newby. His integrity is not in question in any way. That has been confirmed throughout our discussions today and previously, and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) made that point extremely well.

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. It is unfortunate that the Minister has to defend this situation, which is, as much as anything else, about governance in her Department—including, in all Departments. In the absence of a confirmation hearing, the decision to go by statutory instrument rather than Standing Order and therefore to restrict the level of oversight and scrutiny by Parliament is regrettable. I gently say that the Government should reflect on the fact that we will continue to have instances when people say, “Is it cock-up or conspiracy?” and question individuals if the system sets its face against proper scrutiny.

Bill Esterson: I agree and echo the hon. Gentleman’s call for such appointments to be subject to Select Committee appointment hearings. That is the right way to go. The way he phrased it is a good way of emphasising that this is not about any individual. We are not questioning anybody’s integrity. I am glad he made that point, because it is important that we continue to stress it.

The problem is the conflict between Mr Newby’s work for Fleurets and his representation of the big pub companies over many years, and his ability to gain the trust of pub tenants. It is no good to say, as the Minister did, that he acted for pub tenants. As RICS pointed out, having advised either a pub company or a pub tenant could be perceived to lead to a conflict of interest. In any case, in examining the claim about Mr Newby’s having represented pub tenants, it is important to understand what that really means. Mr Newby’s CV, dated 10 February 2012, shows that he acted for the following pub tenants, among others: Enterprise Inns, Marstons and Punch Taverns. In other words, the same large companies can be pub owners and pub tenants, which raises questions about why his more recent CVs omit such detail.

We have not been able to get an answer to how many pub tenants whom Mr Newby or Fleurets has represented are the tied tenants of a single pub or the small number of pubs that they run. After all, with fees of £300 an hour or more for a firm such as Fleurets, it is rather doubtful whether any tied pub tenant with an annual income of £15,000 or less—or those with no income or those making a loss—would be able to afford such services.

When the Minister wrote to me, she told me that the appointment panel had satisfied itself that Mr Newby had no conflicts of interest. That is rather odd, given the RICS assessment of the same topic. I suggest to the Minister that had she said to me that the panel had found conflicts of interest, but had decided that they would not affect Mr Newby’s ability to do the job, that might have been a rather better case for her to make.

The point about conflicts of interest is that, by definition, they have the ability to undermine impartiality, to influence and to create doubt among those involved. The example of the Groceries Code Adjudicator’s conflicts of interest policy was mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Leeds North West. The policy commits in some detail, recommending a two-year period before conflicts of interest start to diminish. It also states that they have the potential to be a “disqualifying interest”. When setting up the pubs code, why was a similar approach not adopted from the outset? Why are such rules not already in place? The pubs code conduct policy will be developed in time, but it would have made more sense to have it in place earlier. Had it followed the same approach as that of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, I suggest that it would have ruled out the appointment of surveyors, including Mr Newby.

Another thing that did not help was that the Minister chose to announce Mr Newby’s appointment during an intervention in a speech being made by the hon. Member for Leeds North West in the Third Reading debate on the Enterprise Bill. The way in which that was done, I am afraid, raised suspicions that not all might be well. She could have made the announcement in a statement to the House—she was forced to come back the next day anyway, to answer an urgent question—or in the Enterprise Bill Committee. Why did the Secretary of State not make the announcement during his speech on Third Reading? Why in an intervention, of all things? That was an odd thing to do and it raised suspicions.

Given the way the pubs code was drawn up—with the exclusion of parallel rent assessment from the consultation; with the need, in the last Parliament, for amendments to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill to protect pub tenants; with real, ongoing concerns about the way MRO could be avoided; and with the appointment of a surveyor with clear conflicts of interest, despite the advice not to appoint a surveyor—it is no surprise that pub tenants and the members of the British Pub Confederation are still deeply concerned about what is going to happen when the pubs code is implemented. In reality, as things stand, there is a strong possibility that the lack of a level playing field will remain and that tied pub tenants will continue to be denied a fair deal.

The Minister needs to get a grip, to ensure that the loopholes in the pubs code are slammed shut, and to go away and take a long hard look at the appointment of the adjudicator. I believe the Minister wants a fair market in pubs and beer, but she has a lot of work to do to get there and little time in which to do it before the 1 June deadline. The hon. Member for Leeds North West made a point in his opening speech about the need for confidence in the pubs code and the adjudicator. I ask the Minister: please listen to what has been said by Members today and by pub tenants, to ensure that the new pubs code delivers.
pay tribute not only to the hon. Gentleman, but to other hon. Members who have for many years been campaigning to ensure that the great British pub has a genuine, sustainable future.

I have to put on record a number of things. One of the things that has annoyed me all my life is any form of stereotyping. I object to it, so I object to anyone who thinks that because I am a woman I do not like pubs or ale—although I am not suggesting that anyone present has said any such thing. Throughout my life, I have enjoyed drinking ale in great pubs. By way of example, I name the Crown Inn in Beeston, the Horse and Jockey in Stapleford and the Nelson and Railway—a particularly exceptional pub—in Kimberley, all of which are in my constituency.

I confess that I started enjoying pubs at the age of 16 and I well remember, with great fondness, the many happy bonds with my school friends that were forged in the Old Ship Inn in Worksop and that have continued all the way through my life. As for so many people, those bonds were formed in pubs. We could also go on to debate all that pubs bring to our communities and to individuals, and the role that they play in the lives of so many people, which they have done for many centuries.

We all agree that we want to ensure that our great British pubs have a genuine, sustainable future. We want to ensure a fair deal for tenants, and for too long they have not had that fair deal in too many instances. Equally, we want a sustainable industry. Unlike some, I do not want pubcos to go out of business. I want them to invest in the future and I want them to act responsibly. It is a question of balance.

If there is one thing that I have learned since being appointed last May—the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) mentioned this, and he has been at it longer than I have, if I may say so—it is that there is a lot of noise and aggravation, distrust and, in some instances, anger about this. Sometimes there is also a lot of unpleasantness, but unfortunately that is a feature of modern political life. I have been the subject of abuse on Twitter from some tenants groups and tenants, and it all gets a bit tedious. However, we have to try and calm everything down and work together, so that we get the right balance and fairness to secure a proper future for our great British pubs. That is what I seek to do.

I mentioned stereotyping, and I also get a little—some might say overly—excited about the notion that, as a Minister, I am not fully aware of my duties in making appointments, or in all matters, of course. I have served in a number of Departments as a Minister, so I have made a number of appointments in my time. My duty is to ensure that I get the right candidate—to go through the proper process, with rigour and fairness, to get the right person into the job. I object to any suggestion that I appointed Mr Newby because I thought he was a lovely man.

I took my decision with great care. Three candidates were placed before me, all of them eminently appointable. I took the view that Mr Newby was the best of the three. Those other two people are real human beings, and they were exceptionally good candidates, but he stood out. The idea that I did not consider whether his appointment might please some more than others is frankly rather patronising. I wanted to appoint someone who I believed had the skills, ability and, most importantly, integrity to ensure that there was a level playing field and fairness—in particular, if I may say so, for tenants. If anyone suggests otherwise, I will take a very robust view with them.

Mr Jackson: For all I know, Mr Newby might be a lovely man. It is important to put that on the record.

May I also correct the record? I erroneously stated that the appointment was made under the auspices of a statutory instrument. I now know that that is not the case.

I think it is quite reasonable for key stakeholders to say that for a new group of Ministers and civil servants dealing with a complex, dense, difficult and contentious area, to err is human and there may have been genuine mistakes. I do not think that anyone is impugning the Minister’s integrity.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his wise words. I take objection to the idea that the civil servants, in the most difficult of circumstances—they really are up against the clock—have not acted with total integrity. They have done a great job. I think that we sometimes forget that civil servants are professionals and human beings. With few exceptions, they serve us extremely well and do a good job.

Make no mistake: I do not have any complaints about the rigour of this place’s questioning and probing, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. I hope he knows that I always act with complete integrity, and would weigh up all the matters in favour of and against the appointment of anyone to ensure that we get the right person. I do not know whether Mr Newby is a lovely person, but I do know that he brings the requisite skills, ability and experience, and I am confident that he will act with integrity and do a good and fair job.

As I made clear on 10 March, Mr Newby is an excellent candidate. He was appointed in accordance with the code of practice for ministerial appointments to public bodies. As I did then, I take exception to any allegation that I or, indeed, anyone else has acted improperly or with complicity, and I have no doubt that he has all the necessary skills and experience of the pubs trade.

Bill Esterson: Will the Minister give way?

Christian Matheson: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: I will in a minute. There has been a very positive response to the appointment of Paul Newby as the Pubs Code Adjudicator. I am grateful for the briefing supplied by the House of Commons Library and the comments on 16 March from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which we have heard a lot about and heard some quotes from. Its statement regarding the appointment of Paul Newby as Pubs Code Adjudicator went as follows:

“By the very nature of the role, the adjudicator’s office will need someone with past experience in this field of valuation and Paul’s professional history has seen him represent both pubcos and tenants at various junctures in his career. As Paul Newby will no longer continue in his role with Fleurets, there should not be a risk of this posing a conflict of interest in his execution of his new post.”
An RICS spokesman has said: ‘Chartered Surveyors are expected to demonstrate the highest professional standards and act within the RICS Code of Conduct at all times. We have no reason to believe that Paul Newby is failing to meet these standards. On the evidence that we have seen to date, this does not appear to be an issue of conflict.’

Bill Esterson: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Mulholland: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: I will continue with these comments by people who have paid tribute to Mr Newby, and then I will give way.

The British Institute of Innkeepers’s licensee of the year, Mr Keith Marsden, has said that Mr Newby has “fantastic integrity” and will be “both feared and respected” by pub companies. Others have also welcomed his appointment, highlighting that he has worked on both sides of the industry. I support the view of Ed Beddington, editor of the Publican’s Morning Advertiser, who said that Mr Newby should be “judged on his actions”. Punch Taverns has written that as well as acting for it on a couple of occasions, Mr Newby has “acted against Punch on one occasion, on behalf of a tenant acting against us…To our mind, this gives him good experience from all angles of what will be a challenging role.”

Greg Mulholland: It is rather extraordinary that the Minister is giving an endorsement from Punch Taverns—one of the companies that Paul Newby is supposed to regulate—as if that is a good thing. But on the RICS point, I have seen that same correspondence to a RICS surveyor and I must point out that the RICS statement was only on the evidence seen “to date”. That was then challenged, and the fact is that it had not had any submissions before the one it had from the RICS surveyor who has complained. So I am afraid that is far from a RICS endorsement, and its own clear guidance shows that Paul Newby’s appointment is inappropriate. If we need to write to RICS further, then we will.

Anna Soubry: I shall continue.

Bill Esterson: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) want to intervene? Let me say a few words and then I will take an intervention.

As the Pubs Code Adjudicator, Mr Newby has a duty to set out arrangements to deal with any specific conflicts of interest. He will do so in the normal way and, as part of that, he will publish a register of interests. Contrary to the British Pub Confederation’s campaign, he has a wealth of experience on rents, rent reviews, lease renewals and landlord and tenant issues. It was that experience that I found particularly attractive in his CV and then when I met and interviewed him, as I did all three of the final candidates.

Mr Newby has also been involved in dispute resolution in those areas as an expert witness, arbitrator and independent expert for many years. In one case he represented a tenant who had significantly overpaid rent to a large pub company. That required sustained effort by Mr Newby to recover the overpaid rent. That is just an example of his work for tenants, certainly not of being in the pocket of large pub companies.

We have had reference to my former profession as a barrister. I do not want to fall out with the hon. Member for Leeds North West, but I do not think he quite remembered what was said. I was trying to make a point about professionals. The hon. Gentleman for—I have forgotten his constituency in Scotland; that is very rude of me.

Richard Arkless: Dumfries and Galloway.

Anna Soubry: Dumfries and Galloway. Excellent—I know exactly where he represents: Kirkcudbright. He made that point about when he was a solicitor. I do not know what work he did, but the point I was trying make was that certainly at the English Bar, and I think it is the same in Scotland with the advocacy system north of the border, a barrister may act for someone—I will be frank: I have acted for people who have been exceptionally unpleasant, usually because they had been accused of vile offences against children—and put forward their case, but that is not to endorse it in any way. Actually, the barrister might think they are some of the most despicable human beings.

Of course, that is not the position that Mr Newby will have as the Pubs Code Adjudicator. The clue is in the title: he will adjudicate, based on his experience and particularly because he has been able to see both sides of arguments. He brings great skills to the role. He will take up his appointment on 2 May to enforce the pubs code with independence and impartiality.

In answer to the proper comments made by a number of hon. Members, as it happens, on 10 May he will appear at 9.30 am in front of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. There is a good debate to be had as to whether public appointees should effectively have their appointments endorsed by Select Committees. I know that some are and some are not, but I do not think this is the time for that debate and I truly do not think that would have made any difference to Mr Newby’s appointment. He will also meet representatives from both sides of the industry in May and I hope that the hon. Member for Leeds North West will be pleased to know that Mr Newby is keen to meet him and representatives of the British Pub Confederation in his first weeks as the Pubs Code Adjudicator.

Today—very soon, I hope—I will place the Government’s response in the Library and lay the pubs code regulations. Time is of the essence, because we now know when the House will prorogue, so to get the pubs code up and running on 27 May we will lay the regulations today.

Greg Mulholland: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: I have some very good news for hon. Members, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, I will give way.

Bill Esterson: I thank the Minister for answering the question about when the regulations will be laid, but it would have been extremely helpful to have them in advance of the debate, so that we could discuss them today. Earlier, she said at least twice that serious allegations had been made about her having a conflict of interest in Mr Newby’s appointment. Will she say who made those allegations and what they have been? Using parliamentary privilege, she can name the person right here and now.
Anna Soubry: I get the impression that somehow I have acted with impropriety in appointing Mr Newby, and I want to make it clear that I have not.

I want to talk about the regulations we have laid today. There is some bad news: I have not agreed to the pub companies' request for a six-month transition. The pub companies saw our draft regulations late last year. The requirement to provide a rent assessment is not new for them. We have staggered the points at which they have to provide MRO, to allow at least two months' preparation. I know that they are, to put it mildly, less than pleased at that decision, but I take the firm view that they are able to implement the pubs code. They have had long notice of the code coming in, and frankly I just want to get on with it and get the code up and running, so that we can do the right thing by tenants.

I am grateful to everyone who responded to the consultation on the pubs code. I understand the frustration of the hon. Member for Leeds North West that we were unable to discuss his two amendments, but I will tell him about the view I have taken. I want to put it on the record that these are decisions I make. I often frustrate my officials because I do not always agree with the advice they give. I am not some sop who goes along blindly with the officials, as they would often testify. I did not need any persuading on this, because a series of options was put to me.

This is my decision. I can confirm that the pubs code will include transitional measures, which means tied tenants can access their MRO rights at rent review in the first six months. I can also confirm that the right to MRO at renewal of a tenancy will exist from the day the code is enforced. From that date, once a tenant or a pub company issues notices related to the renewal, the tenant will have the right to request MRO. The pubs code will set out that when a tenant chooses MRO, the MRO-compliant tenancy should be at least as long as the previous tied tenancy; that is important.

This is really important, and I am pleased that I might actually get a thank you from the hon. Gentleman. We listened to all that was said. I know that the British Pub Confederation has been briefing MPs that the pubs code will contain an investment waiver—actually, we are calling it an investment exception—that reduces MRO rights before a tenant signs on to a pub. I can confirm that that is not the case. The investment exception will not apply to investments made in empty pubs.

I agree that pub company gaming, which my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) mentioned, could be an issue, where a tenant's rights to MRO are avoided, perhaps via an investment. The best insurance is to get the pubs code in place. The Government accepted an amendment to the Enterprise Bill that places a duty on the adjudicator to report cases of unfair business practices that are aimed at avoiding the code. It will open to the adjudicator to make recommendations to the Secretary of State to address any unfair business practices. I know I have upset the pubcos; I will be up front about that because I know I have not given them what they wanted. I have, I hope, satisfied the proper concerns communicated by tenants, and we are going to work on that.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's point about previous ministerial commitments, the pubs code and regulations will honour the commitments made in Parliament. My guiding message to my officials—I have probably driven them mad—is that we have just got to be true to what we said we would do when the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 went through Parliament. Those commitments were on key issues such as the right to consider a tied tenant in parallel to an MRO offer; the extension of code protections in the event of a sale of a pub to a non-code company; an exemption for pub franchise agreements from the MRO and rent provisions in the code; and deferral of the MRO option of up to seven years in return for significant investment by the pub-owning business. On significant investment, I will probably upset the pubcos and some of the tenants' groups by saying that the proposal of CAMRA—which is a cracking organisation—of 200% of dry rent is the right one.

My aim is to strike the right balance and to ensure we get a fair deal for both sides in what should not be an argument. We are moving in the right direction. I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming the fact that we are very close now to having the pubs code in force. It will provide fairness to more than 12,000 tied tenants, which I know he and many others have wanted for some time.

As I draw my remarks to a conclusion, I am helpfully told that the regulations have been laid. I want to put on record my thanks to the officials. The clock has been ticking against us, and they have worked exceptionally hard to comply with the requirement to get the regulations laid in time for 27 May. At one point today, we thought that that might not happen; I will not trouble Members with the reason why. We were determined to get the code into practice. I have full confidence that Paul Newby will be an excellent adjudicator. The regulations are not in the Vote Office yet for Members to pick up after the debate, but a version should go online within the hour.

I very much hope that that will please the hon. Gentleman, although I have an awful feeling that I will never be able to please him. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough made a good point: if we get this right from the beginning, we will not have to keep going backwards and forwards. The regulations setting out the pubs code are subject to parliamentary scrutiny at any time, so we can amend them, but he is right that we must get them right from the outset. The legislation also provides for a review every three years.

I always say to everyone involved that my door is open. My door has not been always open in all of this, because it has been imperative that we do the right thing for both sides of the argument. I hope that everyone will welcome the pubs code and that our pubs can now have a new age and a new dawn, so that they continue to be wonderful, uniquely British places, so that we have an element of fairness for the tenants, who are very important, and so that we get the right investment and have a sustainable pub industry in our country.

4.17 pm

Greg Mulholland: It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Mr McCabe. It has been an excellent debate and I say a huge thank you to all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part and stayed here on a Thursday, which at this juncture is not always an easy thing to do, with other commitments.
We heard some fantastic contributions today. It was fascinating to hear the passion of the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) who, rightly as a proud Conservative, said that crony capitalism is wrong—it is an abuse of capitalism, and a failed market does not work for anyone. He was then followed by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris), someone from the other end of the spectrum, representing Unite and standing up for people and social justice. This issue encompasses all those positions.

There was a powerful contribution, of course, from the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), who did such a fantastic job. Let me thank him for all the work that he did, which was absolutely instrumental; he is regarded as a real pub hero by licensees and campaigners. It was great to have such strong contributions from representatives of two of the finest cities in the country—our walled cities of York and Chester—the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

Every single voice was in accord. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) provided some absolutely insightful legal perspectives on conflict of interest, which I really do not think can be argued with. Just so that he knows, I visited Fergus Ewing, a Minister in the Scottish Government, to discuss this issue, because the next stage of this campaign will be to get a pubs code and adjudicator in Scotland and that, of course, will be the job of the next Scottish Government. I hope that we can work with him and whoever is in government in Scotland after the election, and I look forward to doing so.

I thank both the Minister and her Parliamentary Private Secretary. It has been good to have that line of communication with the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who is a cross-code colleague of both games of rugby. It is always a pleasure to work with him, and it has been very helpful. I thank the Minister for the announcements that she has made today. Whether they were going to happen today anyway, or whether she made those announcements specially in response to this debate, does not matter; I very much appreciate what she has said.

It is excellent news that the Minister has clearly accepted the points about the loopholes. I warmly thank her and the team on the code or dealing with BIS officials. Secondly, in responding to the urgent question, she said:

“Paul Newby is a good man”—[Official Report, 10 March 2016; Vol. 607; c. 430.]

I quote from Hansard—yet today she said she does not know if he is a good man. I gently say that these are the kind of things that are leading to concern. We do need to get clarity. After this debate, we still need clarity as to precisely what he has been doing since his appointment in December. We only found out about it through an intervention, so what was happening during that period? Why were none of us told?

Finally, I turn to the absolutely key issue. With respect, we should consider the factual evidence in respect of the Groceries Code Adjudicator and the reality of Fleurets. Mr Newby is a director and shareholder who will retain his shares in a company that makes the majority of its money from both acting for pubcos and flogging off pubs for pubcos. It is quite absurd to think that somehow there is not a conflict of interest. It was extraordinary that the Minister’s written answer yesterday to the parliamentary question finished by stating:

“The Panel was satisfied there were no conflicts of interest, and put this advice to ministers.”

The fact is that there are conflicts of interest—that is a fact. The question is, are they disqualifying ones? It is not, are there conflicts of interest—they are there, even if she has decided they are not. So that parliamentary written answer yesterday is wrong. It is plainly, clearly, legally wrong. There are clear conflicts of interest and I believe that I have laid out today that they are prejudicial and disqualifying.

If the Minister is still not going to listen on that, I have to say to her that Justice for Licensees, the Fair Pint campaign, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Forum of Private Business, the Guild of Master Victuallers, GMB and Unite: two of the largest trade unions in the country, Licensees Supporting Licensees, the Pubs Advisory Service, the Punch Tenant Network, and all bar one genuine tenant-representing organisations—supported, incidentally, by the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, even though this will not apply to its tenants yet—are saying very simply that they will not accept Mr Newby. They will not have him act on any of their cases. Tenants will not accept him; they should not accept him.

The Minister has clearly listened, and there has been consultation. In conclusion, I gently ask her to look at what I have said today. We will supply further information. I firmly believe that, as the hon. Member for Peterborough said, this was a mistake. There is no question in my mind about the Minister’s integrity. She certainly is not a sop and I do not think anyone would ever accuse her of being so, but I think she has to accept that when we look at the evidence, we can see that this was a mistake and that the pubs adjudicator cannot be any pub surveyor.

So I would gently say, could she, and the hon. Member for Rugby, and her diligent officials, who do work hard and do a good job, but on this occasion have erred, look at this again? Can they look at the evidence? Because simply to ignore it, as is currently happening, and appoint someone to such an important role, considering the whole history of this matter, would undermine
everything that she and her Department are trying to do on this issue. I urge her: please look closely; please listen. Mr Newby must stand aside. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for City of Chester, who said that Mr Newby must consider his position. If he does not—and he will not—command the confidence of so many tied licensees, as a good man and a man of integrity he must realise that, and he must stand aside.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Pubs Code and the Adjudicator.

4.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Monday 18 April 2016

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH in the Chair]

Brain Tumours

4.30 pm
Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): There are still people trying to get into this most important debate, and I am happy to allow everybody to come in and for people to stand at the back if they need to.

Before I call Helen Jones to move the motion, I should say that 30 colleagues have put their names in to speak, so I will be imposing a time limit soon—I know Sir Edward, and to see so many colleagues present for this debate on funding for research into brain tumours, which was the subject of the first report by the new Petitions Committee.

We began this inquiry in response to a petition that was started by Maria Lester, whose brother, Stephen Realf, died following a brain tumour. It is fair to say—I think my colleagues would agree—that we began in a state of ignorance. We did not know a great deal about brain tumours or their impact, but, as we proceeded with the inquiry, we were humbled and shocked. We were humbled by the people who came forward to give evidence to us, whether in person, in writing or on the web; it is a measure of the interest in this topic that we received more than 1,100 posts on our web thread in 10 days. All those people had been either directly or indirectly affected by brain tumour and wanted to use their experience to improve other people’s chances. We were also shocked at the number of life years lost to this dreadful disease, the impact on children and the pitifully small amount of research funding devoted to it.

For that reason, we have made our report slightly different from some Select Committee reports; there are many individual stories in it and pictures of those affected. That is because we want to make it clear that this is not just a matter of statistics. Real lives, real people and real families are affected, and they are let down at almost every stage of the process, because, despite the excellent work of the doctors in this area, the system is underfunded and not properly structured, and has been so for years. That is our collective failure, because the neglect has gone on under different Governments, even though brain tumours are the biggest cause of cancers in children and in the under-40s. They account for between 15% and 25% of cancers in the under-25s and, if we look at the statistics overall for all age groups, we see that about 60% of cancers involve the brain at some stage, meaning that there has to be treatment for that if people are to recover. Because of the age groups that are generally affected, the number of life years lost to this cancer is greater than for any other cancer, and, of course, when children are involved, the situation is particularly tragic.

A number of parents came forward to tell us what had happened to their children. A number of those children suffered from a type of tumour called diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, or DIPG, which is almost universally fatal. In this country, a child is diagnosed with one every nine days, yet few people have even heard of it. I suggest that, if they had, there would be much more pressure to increase funding for research in that area.

Those who survive, whether children or adults, face a huge burden from this disease. Many survive with serious disabilities, including physical disabilities or other things such as memory loss, personality change or cognitive disorders. Because of the huge burden of the disease, in terms of life years lost and significant disabilities among those who survive, we have made the recommendations that we have and we believe that it is time for a step change in how we deal with this most awful cancer.

That change has to begin, of course, with diagnosis, with which there are major difficulties. GPs may see only two or three cases in their professional lives, and in its early days brain tumour can mimic the symptoms of other diseases. However, 61% of people are diagnosed in A&E when they reach a crisis. We heard time and again from people who went back to their GP and went back to other doctors, often knowing that something was seriously wrong with them or with their child, but they were still not able to get a diagnosis. I suggest that we would not accept 60% being diagnosed in A&E for any other cancer and we should not be accepting it for this one.

Early diagnosis matters, because it affects the treatment options and the outcome. If we were able to diagnose people earlier, more would survive, especially among children, and there would be better outcomes for patients, with fewer survivors left with significant disabilities. That is why, I say to the Minister, we were concerned to note that the Government’s Be Clear on Cancer campaign did not include brain tumour. We understand that that is because the number of life years lost is not taken into account in deciding which cancers are included, and we believe that has to change.

There are important things happening. For example, the HeadSmart campaign, which seeks to raise awareness among GPs and lists the symptoms that can be seen in different age groups, has managed to improve the time taken between people presenting to their GP and diagnosis. Again, however, we are concerned that the guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in 2015 do not include lists of different symptoms for different age groups. We think that needs resolving.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Why does my hon. Friend think that NICE guidelines did not take that into account and include the information that we feel should be included?
Helen Jones: We simply do not know the reason for that, but we think that the Government need to look at this as a matter of urgency and raise awareness among GPs as part of their continuing professional development programme. It is very important that they understand this, because if the disease was caught in its early stages, that would help future research. More people could take part in clinical trials and more could donate tissue in the early stages of the disease. Research is extraordinarily important, and I will come back to that in a minute.

We heard from a number of experts, including Professor Geoff Pilkington from the University of Portsmouth, about the questions that GPs should be asking when people present with particular symptoms—it is not always a headache, of course. There can be lots of different symptoms, such as an odd smell or a pain in the spine. There is a range of symptoms that people need to be alert to, but the only real way to diagnose a brain tumour is with a scan. Again, we heard from many people who had tried and tried to get a scan but were not able to do so.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. An important factor, which she has just mentioned, is the difficulty of getting scans. Why is that difficult? Is there a shortage of scanners or is there another reason?

Helen Jones: Again, we were given various reasons when we took evidence, and we want the Government to consider the matter carefully. There is no doubt that if we are to improve scanning procedures, we must accept that a number of scans will come back clear. The issue is, what proportion that comes back with no tumour shown is acceptable? Surely it is better to invest in a scan than to let a tumour grow, because later treatment is much more difficult, complex and costly. We want more people to have access to scanning.

Early diagnosis is important, but it will not solve the problem without more research. Despite the excellent scientists and clinicians who gave evidence to the Committee, there is no doubt that they are working in an underfunded system. The Government response to the petition said that about 1.5% of cancer spending is devoted to brain tumours, but that includes fundamental research and non-site-specific research.

The National Cancer Research Institute told us in evidence that some non-site-specific research undoubtedly benefits brain tumour research, but it was unable to put a figure on that. We heard from Professor Tracy Warr of the brain tumour research centre at the University of Wolverhampton that brain tumours are less likely than other cancers to benefit from non-site-specific research because of their complexity and location, and the blood-brain barrier, which means that drugs that work in the bloodstream do not transfer to the brain. That is an unscientific explanation, but I am sure hon. Members will know what I mean.

We found that spending records are very unclear. The Government’s own records are not clear. The National Cancer Research Institute was unhelpful when trying to find out exactly how much of the spending benefited brain tumour research. There is no central record of spending by people who are not partners with the National Cancer Research Institute. There is no doubt that spending is low. The only figure that we can be certain of is the 3.3% of spending on site-specific research, which is about £7.7 million a year. At that rate of progress, it is estimated that it would take 100 years for the outcome for brain tumours to be as good as for many other cancers.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with the assessment of my constituent, Mrs Alison Hutchman, who has been living with what she calls “this devastating disease” for the last six years, about that estimated time of 100 years? Why is this terrible disease so low down the priority order?

I saw the recent death of my friend, Richard Webster, at the age of only 50, from a brain tumour, despite the loving care of his family and his long-term partner and later husband, Jamie Norton. I know only too well, as only someone who has seen it can know, what is entailed when this disease strikes.

Helen Jones: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention and I agree with his constituent. Brain tumours are perceived to be rare, although my argument is that they are not as rare as we think and the number of life years lost and the burden of the disease mean they have to be tackled. We know there is a correlation between the amount of money spent and survival rates in cancer. Survival rates for those with brain tumours went up by only 7.5% between 1970 and 2015. For cancer overall, they have doubled.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some valuable points. Does she agree that a key issue is that a young researcher will look at the overall commitment and likely level of spending in this area during their career before deciding whether to specialise in it? The paucity of research spending in this area may mean that we do not get the amount and quality of research that is required.

Helen Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and I will come to that.

Between 2000 and 2012, we spent about £35 million on brain tumour research. The Government have rightly said that such spending has increased tenfold. It has, but it has increased from a very low base. That £35 million is from a total of about £4.5 billion of spending on cancer research.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The Brain Tumour Charity is based in Farnborough in my constituency. The hon. Lady mentioned the £35 million. Is that just public sector funding, or does it encompass private sector funding? The Brain Tumour Charity has already invested £14 million and plans to invest another £25 million by 2020.

Helen Jones: That £35 million includes spending from the voluntary sector. The report states that it is simply not good enough for the Government to leave decisions on such spending solely to the voluntary sector.

We welcome the decision of Cancer Research UK and Children with Cancer UK to prioritise spending on brain tumour research as a cancer of unmet need, but we are calling on the Government to identify the gaps in funding, to take action to remedy them and most important, to make it clear that they see this research as a priority.
We heard evidence that creating a positive research environment with an emphasis on increasing funding would not only keep our scientists in this country, but attract scientists from elsewhere in the world. Britain has the potential to be a world leader in this sort of research but at the moment we are not.

The Government said in their reply to the petition that decisions on funding are based on a number of factors, including the size and quality of the workforce. That ignores the fact that, as the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said, this is a Catch-22 situation. At the moment, young trained oncologists are having to change specialties or leave this country to pursue their research. Without an increase in funding, we simply cannot attract the good PhD students and postdoctoral researchers we need to make progress and to build up the cohort of young scientists who will go on to research this disease and may make the important discoveries of the future.

There are other barriers to research. One is the difficulty of getting enough tissue to work on. Only about 30% of patients are asked whether they will donate tissue, yet polls show that up to 90% would do so if asked. We do not have enough specialist support nurses and, according to the evidence, we do not even have enough people who can transfer tissue from hospitals to laboratories. The other problem that researchers come across—the Government really could act in this area—is that they must make applications to many local biobanks to get enough material to work on. Often, those biobanks have different procedures, application forms and so on. We urge the Government, while keeping safeguards in place, to try to tackle the problem of biobanking. Unless researchers have access to tissue, they cannot do the fundamental research that we need. The University of Southampton has started to use tissue left over from diagnosis but, again, the system is grossly underfunded. In the end, I am afraid the issue comes back to money if we want to make progress.

We also highlight other issues, such as the need for access to non-therapeutic drugs, which can improve brain surgery outcomes, and the need for access to off-patent drugs, which can be used for new indications. The Government said in response to the Off-patent Drugs Bill that they did not need a Bill to allow that. We need to make progress in that area urgently, but I will not spend too much time on it now, because we are pressed for time.

I do, however, want to say this to the Government. I said earlier that brain tumours may not be as rare as is perceived, and the reasons for that are simple. The numbers are going up. The system of recording has been changed. The experts who spoke to us said that brain surgery outcomes, and the need for access to off-patent drugs, which can be used for new indications. The Government said in response to the Off-patent Drugs Bill that they did not need a Bill to allow that. We need to make progress in that area urgently, but I will not spend too much time on it now, because we are pressed for time.

I hope that the Minister will look at the personal stories in our report. They are there for a reason. Let me remind people of some of them: Saira Ahmed, dead at the age of 6, Abbie Walker, also dead at 6, Lucy Goulding, who died at 16, and Stephen Realf, whose sister started the petition. An RAF officer who was apparently in excellent health, he was diagnosed at 19 and dead at 26. There are many more, whom I do not have time to name. There are those who died and those who survived—remarkable people such as Hannah Jones, a young woman who gave evidence to us and now devotes her time to promoting the HeadSmart campaign. And there are the families of those who died. In all my time in Parliament, I have never met such an amazing group of people. They had undergone the most appalling tragedies, but did not want to point the finger of blame. They simply wanted to use their experience to make life better for others. They deserve that we listen to what they say.

I say gently to the Minister that it is not often in ministerial life that one gets a chance to make a real difference. We know that Ministers get bogged down in the minutiae of every day and that things come down the chain to them, but this is a chance to make a difference. It is a chance to leave a mark that will be there long after he leaves ministerial office—not that I am hoping he will leave soon—long after most of us have left Parliament, in fact.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Jones: I am going to wind up my speech, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

This is a real chance to save lives, so I say to the Minister: read the report and champion its recommendations in government. That way we can have world-class scientists in this country and save the lives of many people, including young people, who will have the chance to make an enormous contribution to this country. It is as simple as that. This cancer has been neglected for far too long. That now has to change. [Applause.]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I know this is a sensitive subject, but I am afraid that people in the Public Gallery must not clap; I am sorry. As I said earlier, a very large number of Members have written to Mr Speaker, and they often quote the fact that they want to speak on behalf of constituents, so my aim is to get everyone in and I will now have to impose a four-minute limit. I would be grateful if colleagues could resist the temptation to take too many interventions, because that will mean that someone at the end of the queue does not get in. I know that the first speaker will want to abide by that, because of her long experience.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on such an excellent start to the debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) for her excellent chairmanship.
Of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, and to other hon Members who support her in that work.

My contribution will be succinct. As the hon. Lady pointed out, this is the largest cancer killer of children and adults under the age of 40, yet just 1% of research funding is given to find a cure or new treatments. The hon. Lady said that this felt to her almost like a Catch-22, and I think she is entirely right: a lack of research means that there can be difficulty in having effective professional development, which leads to continued late diagnosis. The fact that 61% of brain tumour patients are being diagnosed in A&E is backed up by information from my local hospital and Dr Lara Alloway, a consultant in palliative care there, who said that brain tumours are “most frequently diagnosed when people present as an emergency with stroke-like symptoms, headache or confusion. It is less common for people to be diagnosed as an outpatient.”

The lack of early diagnosis was also picked up by my local primary care trust. However, the issue is not just a lack of early diagnosis, but a lack of guidance from NICE. There are just seven pages of guidance on this matter, but more than 30 pages for blood and haematological disorders. The limited evidence base makes it very difficult for doctors and GPs to be able to diagnose in the fashion that the hon. Lady talks about.

It would be difficult to do justice to the number of constituents who have contacted me about this debate. I pay tribute to them all. I pay particular tribute to Olya Elliott, who lost her son, to Sandra Welch, who was diagnosed after a year of seeking help from her GP—that was too late to be cured—and to the gentleman who talked about his daughter, who had died at the age of 44. The list goes on, and it is very difficult to talk about it. I think that the debate today will do a great deal to send a positive message to all those constituents. I pay particular tribute also to Jan Pearson, who came to my surgery on Friday and spoke incredibly movingly about his daughter, who had died at the age of 18. He was diagnosed because of the tenacity of his mother, that is so important. When I speak to my constituents who have lost loved ones, that is often the way they can find most solace. The hon. Lady makes a very good point.

Mrs Miller: That positive effect in terms of fundraising is so important. When I speak to my constituents who have lost loved ones, that is often the way they can find most solace. The hon. Lady makes a very good point.

I also pay tribute to those who support my constituents who have gone through such appalling losses, particularly St Michael’s hospice, which cares not only for individuals who are going through the last hours of their lives, but for bereaved relatives and carers.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May I draw the right hon. Lady’s attention to my constituent, Caroline Fosbury, mother of Ella? Caroline lost her daughter at the age of 11. She said that it is a three-way cycle between support, awareness and research, and the family have started Ella’s fund to campaign for more research.

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[Mrs Maria Miller]
by constituents, not just now but before the petition, asking us to come and speak on this subject. I will not take up too much of the House’s time.

Last November, I visited the children’s brain tumour research centre at the University of Nottingham, which gave evidence to the Committee’s report. The research centre is an outstanding medical research facility that provides vital support for children and their families as they undergo treatment, and for families who have lost a loved one to a brain tumour. The research centre also services Derbyshire—everyone with a brain problem has to go across to Nottingham—and it gives an outstanding service. The amazing work done in such centres is being held back, as has been said, by a lack of funding, which has been a problem for decades.

Brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and people under 40, yet brain tumours receive just 1.5% of the £498 million spent on research into cancers. I am in no way saying that money should be taken away from research into other cancers; rather, I am pointing to the success that increased funding has achieved in other cancers, such as breast cancer and prostate cancer, for which patients now have an 80% five-year survival rate, compared with less than 20% for brain tumour patients. The lack of funding for brain tumours creates a Catch-22 situation, because researchers are not attracted into the field as the funding is not there for them to work with. As the report states, existing levels of funding have not been sufficient for researchers, such as those at the children’s brain tumour research centre, to make significant advances in their understanding of this horrific disease, although they are working very hard and feel that they are almost on the edge of a breakthrough.

As well as an increase in funding for research on brain tumours, we need greater investment in educating healthcare professionals on the symptoms of brain tumours. Too often people are misdiagnosed by GPs. That is not really the fault of the GPs, because they have to know everything about everything, which is not possible. They sometimes think that the symptoms with which they are presented could not be a brain tumour, and therefore they fail to send the patient for a scan, which is the only way to diagnose a brain tumour. That leads to a situation where 61% of brain tumour patients are now diagnosed at A&E, with children being a high proportion of them. Again, there is a Catch-22 because late diagnosis makes it harder to place patients in clinical trials to research much-needed cancer drugs. Also, the later they are diagnosed, the less chance there is of a cure.

Building on the success of the HeadSmart campaign in incorporating the symptoms of brain tumours, and the variants in children, young people and adults, into National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on cancer would help GPs to know when they are dealing with a brain tumour and would therefore increase scan referrals, which is the only way that a brain tumour can genuinely be identified. Early diagnosis would greatly increase survival rates and improve the quality of life of those who are diagnosed.

Will the Department tell us whether it believes that the current levels of funding are adequate for progress to be made in improving survival rates for this disease? We need extra funding. A constituent came to me who had been diagnosed with an incurable brain tumour. He wants more money to go into research, not to help him, but so that the people who come after him can have better care and better diagnosis so that they can be cured. We also need the extra funding—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order.

5.6 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I have just a few words, and they are from my constituent, Mr Philip James of Tallarn Green, which is near the English border. Philip James is a 3D artist, and this is what he movingly wrote:

“I was diagnosed with brain cancer a few days after my 30th birthday where I proposed to my fiancée. Since then I have set a wedding date of 7th April 2017. It is my mission to help others dealing with this awful disease that has a preventable poor prognosis by doing a daily blog about how I’m fighting it and about what research I have done myself.”

Mr James is chronicling his condition in a daily blog. His is a very heartfelt story and it shows one of the many reasons why we need to listen to people who are fighting and battling against brain tumours and why it is so important that we as a country spend more on research.

5.8 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. As a member of the Petitions Committee, it is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. I add my thanks to those who put together the petition, particularly Maria Lester and the Realf family—their love and passion for their son and brother came across in all our evidence sessions—and to all the others who came along and gave evidence. Hopefully this will be their report.

I declare that I am the chairman of the all–party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions. Given the vast number of factors that cause brain tumours, I join colleagues in using this opportunity to call on the Government to do more to redistribute research funding more fairly among different cancer groups. There are limited resources available.

Nadhim Zahawi: I commend the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this important debate. The UK model of partnership between Government, industry, universities, the NHS and charities is the right leadership model. The Government have led the way with a taskforce on anti-microbial resistance; maybe the way forward here is a taskforce on how to deal with early diagnosis and extra funding, as well as bids from charities that would attract that funding.

Ben Howlett: I agree that the Government have been leading the way. No doubt we will hear from the Minister about some of the work that they have been doing to create such partnership models. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has been delivering in that area.

Limited resources are available to fund research. A vast number of conditions fight desperately for every resource available, and researchers in every field work hard to get one step closer to a cure. It is important that we take a moment to thank all our constituents who are working tirelessly to advance medicine, find cures and improve the life chances of all of us.
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Given my hon. Friend’s expertise, has he considered the point made by the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) about the loss of life years and whether it should be taken into account when we determine how to distribute our funds?

Ben Howlett: I agree, and as part of our report we have considered that and suggested that it be done. I hope the Government will consider a fairer funding formula in order to make a big impact on the number of life years lost. It is crucial that we strike the right balance when allocating research and development resources, both financial and otherwise, to ensure that all areas get a fair share of what is available. It is simply not right that issues such as brain tumour research continually miss out on funds.

I would like to take a moment to speak about a former councillor in my constituency of Bath, Richard Maybury, who sadly passed away around five years ago after finding that he had a brain tumour, which was unfortunately incurable. I have seen what his wife has gone through. He was in remission for a couple of years, and thereafter only palliative treatment was available. It is just one of many cases, but it brings up an important question. There are many varieties of brain tumour, some of which are curable but some of which can only be supported by palliative care. It is crucial that research is directed to all areas. Richard Maybury’s wife is calling for more to be done at an international level. We should be able to work with the likes of Germany and the United States, which are leading the way in this area.

There are clear imbalances that must be addressed in order to ensure that all crucial research areas receive sufficient funding. I know that the Government are committed to ensuring that we progress further with medicine and that more and more people survive all forms of cancers, yet the shocking figures that we have heard from the Chair of the Petitions Committee and the testimonials in its evidence sessions show that the funding model must be reconsidered to ensure that research into brain tumours is not neglected.

Brain tumour sufferers have benefited from the cancer drugs fund. They will benefit from the Government’s accelerated access to medicines review and from improvements to palliative care. More sufferers will benefit from genetic medicines as part of the genomics revolution, in which our country is currently leading the way. Data collection and participation in personalised medicine will improve with new emphasis from the Government. I agree with the petitioners, however, that brain tumour sufferers should not be forgotten, but should receive a fairer share of research funding. I hope that the Minister will consider this group of sufferers when making his closing remarks.

5.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on her detailed and concise presentation. I am here because my constituents have contacted me. I suspect that is why we are all here: we have poignant personal stories to share.

Brain tumours kill more children and young adults than any other form of cancer. Every day, 10 children and young people in the United Kingdom learn that they have cancer. More than 16,000 people are newly diagnosed with this form of cancer each year in the United Kingdom, yet just 1% of the national spending on cancer research is allocated to this horrendous disease. I am glad to see the Minister in his place; I always look forward to his responses. I am sure that he will respond in a positive fashion and give us the hope for which everyone in this Chamber wishes, along with our constituents.

The allocation of funding is even more alarming when we consider the survival rates for brain tumour patients. Breast and prostate cancer patients, to give two examples, have an 80% five-year survival rate, compared with that of brain tumour patients, which is less than 20%. Clearly, more needs to be done on investment in brain tumour research. Can the Minister indicate what partnerships he is encouraging between universities, Departments and big business to ensure that we can move forward?

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Our colleague the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) could not be with us today, but she lost her sister, who managed completely asymptomatic, at the age of 37. That reinforces the point that discovery often occurs too late, which is why research and awareness are crucial.

Jim Shannon: As always, I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Secondary or metastatic brain tumours are particularly important to consider. Up to 40% of cancers in other parts of the body will eventually spread to the brain. Let us focus on the key issues, such as the blood-brain barrier.

The National Cancer Intelligence Network found that 61% of brain tumour patients were diagnosed in accident and emergency, including 53% of children up to 14 years old, 25% of those aged 15 to 24 and 20% of older adults. Although there are many charities, I will put in a quick plug for CLIC Sargent and its work. Its paper, “The Best Chance from the Start”, found that the rarity of cancer in children and younger people, added to the fact that symptoms can be non-specific, can make it challenging for GPs to recognise the symptoms.

Many constituents have written to me, but I will conclude by quoting two. One is my constituent Mary Patterson, a survivor. She was diagnosed, she had surgery and she is alive today, although her life is restricted. Another story involves a lady in my constituency called Heather, who writes about her late husband George:

“My own interest in this petition and upcoming debate came about because my husband, George Ramsey, died 1 July 2011 from a brain tumour, only nine weeks after diagnosis. He was just 50 years old, and had just retired from the fire service after 32 years of service. Unfortunately my husband received poor management from the neurosurgery department, and his treatment was delayed after the team ran out of time to discuss his case on two separate occasions.”

An ombudsman investigated and reported to the Assembly. I conclude with this comment of hers:

“In his last five years in the fire service, he was the community liaison and youth engagement officer for the Belfast area. The chairman of the Belfast City Council stated that George’s work had ‘made Belfast a safer place’. “
That is a touching and personal testimony. The sad thing is that it is happening to families up and down the country at this moment. Although we have the opportunity to get back on track, it is sad that it took a petition to bring us here.

5.17 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to add my voice to this important debate. I thank the Petitions Committee for scheduling it, and its Chair, the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), for her superb opening speech, which covered the issue fantastically. It is phenomenal to see so many hon. Members in Westminster Hall. That firmly assures us that the issue is now well and truly in the public eye and on the Government’s agenda.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, and I am here because I attended the funeral of an 11-year-old boy, Danny Green. No parent should have to bury a child, and no child should have to attend a friend’s funeral, as I saw when Danny’s many school friends made a guard of honour for his coffin, something they will never forget. How on earth can one celebrate the life of someone who died aged only 11?

All hon. Members will have received a copy of Danny’s father’s book, “Danny’s Journey”, detailing Danny’s story from his first dizzy spell in November 2011 to his tragic untimely death just seven months later. It was distributed jointly by the Danny Green Fund and the Brain Tumour Charity. We should all find it shocking that, given that, as we have heard, brain tumours are the main cancer killer of children and young adults and that more life years are lost to them than to any other cancer, this receives as little as 1% of the national cancer research spend.

We have also heard that, over the past 30 years, although cancer survival rates have increased by 50%, brain tumour survival rates have increased by only 7.5%. The people involved are often children and the parents of young children, and those figures do not begin to illustrate the degree of lifelong disability that many of the survivors, of whom there are too few, also face, and the cost and burden added to their lives and those of their families.

Many small charities work tirelessly to make up the funding shortfall. To their immense credit, Danny Green’s parents, Lisa and Chris, and his sister Holly have raised more than £250,000 in the short time since his death, but surely we cannot rely on the hard work of sufferers and their loved ones, like any parent here. I would give my life in an instant if it could save my nine-year-old’s, and I am certain that my mother, who has enjoyed a very full life for 82 years, would also do so if she could save anyone’s child. We must consider our priorities. Brain tumours may be considered rarer cancers, but their disproportionate effect on the lives of young children and young adults means that we must give them a much higher priority.

5.19 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I start by thanking the Petitions Committee for introducing this important debate and commending my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her excellent opening speech, in which she eloquently made the case on behalf of the 120,129 citizens who have signed the online petition. I also commend the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who is the chair of the all-party group on brain tumours, for her leadership on the issue and her very emotional speech, which I thank her for.

Over the years, I have had to deal with a number of individual cases, as I am sure other hon. Members have. Currently, I have three, and 132 of my constituents have signed the online petition. The issue that our constituents on the issue is not surprising when we realise that, as we have just heard, malignant brain tumours are the biggest killer among all types of cancer of people under the age of 40 and of children.

Also, survival rates for brain tumours have not improved in the last 30 years; if anything, on some measures they have got worse. Currently, only 40% of patients will live for more than a year after diagnosis and less than 20% will survive for more than five years. However, as we have heard, despite those shocking figures, cancer research funding into brain tumours amounts to little more than 1% of the spend on cancer research. Due to the chronic and continuous underfunding of brain tumour research, there are clear knock-on effects to the services and treatments that patients access and receive. If we continue to limit the potential progress that properly funded research might make, those outcomes will never improve. That probably explains the 30-year plateau that I have just highlighted.

As with all cancers, early detection is key to boosting survival rates. That is why it is so dismaying to find that brain tumours are not included in the Government’s Be Clear on Cancer campaign. Early diagnosis not only helps to prevent avoidable death, but can relieve the stress on a patient’s life, as one recent case brought to my attention by a constituent exemplifies. After visiting their local GP twice about feeling generally unwell, my constituent was told that they had all the classic signs of stress and they were prescribed antidepressants.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): My constituent, Rita Magorrian, got in touch with me about her granddaughter, Helen, who collapsed just before Christmas with a brain tumour. Helen had been to see her GP several times and had been told her problems were down to stress, but she had also been to see her optician and was told the same. As well as considering further training for GPs, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to widen the process to include opticians?

Mrs Hodgson: That is an excellent point, well made, and I thank my hon. Friend for it.

Two days later, when my constituent lost all strength on the left side of their body, they went straight to A&E, where it was eventually found they had three brain tumours. After receiving brilliant treatment by NHS staff and support from the Bobby Robson centre in Newcastle, thankfully my constituent is now in remission. However, that case clearly shows the need for improved awareness, as the situation would have been better if the GP had been able to spot the signs of a brain tumour sooner. We in the north-east have an excellent brain tumour facility in the Bobby Robson centre, but there are always concerns about its future, as it depends greatly on legacy and charitable donations.
It is also important that research considers the needs of patients. According to studies by Brainstrust, patients believe that more research and funding must focus on the quality-of-life issues, such as function and symptom relief, to help to improve life after diagnosis, whether the diagnosis is terminal or not.

That is reflected in the case of another of my constituents, Malcolm, who was given a terminal diagnosis of a glioblastoma multiforme, or GMB, 4 brain tumour. Despite being told by his doctor in the north-east that he was too sick for further treatment, Malcolm, along with his family, sought out specialists in London. He took the difficult and expensive decision to self-fund the life-extending drug, Avastin, which, although licensed for use in the treatment of some other cancers, was not available on the NHS for use in his case.

Malcolm is due to receive another dose of Avastin, but he wants it to be administered locally and is unable to find an oncologist in the north-east who is able to do so, even privately, so Malcolm is faced with either travelling up and down to London for that treatment every two weeks, or perhaps up to Scotland, or to Leeds or Manchester. Although Malcolm has responded well to the Avastin treatment, more options need to be available to people in his position, with treatments to improve the quality of life and, where possible, to extend life. However, that is all for nothing when there is a clear postcode lottery on access to specialists and services, as seen by Malcolm and his family.

The chronic underfunding of research into brain tumours is clearly having an impact on the lives of those who are diagnosed with brain tumours, and that cannot and should not go on any longer.

5.24 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and to all hon. Members who have spoken with such passion.

We have heard how children are particularly the victims of brain tumours, so it is with great pride that I wear the daisy badge, in honour of Daisy Brooks, whose parents, Louis and Anna, have just about made it. Malcolm is due to receive another dose of Avastin, so, even privately, so Malcolm is faced with either travelling up and down to London for that treatment every two weeks, or perhaps up to Scotland, or to Leeds or Manchester. Although Malcolm has responded well to the Avastin treatment, more options need to be available to people in his position, with treatments to improve the quality of life and, where possible, to extend life. However, that is all for nothing when there is a clear postcode lottery on access to specialists and services, as seen by Malcolm and his family.

The chronic underfunding of research into brain tumours is clearly having an impact on the lives of those who are diagnosed with brain tumours, and that cannot and should not go on any longer.

5.27 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) said, brain tumours are the biggest cause of cancer death among children and adults under 40 in the UK. Surely, research into that disease should be a priority in the UK and around the world.

I will talk today about five-year-old Cian Case. My friend, Huw Irranca-Davies, who has now left this place after being the hon. Member for Ogmore, has been dealing with Cian and his family for some time, and he wanted me to pass on Cian’s story.

At the end of November 2015, Cian was admitted to Bristol children’s hospital, who is involved in the development of a software-guided robot that installs a series of catheters attached to a titanium device to deliver chemotherapy direct to the tumour. That is a risky form of surgery, but Daisy’s parents were prepared to try it because they had no alternative. Daisy underwent three rounds of treatment and, although the initial results looked promising, the tumour proved too aggressive, and Daisy passed away on 17 November 2014, hours after celebrating her seventh birthday.

Less than 10% of children with DIPG live longer than 18 months after diagnosis, and survival is even rarer, but there are two positives in this situation; first, Anna, Daisy’s mother, is expecting another child, as is very obvious; secondly, very positive steps have been made through that research. Research can deliver, if only we can back it. We have heard about the low priority that research into brain tumours receives. In this case, the research group—the Functional Neurosurgery Research Group—aims to identify new drugs for the treatment of brainstem tumours in children, using the new method that I have described.

I have many other constituents whom I would like to mention, but I know that other hon. Members want to raise their own constituency cases. My point is simple. My view is that I am a parent of four children, the oldest of whom is nine, but I cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to have a child, who is so vulnerable already, in the position that Daisy was in. Whenever a child is ill, we feel incredibly powerless, but we are not powerless and nor are the Government. We have the power to raise the priority of brain tumour research and I hope the Government do so, in memory of those who have suffered so tragically and so that we can deliver hope to those who, unfortunately, will suffer in the future.
Cian responded well to that initial dose of chemotherapy and is now receiving intensive chemotherapy to his brain and spine.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I pay warm tribute to Carole Hughes, the inspirational woman behind Peterborough-based Anna’s Hope. She is in the Gallery today. In view of the fact that cancer affects children in particular, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that specialist neuro-rehabilitation therapy centres are set up to assist children in that position and to try to get them to fulfil their ultimate potential?

Nick Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who makes an important point.

I am pleased to report that Cian continues to make good progress and that his mobility is improving weekly, defying the original prognosis. Cian’s dad, Richard, is one of the more than 120,000 signatories to the petition we are discussing. He understands that cancers such as Cian’s are rare, and that that is why funding may not have been forthcoming enough. He believes, however, that more research can lead to longer and healthier lives for youngsters blighted so early by this disease. I am pleased that Cancer Research UK has committed to increasing spend on research into brain tumours, and we can all welcome that good news.

It is difficult standing here today relaying the story of one family’s brush with tragedy and the long road to recovery ahead, so I do not want our successors, years from now, to face the same questions, wringing their hands and saying, “Something should be done.” The community has rallied around Cian and his family—the school, the rugby club and the community drop-in centre have all organised different activities to raise awareness and funds, for which the family are incredibly grateful. The Noah’s Ark children’s hospital, LATCH and everyone in the health service has been fantastic on every step of Cian’s fight. They are all doing their bit; now it’s our turn.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her powerful start to the debate.

I want to spend a bit of time talking about the brilliant work being done in my constituency at the University of Portsmouth. The university hosts one of the largest centres of excellence for brain tumour research in the world, led by Professor Geoff Pilkington. The department collaborates with research centres around the world and Professor Pilkington is much in demand at international conferences. The centre is a flagship research body in the UK, but it is coming to the end of its core five-year funding, which will be reviewed by international scientists at the beginning of May. Although I am sure that it will come out with a top review, the next five years of funding might depend on that. It will mean £1 million a year and the ability to apply for more grants and employ more postgraduates. It is absolutely crucial to bring in new people to increase the depth of research and it is worrying that too many top research centres are continually fighting for more funds.

The research being conducted at Portsmouth is also heavily funded by the third sector. The core funding comes from the charity Brain Tumour Research, which has provided about £500,000 per year for the past four years. That money has not only funded 10 researchers, but has acted as a catalyst for donations from other charitable and third-party organisations. The centre now has between 17 and 20 researchers at any one time.

As a centre of excellence, the University of Portsmouth attracts some of the brightest students from all over Europe and beyond. Recently, the research unit has had new staff from Portugal, Italy and other places around Europe, who are contributing significantly to our understanding of this terrible disease, but extra funding is needed to enable brain tumour researchers to stay in their field. Although charities are desperately trying to bridge the gap in funding to retain the researchers, it is not enough to prevent them from moving into other fields.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I speak on behalf of the many constituents in Fareham who have been affected by this devastating and indiscriminate disease, for example, Simon Tier, whose best friend sadly died because of a brain tumour and who is an indefatigable campaigner. Does my hon. Friend agree that current rates of funding are insufficient and that we need between £30 million and £35 million per year, in line with funding for research for other cancers?

Mrs Drummond: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I hope that those in the third sector will continue to be helped to raise funds because it has obvious implications for the progress of brain tumour research. Those currently involved are working incredibly hard.

I had the fortune of meeting Kathleen Keatley, a final year PhD student who is sponsored by a charity called Headcase Cancer Trust, and her colleagues at their labs last month. The passion, knowledge and dedication to research that the students have should be celebrated. The work the unit is doing is truly ground-breaking. Kathleen is doing research into mitochondrial mutations in glioblastoma, which is one of the most common and aggressive brain tumours. Greater understanding of glioblastoma will improve the effectiveness of treatment. We have spoken in other debates about the role that innovative treatments have in future NHS provision and research might result in personalised treatment for those with brain tumours. At Portsmouth, innovative treatments for the most serious conditions are already being worked on but we need to invest more to encourage that development.

During my visit to the University of Portsmouth, the message was clear that more funding means that we can accelerate our learning. By increasing our funding, we can continue to attract and retain the brightest people from within, and outside, the UK.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I am sure that the Minister is pleased to hear about the excellence that is in evidence in Portsmouth and that call for additional funding, because funding is key to research and research is key to early diagnosis.

When my husband and I received the shock diagnosis for our son, we had just days to respond, even though he had been, at that point, under the care of the local
hospital. Our situation ended in a happy conclusion, but serving as I do with my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) on the all-party group on brain tumours, I know that too many stories end in grief.

Mrs Drummond: Life expectancy, diagnosis and treatment continue to improve for cancer as a whole, but the current lack of knowledge about brain tumours means that 60% of diagnoses happen in A&E. For many of those people, the story is one that no cancer victim should ever hear, which is that the diagnosis came too late. I am really pleased that the son of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) is doing well.

The socio-economic effect is that 21 years are lost for people with brain tumours compared with 13 for breast cancer. We need to fast track treatments from the laboratories to patients. They are available, but regulations can make progress slow and we need to find more rapid ways of improving access to drugs. It is vital that we support more funding for brain tumour research and also a quicker system of getting treatment to patients.

5.36 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on superbly outlining all the reasons why we need to take action on the issue. We should also congratulate, as a House, Maria Lester, on bringing forward the petition, along with all the others who have fought to have the issue addressed.

The stories we have heard are heart-breaking. They are emotional stories about people throughout the United Kingdom. All of us have constituents who have been affected. Those stories are demanding of a response from us as parliamentarians and from the Government—a response saying that we are listening and that we will do the right thing and ensure that we do all we can to support increased funding for research into this killer.

A constituent of mine, Katy Sutherland from Dingwall, has asked me to tell her story, which is yet another demonstration of why we must act. Katy said to me:

“My own interest in this petition and upcoming debate came about because my mum Jackie…was diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour two and a half years ago—she had just celebrated her 49th birthday. The diagnosis came as a huge shock. Since her diagnosis she has been through two major surgical procedures and has had countless rounds of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. When you are diagnosed with brain cancer it is always a brick wall terminal diagnosis; there is no known cure.”

She went on to say:

“I was nothing short of shocked by the lack of funding into the research of brain cancer; just 1% of Government funding is allocated to this notorious killer. I have raised vital funds myself towards research by doing various runs over Scotland, but not enough to make a difference. I would never wish this horrendous, debilitating disease to strike anyone. The impact and change it has had on my family and our previously ‘normal’ lives has been huge. Watching someone you love being so brave, when you both know there is no real light at the end of the tunnel, is extremely difficult….With many cancers now curable with early diagnosis, research has come a long way with the help of Government funding. However, there is still very little known about the biggest cancer killer in the under-40s and I hope you will agree with me that this needs to change!”

[Caroline Ansell]

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Shortly after my election to this place in 2010, I was diagnosed with a brain tumour, an experience I share with the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman). We were both able to return to the House fully fit thanks to the excellent work of surgical teams in the NHS in Sheffield and in London. Does the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) recognise that, alongside research, support for victims of brain tumours is also important? Does he recognise and celebrate the excellent work done by charities such as Headway, which supports those suffering from the consequences of brain tumours and other brain injuries?

Ian Blackford: I am most grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. He demonstrates, as does the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), that we are so lucky that people such as them have been able to come through this. It demonstrates why we need investment in diagnosis, research and support for those affected and their families—so much needs to be done, because there is so much that we are losing as a society. So many young people’s lives are being taken away. If we do the right thing by putting that investment in, we can deal with the issues and ensure that many of our people can survive this dreadful disease.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Like many Members here, a number of my constituents have contacted me who are suffering from brain tumours or have family members suffering from brain tumours. My mother is suffering from a brain tumour. No matter what I hear from them about excellent treatment and fantastic charitable work, I agree that there is no substitute for investing in research so that in future other people do not have to suffer such experiences, as so many are.

Ian Blackford: I hope that we have crossed that Rubicon today and that the Government will recognise the responsibility that they have. This is the last big cancer where we have not had the appropriate funding into research. Let us ensure that we take our responsibilities seriously, not only for all those here today, but for all those we can protect from this dreadful disease in years to come.

Katy’s words, which I read out earlier, are a call for action. We cannot and must not let down her or the many others who have asked us as parliamentarians to address this terrible killer. The case for increased funding is irrefutable. We know that brain tumours kill more children and adults under 40 than any other cancer. Like most cancers, the incidence of brain cancer is rising. Fewer than 20% of those diagnosed with brain cancer survive beyond five years, but despite those shocking statistics brain tumour research accounted for just 1.5% of the £498 million spent on cancer research in 2014. Less than £8 million is spent on brain tumour research.

As Maria Lester has said:

“History has shown that where funding leads, breakthroughs follow. Just look at the improved survival rates for breast cancer and leukaemia since the 1970s. I would like to add here that I do not wish to see money redirected from other cancers but overall investment increased so that brain cancer achieves parity of funding.”

Brain Tumour Research has echoed that by calling for funding to increase to between £30 million and £35 million. It has also quantified that there is an average of 6.9 deaths
of men and women under 45 for every £1 million in research spending on all cancers. For brain cancer there is an average of 82.5 deaths of men and women under 45 for every £1 million spent on research. Those statistics should shock and shame us all, and they demonstrate why we must take action.

In conclusion, it is important that the Government respond positively to the petitioners, the Petitions Committee report and those asking legitimate questions this afternoon. I hope the Minister does that. I ask him to not let us down. Most importantly, will he give some hope to those who will suffer from this cancer by showing that we are determined to improve the survival rate by taking action and making it a priority?

5.43 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): May I begin by welcoming this long overdue debate? The importance and impact of the issue are impossible to overstate and have been eloquently set out by other right hon. and hon. Members. Of all cancers, brain tumours are the biggest killer of people under the age of 40, with fewer than 20% of those diagnosed surviving beyond five years. Although welcome progress has been made in the treatment of and research into other cancers, with significant improvements in survival rates, sadly, that is not matched in respect of brain tumours. A number of problems remain.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) is sadly unable to speak in today’s debate, but her interest in and commitment to this cause are well known. She asked me to mention her constituents Terry and Eileen Smith, who lost their son Michael last November, and David Bird—his wife and daughter came to see my right hon. Friend—who sadly passed away after a very late diagnosis; that came too late for anything to be done.

Those stories are echoed by that of Jake McCarthy, whose family live in Rothley in my constituency. He was a bright, talented 24-year-old who on Christmas eve 2012 lost his life to a brain tumour diagnosed too late. Jake’s family and friends set up the Jake McCarthy Foundation to help to prevent others from experiencing such a tragic loss. The foundation helps to raise awareness of the symptoms and promotes the importance of early diagnosis. So far, it has raised more than a quarter of a million pounds. On 11 June we will see the third annual cycle ride to raise yet more money. Members of Jake’s family and friends are here today, and I pay tribute to their bravery and the work they have done through the foundation.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking powerfully about his young constituent. Does he agree that brain cancers, precisely because they affect children and young adults in the prime of life, disproportionately affect others? I pay tribute to my constituent Adam Bolton, a father of four. An owner of a small business employing 15 people, because of his treatment, he has had to sell his business.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the human consequences of this terrible cancer. It is clear that, while brain cancer is rarer than some, the mortality rate is very high, and awareness of symptoms and swift diagnosis are vital. It is research, however, that holds the key to beating the disease in the long term. Other Members have cited the stark statistic that research into the disease accounts for just over 1% of the £498 million spent on cancer research, and that is truly shocking.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Many of my constituents have also raised this important matter with me. Brain Tumour Research in Buckinghamshire has requested not just an increase in funding from Government, but an absolute minimum, on which we can argue for increased funding over the years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the right approach?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to see the amount of funding increased to the £30 million to £35 million proposed in the petition. I was disappointed by the Department’s official response, which essentially appeared to abrogate responsibility for helping to identify and address areas with insufficient funding. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) in asking whether the Minister thinks that the current level of funding is adequate. If it is not, what steps will the Government take not to pass the problem to the voluntary sector, but to take the lead in addressing and filling that gap?

The Petitions Committee was right to state that brain tumour patients have been let down by a lack of leadership from successive Governments. This is not a party political issue; it is about getting it right. I hope that the Minister’s response, as his responses normally are, will be positive, constructive and encouraging. It is through the efforts of Jake McCarthy’s family and friends and people like them across the UK that we are having this debate. We owe it to them and to Jake to rise to that challenge.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): We have 15 more speakers. If they all stick to about four minutes, we should get everyone in. Members of the public have written to their MP and their MP is here. They want to hear their MP speak, so I know that everyone will try to keep to their four minutes from now on and not take too many interventions.

5.48 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her exceptional speech and to the chair of the all-party group on brain tumours, the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), for making such a moving speech.

As we have heard, brain tumours account for 40% of all cancers in children. They are the leading cause of male deaths for 20 to 29-year-olds and they are the biggest cancer killer for those under 40. We do not have a good survival rate for brain tumours; four out of five people will die within five years of being diagnosed. Brain tumours are on the increase. Twenty-nine people a day are diagnosed, reducing life expectancy by 20 years on average, which is the highest for any cancer.

Brain tumours are the largest cause of preventable or treatable blindness in children, and childhood brain tumour survivors are 10 times more likely to suffer long-term disability than well children. This accounts for 20,000 additional disabled life years for all children
who are diagnosed each year. We have heard about the low base of research funding for brain tumours. The Minister has already been asked about that and I look forward to a favourable response.

Behind all the facts and figures are the personal stories. I was particularly moved by one of my constituents who wants to remain anonymous. He has a young family and he has had a difficult time. He told me he has gone from being a fit, healthy individual to one who struggles to do many of the everyday things that a dad wants to be able to do with his children. He was diagnosed last year at the age of 40 with a grade 2 oligodendroglioma. After an 11-hour craniotomy, during which he was awake, he has spent much of the past nine months fighting infection and undergoing extensive physiotherapy to help him to learn to walk again and to enable him to live a relatively normal life. He started radiotherapy at the Christie last month to try to control the regrowth of the tumour. Unfortunately, the nature of these things means that it is almost certainly regrowing, yet he says he is one of the lucky ones with, hopefully, “a decent number of years ahead” of him. However, he is taking nothing for granted. He has been lucky in terms of being awarded an Access to Work grant, which has been invaluable in helping him to stay in work.

I also want to mention a young man, Christopher Clarke, who was 18 when he died of his brain tumour. He was a lovely lad. He was so cheerful in spite of the diagnosis and prognosis. He had a profound effect on his circle of friends. Even 10 years after his death, they are still fundraising for the trust that was set up in his name.

Satvinder Uppal was 54 when she died of a brain tumour five years ago last week. The real issue for Satvinder’s family was the delay in diagnosis of the brain tumour, which we have heard is common. In spite of prolonged jaw pain, severe headaches and memory issues, the tumour was not picked up when she went on various occasions to visit her GP. It was not until she collapsed at home that she was finally diagnosed at A&E. As her family said, “The specialist cancer centre was brilliant, but getting the diagnosis in the first place was the issue.”

What does the Government plan to do to extend brain tumour research from the current low level? What will the Minister do to ensure that clinical guidelines reflect the poor diagnosis rates?

5.52 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The outcome of today’s debate is an incredibly simple one for my hon. Friend the Minister and the Department. It is to step up to the plate that the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and others have already referenced. There is an unjustifiable disparity in attention and funds, which are not being provided for research into this type of cancer, whereas others attract it. I see a role for my hon. Friend’s Department. A number of right hon. and hon. colleagues have referenced the huge and valuable local fundraising that often goes on as a result of an individual tragedy. To avoid duplication and some of the problems that the hon. Lady referenced—the access to tissue and so on—could the Minister say in his summing up what role, if any, the Department might have in leading some form of co-ordination to try to get a national approach? However, that should not be seen as an abrogation, relying on the voluntary sector for the Department not to step up to the plate.

At the first or second surgery that I held after the election last year, a constituent called Sacha Langton-Gilks came to my surgery, and her story is replicated so many times. She had lost her son at the age of 16 to a brain tumour; he was diagnosed at the age of 11 in 2007. For five years he was treated very well with chemotherapy and radiotherapy, but underwent 11 brain operations. The cancer reappeared in May 2012 and such was the physical toll on him and the family, they decided to go for the quiet option and not to prolong his life through any unnecessary and probably futile suffering. We must do something about all those tragic stories.

If I may, I want to talk briefly about the work and the campaign of HeadSmart. I cannot understand, and neither can my constituent who works on its education side, the Department’s reticence to have HeadSmart’s booklet inserted into the little red health book of every child. We must improve education and knowledge about this. Every death that we hear about is met by frustration and a sense of futility, which could so easily be evaporated if we were able to have a better and more pronounced understanding of the subject.

We have to do more about screening. It is unjustifiable that a child in the UK with a brain tumour takes on average three times longer to be diagnosed than somebody in the United States of America and even somebody in Poland. We are the world’s fifth largest economy. We know that there is pressure on the public purse, but, given the vulnerability of so many of these young people, now is the time for action. Will the Minister work with HeadSmart and others to get the information booklet inserted into the little red health book and also to promote the information talks that HeadSmart provides within schools? It is crucial in personal, social, health and economic education, which is not technically required in academies. That is something we will have to think about as another aspect of policy, but now is the time for the Government to step up to the plate.

5.56 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I apologise to other Members: I was not here for the start of the debate because I was upstairs in a Delegated Legislation Committee dealing with the code of practice under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, so unfortunately I did not hear what by all accounts was a powerful speech by the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones). I want to thank her not only for her role in securing today’s debate, but for the quality of the Petitions Committee report, “Funding for research into brain tumours”.

I was delighted to be here for the contribution by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), whose work as chair of the all-party group on brain tumours I admire and, as a member of the group, try to support. I thank Maria Lester for the petition, which is welcome and gives us the chance to follow up on the work done by so many other people to point out exactly how little funding goes into research into brain tumours compared
with other cancers. The statistics have been quoted again and again today. I can do my little bit as well, but no matter how many times the statistics are quoted they do not become cliché-worn. It is still a shock when we consider the impact that brain tumours have.

[MS KAREN BUCK in the Chair]

Brain tumours represent 1% of cancer diagnoses and 3% of cancer deaths. They also represent 2% of all deaths under 60, so that shows us what we are dealing with. It is shocking that the Government persist in committing relatively little to specifically support research into brain tumours. That is why I want to thank Brain Tumour Research for its work in Parliament and so many other places to raise awareness and funds, and then to have those funds applied to excellent work that hopefully can transform prospects for many people.

Like others, I have been contacted by constituents about this debate, including by Anne-Marie, who wrote to me about her husband, who is 43 and was diagnosed with a glioblastoma last August. She has pointed out the major effort going on in the United States via the “moonshot” campaign, which received a lot of attention after the tragic death of Joe Biden’s son. She referred to me to some of the letters that were written to Joe Biden in the context of the “moonshot” campaign. She said she identified strongly with some of those letters, which spelled out the frustrations and feelings that she and her husband experienced. Our efforts should not just be about ensuring that more funding goes into research per se. We must ensure that it incentivises new treatments and fosters and facilitates innovation. Doing one will help us do the others; it will make such a huge difference.

One of the reasons why my constituents are so aware of brain tumours at the moment is that the top-class footballer Mark Farren, a young man of 33, died in February. He was a record-setting and record-breaking goal scorer who played for Derry City and Glenavon. He tragically lost his battle, even though the football family—not just those in Ireland, but people here such as Wayne Rooney, Roy Keane and others—raised money to help to get innovative treatment for him. He lost his battle, but the fight goes on.

6.1 pm
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I am a member of the Petitions Committee, which hosted this debate, and I pay tribute to our Chairman, the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), for her opening speech, in which she laid out clearly and comprehensively the argument that we need to make today. The subject of this debate is close to many people’s hearts. We have heard many tragic stories of people who have suffered from this terrible disease, but also the stories of hope of people who received treatment and survived. It is absolutely right that we are holding this vital debate.

As many hon. Members said, brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40. It is the most costly form of cancer in terms of years lost. It is therefore legitimate for us to ask why research into brain tumours has been so underfunded for so long. Patients and families up and down the country understandably feel let down by the lack of action of successive Governments. During the Committee’s research into this issue, I was particularly saddened to learn that the survival rates for brain tumours have improved little in the past 30 years. Surely we as a nation should not and cannot accept that. It is time to take action for change.

It was highlighted to us that the funding of brain tumour research is inadequate and has not been sufficiently prioritised. As many hon. Members have said, of the total amount of money spent on cancer research, about 1.5% is spent on research into brain tumours. I join those who call for the number of years lost to be a major factor in allocating funds for research.

Like many hon. Members, I have been contacted by constituents who told me their stories. I want to highlight the story of a family who do not want to be named. They battled to get to the bottom of why my constituent was feeling so poorly. His GPs maintained that he was suffering from depression. In desperation, they eventually paid for a private MRI scan, which revealed a brain tumour. Having already faced major battles to get the diagnosis, the family quickly learned that there was a lack of money for support and treatment for that devastating illness. Tragically, they do not doubt that if they had not had the money to pay for the scan privately, my constituent would not be here today. That is not acceptable. I wholeheartedly support their calls for better awareness among GPs and fairer funding for brain tumour research.

The Petitions Committee report sets out some clear recommendations to the Government, and I urge the Minister to consider them carefully. We can provide better leadership to raise awareness of brain tumours among GPs and other health professionals. We can strive for earlier diagnosis. I ask the Government a question that many hon. Members have asked: is the current level of funding adequate? If not, what can the Government do about it? It is too late to save those who have already tragically lost their lives to this disease, but it is not too late for us to take action to save lives in the future.

6.4 pm
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on her dedication to this issue. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I am also grateful to Stephen Realf’s family, the supporters of the petition and the Petitions Committee for helping to bring this debate to the Chamber.

Although brain tumours are often considered to be one of the rarer forms of cancer, as we have heard, they clearly have a significant and devastating impact. Brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of the under-40s and children, and they result in more life years lost than any other form of cancer.

The Petitions Committee concluded that brain tumour research is not adequately funded and prioritised in the UK, and that the Government fail to grasp their funding responsibility and the seriousness of the concern. Sufferers have to fight for diagnosis, treatment, support, awareness, and funding. There is little choice in the treatments available, and treatment protocols may be non-existent.
Earlier this year, the Scottish Government announced a new cancer strategy comprising a number of different actions to help to treat cancer, diagnose people more quickly and deliver better care. It includes £10 million of additional support to enable quicker access to diagnostics for people with suspected cancer and a Detect Cancer Early programme.

There is an acknowledged need to include brain tumours in public awareness campaigns and to develop appropriate care pathways. In 2011, the UK’s first brain tumour tissue bank was opened in what is now the Queen Elizabeth university hospital—a service that facilitates co-operation on research for treatments. Glasgow also has the new Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Care Centre, which is one of the most advanced NHS cancer centres in the UK. Importantly, the University of Glasgow has a brain tumour research fund, which supports local research projects—in particular, smaller projects that do not get funding from larger organisations. It also helps to enable a multi-disciplinary approach to research, which includes input from medical staff involved in front-line patient care and the scientific community. Brain tumour research and treatment must be funded appropriately across the UK.

I was contacted by my constituent, Mrs Robinson, whose husband has a brain tumour. She made it clear to me that they want the system to improve for everybody. I would like to comment briefly on the emotional impact of diagnosis. We need better psychological assistance for those affected and their families, and we need to support their mental wellbeing, alongside their physical health.

On early diagnosis research treatment and care pathways, I would like to remind hon. Members of the need for improved palliative care. I recently lost a much-loved uncle, David McGilvray, to cancer. We now have a good local facility—Kilbryde Hospice—to assist families in that situation, but it was unfortunately not opened in time for my uncle to benefit from it. We need such facilities across the UK, so that families can access palliative care at their times of greatest need and people with cancer can die—if they must—with dignity.

Yvonne Fovargue

6.12 pm

I want to speak on behalf of two constituents today. The first, Daniel, is in his 20s and is a very capable young man in the community. He set up a local youth club, and he is now involved in making a film about his experience of living with a brain tumour. He has explained to me that the biggest issue for him is the lack of available drug options. He would like to see more research into non-chemotherapy drugs.

Another family in my constituency who made contact with me in advance of the debate is Colin and Joyce. Their daughter Jennifer died 10 years ago due to an undiagnosed brain tumour. Today, I am sad to report, would have been Jennifer’s 32nd birthday. They have asked me to raise in particular the need for equity of access to speedy diagnostic tests, on a par with common cancers. They believe, rightly, that guidelines backed by robust research are needed to educate medical and healthcare professionals, as well as the general public, on the range of symptoms that can indicate brain tumours. The Bell family, also rightly, ask for better research into new treatments, access to clinical trials for new treatments and—this is crucial—rehabilitation therapies to improve quality of life.

The Bells are impressive in so many ways, because they lead the Norfolk Brain Tumour Support Group. I want to emphasise to people in Norfolk that that support is available to them. At the support group, I met some nurses from the Norfolk and Norwich university hospital, as well as patients. The nurses told me about not only the difficulties of diagnosis, but the complexities of treatment. The treatment pathway can be complex from the perspective of the patients and of the nurses and doctors, and there are also challenges post-discharge. In the words of the Bell family, to achieve a better future, “charities, the NHS, educational and research institutes must work together and communicate effectively. This is crucial to make the best of available resources in the current economic climate.”

Joyce and Colin Bell

“very much hope that the debate will result in increased funding being made available to improve outcomes for people affected by brain tumour”.

I strongly agree with my constituents. We must make the best use of support groups, such as our local one, and of symptom advice, such as that of HeadSmart. Ultimately, however, we must look to see whether we can do anything better in diagnosis, on the pathway once people are under care, and for their needs post-discharge.

6.12 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her succinct and elegant explanation of the issues and problems.

I am here to talk about my constituent James Hinnigan and his achievements since diagnosis, not least of which was to ensure that Makerfield people top the list of signatories to the petition. James was travelling with his family, but settled in Australia. Then he got a tingling sensation and his speech started coming and going. Fortunately, he went straight to A&E. He was asked to draw a diagram of a clock and, to his amazement, he could see only one side of it—he could not manage to get the other side of the clock going. The A&E staff thought he had had a stroke, but an MRI scan revealed a brain tumour, low level but operable.

James felt isolated, so he came home to Makerfield and moved back in with his parents. In Australia, however, he had read about a pioneering treatment, and he was referred to Charing Cross hospital, where they use the knife and laser. He recently had the operation, in which he was woken up during the procedure and the surgeons assessed, by talking to him, how much tissue they could remove without damaging his brain function. He has told me that he is now recovering well and
looking forward to the birth of his second child at the beginning of May. I know that we would all wish him well.

That is a remarkable story, but what is even more remarkable was James’s reaction to the news. He said, ‘‘This is the hand I’ve been dealt and I just have to go on and play the game’’—and he is certainly playing to win, not just for himself, but for all those diagnosed with that terrible condition. He approached me to discuss the problems and put me in touch with Brain Tumour Research. I learned a lot, and I truly believe that more needs to be done in diagnosis and in treatment. I said to him that I will do what I can to raise awareness.

That was not enough for James. He held a sponsored 8-till-8 spinathon, aiming to raise £2,740, which is the cost of one day’s research into brain tumours. He actually raised double that amount, which was a tremendous effort—even though he had to sit on a cushion for the rest of the weekend. He also attended the event at Speaker’s House, wearing a hat to promote awareness of brain tumours, only four days before his operation. He is now planning to paddleboard the Leeds-Liverpool canal to raise even more money.

That young man, who is only 36, is a fantastic role model. We owe him and all the others like him a future, which we can give them by increasing funding for brain tumour research and by prioritising a reduction in the number of early, needless deaths. Early diagnosis and pioneering new treatments must be a priority if we are not to lose James and other such people.

6.15 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Westminster Hall Chamber is as full today as most of us have ever seen it. We are all here as a direct result of the commitment of the family of my constituent, Stephen Realf. As the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) told us in her persuasive opening remarks, Stephen lost his life in August 2014 as a result of a brain tumour, aged just 26. His sister, Maria Lester, was instrumental in setting up the petition calling for more research.

I will speak about Stephen and about Maria’s campaign in his memory, but I became aware of the effect of a brain tumour on a young person many years ago. A couple I knew well lost their daughter when she was only 10 years old, which had a huge impact on her parents, so when Stephen’s father, Peter, came to see me at my surgery in July 2010, I had some understanding of the effect caused on Stephen’s life by a brain tumour.

Stephen’s dad had actually come to speak to me about how Stephen’s employer, the RAF, had been dealing with Stephen’s illness. From an early age, Stephen had had an ambition to fly with the RAF, so he and his family were delighted when he was accepted as a trainee officer and started his flight training. His diagnosis came when he was 40 hours into flight training. He and his family realised that his dream of becoming a pilot would not come to fruition.

There was some talk about Stephen’s role after his diagnosis, and the concern was that the RAF was not dealing with his case as quickly as it might have done. Stephen was eventually given a medical discharge, but the RAF arranged for an air marshal with responsibility for personnel and capability to deal with the delays, then telling Stephen about the changes in process that had improved their systems. It is important that the RAF acknowledged the situation, and that Stephen was not left feeling that he was not being supported by the RAF once he was discharged. That demonstrates the need for understanding by employers, as well as by the medical profession.

After Stephen died, the family put their energy into raising awareness and raising money for Myton hospice in Rugby. In August last year, Stephen’s sister, Maria, wrote an article in The Mail on Sunday magazine, You. Around that time, too, the idea of launching a petition calling for a debate in Parliament was developed. I congratulate Maria on how she set about doing that. I am delighted that the required number of signatories was easily reached, leading to us being here today.

Members across the House are now much more aware of the number of people diagnosed with this disease and of how brain cancers kill more children and adults under 40 than any other cancer. We now know that only 1% of research spending on cancer is allocated to brain cancers and how the five-year survival rate is less than 20% when there are instances of progress with many other cancers over the past 30 years.

I am proud that my constituents have played such a key role in raising awareness and pleased that they have turned what was for them such a sad time into something positive, to ensure that their son leaves a legacy of a greater likelihood of earlier diagnosis for those affected and, perhaps, of a longer and better quality of life. I very much hope, importantly, that there will be more funding for research on that devastating disease. Along with other Members, I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

6.19 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for securing the debate and for producing, along with the other members of her Committee, an excellent report arising from the e-petition on funding for research into brain tumours. I also commend those who created the e-petition and those who signed it. Their laudable campaign has afforded us a substantive opportunity to discuss the unmet need for and chronic underfunding of research into brain tumours, the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40.

In the days and weeks leading up to the debate, I received a number of emails and letters from constituents outlining the shocking human cost of what is a devastating disease. Each of those missives included a personal account of the distressing experiences of the correspondent whose life had been affected by this terrible disease. We have heard many such stories today. It was striking how many of them had common themes and how the experiences of one individual and their family were echoed in the experiences of another. The Petitions Committee’s report remarked on the similarities among the stories they heard and set out those common themes, which included difficulties and delays in getting a diagnosis; lack of treatment options; poor survival rates; and the huge burden of the disease on patients and their families.”

There was unanimity from patients and their families that those problems were exacerbated and perpetuated by chronic underfunding of research into the cancer, and that those problems could be fundamentally addressed
only through a significant increase in resources. They argued that there is a clear correlation between the funding for research on a specific cancer and improved survival rates and reduced incidence. Yet despite brain tumours being the most fatal of all cancers in the number of life years lost, they have for too long been the poor relation in cancer research. That is why improvements in outcomes for brain tumour patients continue to lag so far behind results in better-resourced areas of cancer treatment.

I readily admit that preparing for today’s debate was an eye-opening experience, in large part because of the profoundly tragic and painful stories I received from constituents, but also because I learned that research into such a deadly disease received just 1.5%, or £7.7 million, of the £498 million national spend for cancer in 2014, and just 1% of the overall national spend since 2002. The charity Brain Tumour Research estimates that, at the current rate of national spending, it could take another 100 years to find a cure. How many more lives will be tragically cut short and how many more families bereaved during that period? The answer is not one we should countenance, so I have no hesitation in joining the e-petition signatories in calling for the Government to show leadership and ensure that brain tumours are treated as seriously as other cancers and that more resources are provided.

Through improved funding we can raise awareness of brain tumours and increase the number of early diagnoses. That in turn could increase the opportunities for research, allowing us better to understand the causes of this devastating disease and potentially to develop urgently needed treatments, which could improve survival rates and patients’ quality of life.

6.27 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I add my congratulations to those that have been offered to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who spoke to the motion so powerfully.

In addition to the moving personal stories that some of my constituents have told me, one of my motivations for speaking today is that I am proud to have in my constituency the national head office of the charity Brain Tumour Research. I pay tribute to Sue Farrington Smith and her team for the incredible work that they do. Earlier this year, I had the great privilege of attending their launch event and open day in their new Milton Keynes offices. I urge colleagues to visit them if they get the opportunity. Mine was an inspirational experience, in large part because of the profound stories I received.

The debate shows the value of the petitions system. I was at the office a day or two before the deadline for registering, and signatures were just below the 100,000 level. Great excitement was palpable as the number neared the magic threshold. The system works.

I want to make two brief points about the substance of the debate. First, I echo the Committee’s call with respect to funding priorities being set by research bodies. I agree with its conclusion that research gaps cannot be the sole responsibility of the voluntary sector. The Government have a leadership role too. The National Cancer Research Institute partners have an invaluable role to play, but we cannot over-rely on them. I hope that one of the Minister’s takeaways from the debate will be to have a fresh look at the Government’s role in identifying and addressing funding gaps.

I hope that the other point I want to make is not naive. It is about the diagnostic procedure. I have no medical background, but in the six years I have been a Member I have encountered a range of medical conditions, including some cancers—such as pancreatic cancer and neuroblastoma, which tragically took away the life of my young constituent, Henry Allen, at only four years of age—and other diseases that are not cancers, such as Niemann-Pick type C, that all have symptoms that can be difficult to identify. The research, treatment and cure will be unique to each condition, but I have found that they share a common problem of late diagnosis.

The symptoms are often not readily connected to the condition and may be general, such as nausea, pain and fatigue. GPs may see only a handful of such cases throughout their careers. Often, there is a lengthy process in which a diagnosis is not possible until a biopsy is undertaken. I urge colleagues to visit them if they get the opportunity. Mine was an inspirational experience, in large part because of the profound stories I received.

I readily admit that preparing for today’s debate was an eye-opening experience, in large part because of the profoundly tragic and painful stories I received from constituents, but also because I learned that research into such a deadly disease received just 1.5%, or £7.7 million, of the £498 million national spend for cancer in 2014, and just 1% of the overall national spend since 2002. The charity Brain Tumour Research estimates that, at the current rate of national spending, it could take another 100 years to find a cure. How many more lives will be tragically cut short and how many more families bereaved during that period? The answer is not one we should countenance, so I have no hesitation in joining the e-petition signatories in calling for the Government to show leadership and ensure that brain tumours are treated as seriously as other cancers and that more resources are provided.

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6.27 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing the debate, which, as we have seen, is important. Like other hon. Members in the Chamber, I lost a good friend to brain cancer. She was aged just 41, and it is no consolation to Joy’s parents or husband, or indeed to her good friends, that she had 30 years more life than Danny Green, who was spoken of so passionately by my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris). Anyone who has read the book by Danny’s parents, Chris and Lisa Green, cannot fail to be moved by their story.

A cancer diagnosis of any type is not news that anyone wants to hear, but brain cancer affects those under 40 disproportionately, and funding must be increased. The arguments for extra funding have been rehearsed many times: symptom recognition, early diagnosis, more investment in research, targeted treatment—they all take funding. However, as we have heard, it is also partly the responsibility of the research institutes to make their bids for funding in this important area. One problem is that it is not recognised that funding is there. We need to change that, and today’s debate will help. I hope that raising the profile of the need for funding for research on brain tumours, through the petition and today’s debate, will trigger more funding requests.
I have mentioned before in debates, and I am sure this will not be the last time I do so, that we must break down the silos that exist not only in the NHS and social care, but in research departments. It is important to consider the long-term cost to individuals and to the health service and social care if we do not invest in research. I request that the Minister look at the health economics to see what we can do and how much more money we can invest, because that will save so much more long term. The long term is important with regard to individuals and the cost of supporting them, because the nature of the treatment and the site of the cancer mean that many are left with lifelong disabilities and need a tremendous amount of support. Some of that support is offered by our amazing hospice movement, such as Treetops in my constituency, which provides incredible hospice care.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister outlined last week, spending on cancer research has gone up, but today the question is how that is distributed. I ask the Minister to do whatever he can to ensure that brain cancer gets its fair share of that increased spending and that it moves up the agenda, so that there is more investment in the research and development of new drugs and new ways of treating these people, who are predominantly young people with their lives ahead of them.

6.31 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and a privilege to be able to contribute to the debate on the Petitions Committee report. I commend the Committee for its work and for the interest it has generated in the debate. I hope that that interest demonstrates to the Government what a vital issue this is for many people across the UK, and I sincerely hope the Minister will take away the points made today and consider what more can be done to fund research into brain tumours.

I have to admit I was taken aback by how many emails I received on the issue, asking me to attend the debate. It was eye-opening to learn how many people in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine have been affected by brain tumours, which I knew little about, and after listening to the debate I realise that I still have a lot more to learn. I am incredibly grateful to those who wrote to me and took the time to share their stories and experiences of brain tumours. It would take much longer than four minutes to share all those stories, but I will briefly talk about two of them.

The first story is that of Carolyn Toshney, who was the first person to raise the issue of brain tumours with me. After returning from a skiing holiday in 2009, her now-husband Mark collapsed at work and had a number of seizures. After initially being treated for meningitis, it was discovered that Mark had a brain tumour. He then underwent surgery to remove 90% of the tumour, which was initially thought to not be cancerous. Unfortunately, a few weeks later, it was confirmed that the tumour was cancerous, and Mark underwent months of chemotherapy.

Since Mark’s diagnosis, Carolyn has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of, and funds for, brain tumour charities, including by working with the Friends of the Neuro Ward AR1 to help raise funds for the refurbishment of the neuro-ward at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary; I share the frustrations expressed by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about the ongoing delays to that. Carolyn also made a valuable contribution to the work of the Petitions Committee’s report.

Secondly, I will mention the situation of other of my constituents, who are parents. They shared the story of their young son who was diagnosed with a brain tumour at the age of four, just before starting primary school. Their son recently celebrated his fifth birthday in intensive care, unaware that it was his birthday, as he is still undergoing treatment. His story is incredibly moving and demonstrates how brain tumours can affect anyone, whatever their age, health or any other factor. Brain tumours do not discriminate. I want to share what they wrote to me:

“We don’t know what the future holds for our little boy, but we do know that we want to help change the future for other children like our son.”

As has been mentioned, for illnesses such as brain cancer, achieving accurate and early diagnosis is often the biggest barrier to effective treatment, which is why I welcome, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) mentioned, the Scottish Government’s new cancer strategy, which allocates an extra £10 million to support swift access to diagnostics for people with suspected cancer. The Petitions Committee report highlighted how early diagnosis could improve the opportunities for research, because it would increase the availability of tissue samples from earlier stages of the disease, and enable a larger number of brain tumour patients to take part in clinical trials.

I once again congratulate the Petitions Committee on the report, and thank everyone who contributed and shared their experiences. I hope the Minister will listen carefully to what has been said today and act accordingly.

6.34 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I add my congratulations to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), on the Committee’s excellent report, and to every Member on today’s thoughtful debate. I pay particular tribute to colleagues who spoke movingly about their own experiences or those of people close to them.

I will briefly mention one of my own constituents, but first echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) about Sacha Langton-Gilks. It is clear that someone is a dedicated and doughty campaigner when they not only attend the surgeries of their own Member of Parliament, but pitch up at those of other Members. Sacha came to see me when I was a new MP—bringing with her the legal requirement, one of my constituents, who introduced her—and spoke incredibly movingly about her son, David. She also brought with her the HeadSmart cards and emphasised the importance of early diagnosis and the HeadSmart campaign, which seeks to bring awareness to schools, doctors and, particularly, parents. As a result of that meeting, I was able to introduce her to the leader of Hampshire County Council, who agreed for those cards to be distributed in Hampshire schools. Those cards are incredibly informative, outlining symptoms in an age-specific way and, above all, not provoking
alarm; they just educate people. It is important that we increase awareness of brain tumours without instilling fear in people.

**Rebecca Harris:** I, too, commend the HeadSmart cards, but does my hon. Friend agree that unless the medical profession is more aware of brain tumours we will run into the problem, as we have time and again, that it overlooks parents’ instincts in such cases?

**Caroline Nokes:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work as chair of the APPG, and I will highlight exactly that situation with the case of a constituent. Brain tumours are not as rare as we might think; they are the biggest cancer killer of children. That is why I argue that research and knowledge are critical.

I received an incredibly moving letter from my constituents, Charlotte Swithenbank and James Butler, the parents of Alfie, who is not yet two years old and has been fighting his cancer for more than a year. As in many cases, Alfie was not initially diagnosed. It was not until his seventh trip to the doctor in just two weeks that he was referred to Southampton general hospital. Within 36 hours of admission, he was diagnosed with a grade 3 infant ependymoma, and he has since had more than 24 hours of surgery. He has also had chemotherapy.

**Simon Hoare:** Does my hon. Friend agree that there may be a correlation between a perception that brain cancers and brain tumours are somehow lower down the pecking order and the fact that GPs are less inclined to refer? They do not necessarily see them as part of the great initiatives of the Department.

**Caroline Nokes:** To be brutally honest, I do not know, but I agree with the chair of the APPG that it is critical that the medical community be incredibly aware of such cancers and make referrals as quickly as possible.

Alfie has been for proton beam therapy in the USA and has lived in hospital for more than five and a half months of his short life. He is scheduled to have his MRI today, which is why his parents are not here; I am sure that they will catch up with the debate later. That MRI will, we hope, establish whether Alfie has gone into remission. We want that news to be positive, but as his mother, Charlotte, says, even if Alfie is now in remission, given the type of tumour he has, there is a 50% chance that it will return within seven years. As a family, they will live in fear even if he has gone into remission.

Charlotte also says that early diagnosis is key. It was her persistence in going back to the GP time and again, and refusing to accept that it was just an ear infection, that meant that Alfie’s diagnosis, in comparison with many, was relatively quick. That got him referred to an excellent children’s unit, which has helped him to have a fighting chance.

Charlotte has sought to convey to me how urgent this issue is. Unlike other cancers, the incidence of brain tumours is rising and the improvements in outcome that we have seen in other cancers have not been matched in brain cancers. In Southampton, we are incredibly lucky to have the Cancer Research UK unit located adjacent to the general hospital. MPs are invited there every year to hear about the work it does and to see graphs that show that, for the majority of cancers, treatment rates are more successful and incidence is going down. However, for brain tumours, those are going in the other direction; the cures have not been as forthcoming as for other cancers.

We are all here today to convey the message to the Minister that we want more investment in research in this field, so that more parents do not have to go through what Charlotte and James are going through, and more children like Alfie have the best possible chance of a positive outcome.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Buck. Along with others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on introducing this debate. Maria Lester should also be congratulated on raising this issue; I do not wish to state the obvious, but without her petition there would have been no debate here today, so we would not have had the opportunity to share many personal stories and to raise this important issue with the Minister. It has also been an opportunity for me personally to learn more about this subject. As a newer Member of Parliament, I am still struck by how often constituents come to us and share their very personal experiences and stories with us; it is often very moving and very touching.

An earlier speech touched on people’s ignorance of this subject matter. In doing research for today’s debate and in sitting here listening, I, for one, have learned an awful lot—and I am sure I have an awful lot more to learn. As we heard today, the Petitions Committee released its report on funding for research in March. That report called for more investment in research into brain tumours and revealed the distress of many sufferers and their families whose lives have been devastatingly affected. It also helpfully explored the reasons behind the historical underfunding of research under successive Governments. I was quite shocked to read that brain tumours are the ninth most common cancer in the UK and they kill more children and adults under 40 than any other cancer—yet, while the incidence is increasing, there has been little extra allocated to research. That is one reason today’s debate is so important.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** My hon. Friend makes powerful points. While I congratulate my constituent, Peter Jordan, on his efforts—he recently completed the Plymouth half marathon to raise funds for this cause—does she agree that, given the figures she has mentioned, what we need to see is real commitment from the Government to funding research?

**Wendy Morton:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. Yes, I do hope that the Government are listening today. We must continue to raise this matter. As a local MP, I recently read a heartbreaking email from a grandmother about her grandson. I then received an email from a mother, telling me about her son. At that point, it hit home that the grandmother’s grandson was the mother’s son. It highlighted to me that it is not just sons, daughters or grandchildren who are affected, but cousins, aunts, friends and colleagues; it extends way beyond the immediate family. Those emails
compelled me to come along today and speak in this debate. The young boy sadly passed away, aged just 14, after surgery, chemo and radiotherapy, seven years after being diagnosed with a high-grade tumour. I cannot imagine how that family must have felt. Sadly, as we have heard from the many examples shared with us today, that family is not alone.

Charities, clinicians and scientists do amazing work. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke about people who raise money through charities, doing sponsored runs, marathons and all manner of things for causes that are very close to their hearts. Yet, although technological advances help, brain tumours remain very difficult to treat and continue to take many, many lives each year—too many lives. I conclude simply by saying that I am looking forward to the Minister’s response, especially on how to raise awareness, how to improve research and, ultimately, how to improve the outcome for patients and their families.

6.44 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Last Friday, I had the very great privilege of spending quite a long time with Peter Realf, who is here today with his family, at the University of Wolverhampton’s brain tumour research centre in my constituency. We discussed a range of things related to brain tumours with Professor John Darling and Professor Tracy Warr, who gave evidence to the Petitions Committee.

I want to make a couple of brief points to remind the Minister that money spent on generic cancer research—is important though that research is—is often not applicable to brain tumour research. One cannot say that 3% of cancers are brain tumours and therefore 3% of the generic cancer research funding can be attributed to brain tumour research. There are about 120 different types of brain tumours. As Professor Warr herself pointed out to the Committee, that generic research is not applicable to many of the brain tumour situations. I repeat what she said to the Committee—it is quoted in paragraph 53 of the report:

“It is a very complex disease and a lot of the general non-site specific translational work from other tumours cannot be applied to brain tumours”.

Also, on the same page of the report, in paragraph 55—this has been mentioned earlier in the debate but it bears repeating—the actual amount, as far as one can tell, that is spent on brain tumour research in the United Kingdom at the moment appears to be in the order of £2.2 million.

I asked Professors John Darling and Tracy Warr how big the brain tumour research community—for want of a better word—is in the UK and they said that it is in the order of 100 people—very specialist people. I asked them what the chances are of scaling up if, as we hope, we get a considerable increase in research funding from the Government as a result of pressure from both sides of the House. It is all very well the Government saying they are going to increase funding for brain tumour research—as I hope they will—but if the researchers are not there to do it, we cannot scale up in a short time; it is very complex work.

The professors told me and Peter Realf that we could scale up if, for example, the funding were doubled. Some have suggested that it should go up by £35 million, but if it is £2.2 million now and that were to double, we could scale up. The brain tumour research centre at the University of Wolverhampton—a national centre of excellence that does this work—is losing doctoral and post-doctoral students to other fields, such as that related to leukaemia, or to places such as Chicago, because the positions are not there for them in the UK.

I ask the Minister to please consider this: we can scale up, we do have the skills there and we can double the research funding. It will cost about £2 million to £2.5 million a year to double the research funding—please do that.

6.48 pm

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): I am humbled to speak after hearing so many moving personal stories. I am here because of Skye. Skye was five when he tragically died in August 2014, not from the medulloblastoma that he was diagnosed with but from the severe side effects of his treatment—the Milan protocol. We now know that a number of other children also developed similar side effects, and the Milan protocol has now been withdrawn. Skye’s mother, Sally, is here in the Gallery today and since his death his family have shown extraordinary courage, raising awareness of, and funding for, childhood brain tumours and setting up the charity Blue Sky Thinking to support research so that all children diagnosed with brain tumours have a better chance of survival. However, Skye’s story illustrates that, although much is working in childhood cancer treatment, some key areas are in need of urgent improvement.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): As the hon. Lady knows, I lost my dear wife, Val, to secondary tumours and it is a year to the day since she started to have palliative care. I very much share what the hon. Lady said about Skye’s case. Does she agree that, more generally, there is a cruel paradox? Progress is being made in treating other cancers but, because of the blood-brain barrier, that increases the number of people who survive to get a brain tumour. That is a further compelling argument for more research.

Nicola Blackwood: The right hon. Gentleman, and friend, has made an important point and I hope the Minister will respond to it. However, we should note at this stage that the overall story of childhood cancer over the last 30 years is positive. Eight in 10 children with cancer survive five years or more, compared with just three in 10 during the 1960s. We should congratulate the Government on that because it is clear that the work and funding we put into fighting cancer is money well spent. As we have heard, unlike most cancers, brain tumours are on the rise and research is underfunded, and because the money spent on cancer is effective, we must put that right.

I want to focus on childhood cancers, for obvious reasons. Despite causing more than a third of childhood cancer deaths, brain tumours receive only 6% of childhood cancer funding. Childhood cancers account for less than 1% of cancer diagnoses in the UK and of that 700 children are diagnosed with a brain tumour every year. It is the most common form of cancer affecting children and the most lethal, killing 160 children every year.

We must consider childhood cancer funding in its own right because children’s cancers are biologically very different from adult cancers and to treat them
effectively requires specifically tailored research and treatment. The effect of the funding shortage, ethical challenges and small cohorts mean that 50% of childhood cancers are part of a clinical trial and the remainder are treated using standard treatment guidelines such as the Milan protocol. There are risks with that approach.

As we have heard, cancer treatment is a brutal regime and can cause long-term disability. That is particularly true of childhood brain tumour survivors, 60% of whom are left with life-altering disability. In a few cases like Skye’s, these effects can be fatal.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is making some powerful points, as other speakers have. Investment in this area is vital. The costs of caring for those lifelong disabilities as well as preventing deaths are why the Government should invest in this area—invest to save money in the long run.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This is not a subsidy; it is an investment that will reap a return.

Currently, there is no formal infrastructure to collect and share data about standard treatment guidelines. Consultants working incredibly hard to save the lives of young patients struggle with their inability quickly to access information about the potential adverse effects of very tough treatment regimes. In all my correspondence about this with NHS England and others, the response is, “We’re trying, but it’s very difficult.” That is not good enough because all life-saving cancer innovations are difficult and, given the stakes, I simply cannot accept that the problem is insoluble. The architecture for collecting the data is in place, but the lack of formal data collection requirements and a single responsible body can have devastating consequences.

Currently, the National Cancer Registration Service and Public Health England are developing a pilot to improve data gathering and I welcome that, but it seems that it will be retrospective. It may yield research benefits, but it falls short of the real-time data necessary to guide clinicians. When Skye’s consultant noted that he was deteriorating fast, she could not easily find out whether any other children on the Milan protocol had experienced the same side effects and she was reduced to phoning colleagues ad hoc to ask their opinion one by one as Skye got worse. In the end, it was too late.

In so many ways, we are making tremendous strides in the UK in tackling cancer, including childhood cancer, but the absence of monitoring the adverse effects of standard treatment for childhood cancer can lead to lifelong disability and death. In an ideal world, all childhood cancers would be the subject of a full clinical trial, but we must recognise the challenges associated with research into childhood cancers where cohorts of rarer cancers can be incredibly small and ethical issues are more complex, making it difficult to recruit participants. This means that even with increased funding, which is clearly essential, some childhood cancers will have to be treated through standard treatment protocols.

I hope the Minister—I believe he is a man of action—will listen to the arguments that all of us here have made today about funding concerns and take action to rectify data gathering and standard treatment protocols. If those adverse effects are properly collected, recorded and shared, we may be able to avoid more cases like Skye’s and to increase survival rates of childhood cancers even more.

6.55 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Ms Buck; it is incredible to see the Chamber so full. I pay tribute to the Committee and to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her incredible opening speech. As many hon. Members know, I am a breast cancer surgeon, so I have worked in a field that has seen a transformation since the ’70s. When I was a student, half our patients would survive, whereas now, about 85% of our patients survive. We have been the recipients of the benefit of research, but what we are talking about today is an area that seems just to have been forgotten.

Although people are talking about this being a rare cancer, we are still talking about 10,500 cases a year, the majority of which are not in young people. They will be in older people. The biggest impact is in those under 40, where it is the biggest killer. We have heard that only 20% will survive five years, but what is even scarier is that only 40% will survive one year. That means that the family have very little time to come to grips with the situation or even to get their head around what is happening to them. It is therefore important that as well as research, which is the topic of this debate, we look at the service that we provide.

I hope that this debate will raise awareness not just among parents, who obviously have been going to their GP, but among GPs. Doctors need to see HeadSmart cards, or go to lectures or be updated. They also need to feel enabled to refer someone to a specialist or to refer them for a scan, because we are hearing that, when things start to get more dramatic and someone gives in and goes to A&E, they are being diagnosed. Can we not move that out of A&E? The survival rates for people diagnosed in that way are much lower, yet 53% of those under 40 will be diagnosed in that fashion.

As well as there being a poor survival rate, 60% of younger people will be left with significant disability. For one third, there will be an impact on their personality. For a half, there will be an impact on memory. A quarter will lose cognitive function or have sensory loss. That means that this is not only about those who have lost life, but about those who have lost quality of life, for whatever life they have.

This is not just an illness of the child or adult with brain cancer, or brain tumours. As we have heard, it is a disease of the whole family and everyone who is connected with it. That is why support is important. In my constituency, there is Malcolm Sargent House, which is a hospice to support children and families with cancer—CLIC Sargent—and it has contributed to the briefings that many Members received.

We talk about brain cancer and brain tumours, but actually, we should say “brain tumours”, because although in other parts of the body, as with breast, we talk about “benign” and “malignant”, and we are delighted to get a benign diagnosis, that is not the case in the brain, because it is where we live. Therefore, even removing a benign lesion can have a huge impact on the person.
That is where early diagnosis is important because the bigger it is, the more damage there will be with surgery; which is the key treatment for these patients.

We have heard about the difficulty of chemotherapy. The hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned the blood-brain barrier. That is simply a protective mechanism of the brain to stop the poison that is knocking around in the body from getting in there, but it means that the big molecules, which chemotherapy often are, simply cannot cross the blood-brain barrier.

The right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) mentioned his wife developing secondary brain cancer. We see this in breast cancer now; we are so good at preventing liver and lung metastasis, the first sign of trouble can be someone presenting with brain metastasis. That is not even included within the type of patients we are talking about today. Those patients, however, do gain in the same way from increased knowledge about managing cancer or lesions in the brain.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) mentioned, since 2011 in Glasgow, there has been a large biobank at the Institute of Neurological Sciences, which is in the same campus as the New South Glasgow Hospitals. Many centres have biobanks. What is different about this one is that it is willing to provide tissue not just UK-wide, but internationally. Perhaps other UK biobanks could think about trying to receive and share samples with areas of the country that have no chance of having their own biobank. We read that only 30% of patients are able to donate a sample but that 90% would like to do so.

As others have recognised, this is not one disease. There are multiple sub-types, and there is a difference between childhood brain tumours and adult brain tumours, which means that, to have any meaningful research, we need to gather those small numbers together—that is not UK-wide but Europe-wide and internationally. One problem that has been mentioned is diffuse pontine glioma, which accounts for 80% of such deaths among young children. There is no treatment and no drugs; there is not even a trial. Part of what we need to do is not just funding but organisation. Representations about brain tumours need to be made on bodies, such as the Medical Research Council, that make decisions about funding.

The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned breaking down the silos. In Glasgow, the Glasgow University brain tumour research fund not only brings in the ideas and contributions of front-line workers but is working with the tissue banks and biobanks to try to identify markers that might give us a prognosis or identify sensitivities to treatment. The institute is also considering the development of using chemotherapy and radiotherapy at the same time and of using MRI to plan that radiotherapy, because radiotherapy has an impact on people’s brain and cognitive functions thereafter.

Brain tumour patients have not had the chances that we would like to see for other cancers. We have heard about many charitable groups, and I pay tribute to my constituent Amy, whose father died at 65 of glioblastoma. She set up the Small But Mighty fund, which is simply getting friends together to run, cook, bake or do whatever to raise money for brain tumour research. The country is covered with people who have turned tragedy into something positive, but the Government are giving less money than Cancer Research UK to tackle brain tumours—£7.7 million against £9 million—which is not how it should be. Charities should be topping up and giving us wider or more innovative corners to consider, but the foundation stone needs to be Government research.

We have seen a change in mortality rates for cancers across the country, with a drop of 11%—I work in a speciality that has seen that drop. When we invest in better research, we will also have to commit to using the drugs or treatments that are developed. How often do we talk in this Chamber about the difficulty of accessing drugs for rare diseases? I call on the Minister to fund research and to remember that, when the research comes to fruition, we need to commit to using it. Other cancers have benefited, it is about time that brain tumours do, too.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I also pay tribute to the work of the pensions committee—[Interruption]. Sorry, the Petitions Committee, not the pensions committee, and particularly its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones).

I have pensions on the brain because the last time we both attended a Petitions Committee debate in Westminster Hall we discussed the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. I hope she forgives me.

By my count, we have had 31 contributions to this debate, which shows that there is a large degree of unanimity on this issue, and it shows the House of Commons at its best. Our constituents have recognised that there is an issue—I pay tribute to the petitioners: not just those who organised the petition, but the many constituents who signed the petition and who have lobbied us—and we have come here today to raise some important issues on their behalf.

I thank all hon. Members for their insightful and moving contributions this evening. I particularly commend the work of the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, who was obviously leading on these issues for some time before the debate. Like others, I congratulate Maria Lester and her family on the success of this e-petition. I think that is the reason why the Petitions Committee was established: so that we could delve in some detail into the issues that concern people outside the House and, in the case of this debate, those such as Maria Lester and all the other supporters who have come.

I thank Brain Tumour Research for its support, not just of the petition but of us as Members of Parliament. It has helped us to understand better some of the issues relating to brain tumours. The charity and its network of passionate supporters have been leading advocates in this area, and the work it has done in founding and supporting centres of excellence for the study of brain tumours has been quite remarkable.

As we have heard, in the last 40 years Britain has pioneered some of the most remarkable research into cancer. Our scientific research capability is the envy of the world and is the engine that drives the fifth largest economy in the world. Investigation of prostate cancer has seen significant improvement, with many drugs coming from Cancer Research UK, while the progress on breast cancer treatments, such as the UK-produced
[Andrew Gwynne]

tamoxifen, has also seen fantastic improvements in survival rates. Those are just two examples of what well-funded research can do, and we can clearly see the benefits of that in survival rates. Over the last 40 years, British cancer survival rates have doubled, meaning that 50% of people diagnosed with cancer now survive for at least 10 years. That improvement can be traced to each pound spent on research. The money funds the years of lab work and the clinical trials that are essential for producing new treatments.

However, despite the undoubted success, some patients, tragically, have been left behind—in particular, many of the 16,000 patients who are diagnosed with a brain tumour every year. The five-year survival rate for brain tumour patients is under 20%. It is not widely known that brain tumours are the largest cancer killer of children and adults under the age of 40. Hon. Members have referred to that umpteen times in the course of the debate, but a lot of work still has to be done with the general public to raise awareness of just how serious this issue is. Those statistics are even more shocking when compared with the improvements in survival rates for other cancers.

We know that research better to understand cancers and find new treatments is the way to improve survival. That makes it even more shocking that brain tumours, which account for 3% of all cancer deaths in the UK, have received just 1% of national cancer research funding.

The Petitions Committee report, which we have been debating, found that brain tumour patients and their families have been consistently let down by a lack of research. That compounds the pain and suffering that these vicious diseases already cause.

The Government have a responsibility to lead research and ensure that every patient, regardless of disease, age or background, has the chance to beat their cancer and live a full life. The Government can be an extraordinary instrument for good and should be at the forefront of shaping the future of science and medicine. The current level of research into brain tumours is a stain on what in general is one of the UK’s greatest strengths. It is essential that the Government make research into brain tumours much more of a priority than it is. We have heard that from across the House today.

The Petitions Committee report makes a series of recommendations that would undoubtedly make a phenomenal difference to the lives of thousands across the United Kingdom. The report calls for the Government to support young scientists who wish to pursue a career in brain tumour research. It calls for the removal of red tape and a clear statement on how usage of off-patent drugs can be widened. Those are excellent ideas that will make a significant difference. The recommendations can be supported by the creation of a national register of all current research to track all grants and current work, which will help to prevent duplication and increase the transparency of research taking place in the UK. I urge the Government and the Minister to accept the recommendations.

Before I finish, I want to raise two particularly pertinent points from the report. First, in order for the survival rate of brain tumour patients to catch up with other cancers, the Government must begin to prioritise research into cancers with lower survival rates and take into account the historical improvement in treatments. That is essential if we are to ensure that research is targeting the diseases and patients with the greatest need and the areas where the money can make the biggest impact.

Secondly, the Government must dedicate a consistent amount of money, far above the current level, to research into brain tumours. The charity Brain Tumour Research, which, as I have mentioned, champions research across the country, has estimated that between £30 million and £35 million a year over 10 years is needed to make a significant impact on brain tumour treatment. The Government must consider committing to a similar level of funding.

I hope that the Minister, whom I greatly respect, takes on board many of the points made not just by me, but by other right hon. and hon. Members from across the Chamber in this debate and in the excellent Petitions Committee report. It is the Committee’s first report, and undoubtedly not its last. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North will continue to be a fastidious and assiduous campaigner on behalf of petitioners who raise issues that have not received enough attention in Parliament. I say to her that brain tumour research funding was an excellent choice for the Committee’s first report. We have had unanimity across the House today. It is now time for the Government to act.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): I thank you, Ms Buck, and also your predecessor this afternoon, Sir Edward Leigh, for your excellent chairing of this debate. It has been a pleasure to serve under the leadership of both of you.

I echo many of the points made, not least those just made by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne): today we have seen the House of Commons at its best, with strong cross-party support for those who put us here and who expect us to listen to them and work for them. I congratulate the Petitions Committee. One does not get to the Front Bench by rebelling against the Government very often, but I am proud that one of my first acts on arriving here as an MP was to vote for more Back-Bench powers, and I think that this is a great initiative. To see direct democracy in action, with the public petitioning the Government and bringing debates like this one, is—although challenging for us—a great thing.

I thank the Speaker for his support for the cause. I recently joined him at the Speaker’s Palace at a reception for Brain Tumour Research. He has quietly done a lot of work behind the scenes in support of that and other medical issues. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and thank her not just for her excellent speech, which framed and kicked off this debate, but for all the work she has been doing behind the scenes. Equally, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) has done extraordinary work behind the scenes to bring the subject to fruition.

It would be odious to pick out individual Members, but we have had some wonderful speeches. Having said that, I will mention my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who has spoken powerfully here and elsewhere. For those who are not aware, he collapsed with a tumour, which was luckily diagnosed quickly. It is a sign that Members of Parliament experience...
the things that we are sent here to deal with. The right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) also spoke powerfully about his experience of diagnosis in his family, as did the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). Disease does not respect party boundaries, and nor should we in tackling the issues that it throws up.

I want to mention Maria Lester, whose extraordinary campaigning work has fuelled much of the campaign and still fires behind the scenes, driving it with personal passion, energy and experience, as well as all the charities that have done and continue to do so much. Of course there is Cancer Research UK, but as is so often the case in my work, I see the work of the small charities, which survive on so little—on the contributions of patients and their loved ones, and on voluntary work: Brain Tumour Research, the Brain Tumour Charity, Marie Curie, the HeadSmart campaign, CLIC Sargent and Children With Cancer.

Most of all, I want to pay tribute to the patients and their families and loved ones whose experiences and whose pain drive this campaign and this issue. It is my great privilege as the Minister to see that across different disease areas, and today in the debate, and in your work, you are lifting a torch and joining a magnificent history of people who, through their suffering of disease, insist on our doing better and who drive campaigns and raise awareness, leading to increased funding. On behalf of all the right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken on your behalf, I want to say that you have spoken very clearly here today and I have heard you. As you know, Ms Buck—some people in the Public Gallery may not—Westminster Hall is often a magnificent forum for raising in the House issues of, shall we say, marginal interest in the House: important issues that do not command widespread support. Today we have seen this Chamber and the Public Gallery packed, and phenomenal interest online as well.

As the Minister for medical research, I know that what drives most patients when they experience a diagnosis is the knowledge—the reassurance—that their disease, their suffering and, in many cases, their death, will not be in vain. What people want is to know that their suffering will do some good, and through our extraordinary research and science infrastructure we are so often able to deliver on that promise. Most of the people I speak to say, “I just want to make sure that through my pain and suffering you are able to help prevent someone else’s; and if my experience of disease helps you to do that, I will have done some good.” I think that is the request that sits deeply underneath what has been said this afternoon.

There are many issues. There are issues to do with awareness, with research funding—clearly—with diagnosis and the care pathway, with treatment, whether surgery, chemo or radiotherapy, and with quality of life and aftercare. There is also a complex range of issues to do with the research, development, procurement and reimbursement pathway, with which I am dealing in a number of the reforms I am leading as Minister for Life Sciences.

It is true that there is no simple solution. It is true that there are lots of competing claims, believe me, on every pound that we spend. It is true that we all have responsibility. I worked in biomedical research for 15 years and none of the companies I ever worked with got anywhere close to working out how we get drugs over the blood-brain barrier. The brain is an extraordinary organ that sits in a privileged place in the body, and that makes it a difficult organ to treat and diagnose. In many ways, it is the last frontier of the extraordinary biomedical revolution we are living through. We have got to the point where we can pretty much take a heart out, strip it apart, replace most of the parts, put it back in and treat disease with an exquisite range of chemicals, but we are not at that stage yet with the brain.

It is equally true that we do not run the allocation of science and research spending on the basis of political lobbying—nor should we. We allocate the funding on the basis of applications, clinical excellence, need and academic excellence. But I believe it is also true that we are sent to this place to reflect the priorities of the people who put us here, and the debate has illustrated, in a loud, civilised, cross-party and non-partisan way, that there is an extraordinary call from people for the disease to be given higher priority. I believe that democracy is about people influencing us. I did not knock on 15,000 doors to come here and say, “We’re doing enough. We’re doing something, and that’s enough.” We need to do more, so I will today announce a package of measures that I hope will go some way to address the points that have been made.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Is not part of the problem that funding has been allocated on the basis of incidence—how often people get brain tumours—rather than on the basis of impact, as in the deaths caused and the life years lost?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady, with whom I work closely on a number of issues, makes an excellent point. There are a number of criteria that drive how funding is allocated, and that is one of the things we ought to look at. If I can get to the end of my speech, I will make some recommendations about how we might pick that up and look at it.

I want to announce today that the Government accept that we need to do more in this space, committing to a number of specific actions that reflect the concerns that have been raised, both here and in the Petitions Committee and the all-party group report. I suggest that I should convene in the Department of Health a task and finish group to examine a number of the issues that have been raised here today, and to ask a question. I do not believe that as a Government we are not doing enough. We have put £0.7 billion a year into the Medical Research Council, to do the deep science on the medical frontier. We have put £1 billion a year—ring-fenced—into the National Institute for Health Research’s clinical infrastructure. We are funding the genomics programme and putting £4 billion into digital health and the informatics that go around it. The question we should ask is: surely there is more we can do to help to make that resource and that infrastructure support this particular disease area? I will say a little more about why I think that case has been made and what we might do about it.

I will not repeat all the numbers—hon. Members have heard them—but about 4,000 brain cancer cases are diagnosed each year in this country, resulting in about 3,500 deaths a year. We all know that brain tumours are very complicated—there are about 130 different types of them—and the truth is that we do not know what
causes most of these cancers. Old age is a risk factor, but as many hon. Members have said with great passion today, it is those children who are diagnosed who drive us. Four-hundred children a year are diagnosed, and we just do not understand or know exactly what is driving it. There are various hypotheses around genetic conditions and some exposures.

Unlike for most other cancers, brain cancer mortality rates have increased. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, in the last 30 years the mortality rate for brain cancer has increased by 15% for men and almost 10% for women. Improvements in diagnostics and treatments have helped to improve short-term survival in adults, with around 49% of people diagnosed with brain cancer now surviving for at least a year, compared with around 25% 30 years ago. Long-term survival has also improved, with around 20% of people now surviving for five years or more, compared with around 10% 30 years ago. We have also recently seen an increase of more than 25% in GP referrals for magnetic resonance imaging for potential brain tumours, from about 30,000 to 50,000. Veterans of these issues will know that those are relatively small numbers over quite a long period, compared with the explosive pace of progress in a number of the other disease areas that we often discuss.

A number of Members have talked about early diagnosis, which is clearly absolutely key with this cancer, as with all cancers. Last year, a report by the independent cancer taskforce set out 96 recommendations, broadly covering six strategic priorities, including early diagnosis, and NHS England is working with partners to establish a new cancer programme to implement those recommendations. By the end of this Parliament, everyone referred with a suspected cancer will receive a definitive diagnosis or the all-clear within four weeks.

Jim Shannon rose—

George Freeman: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he is a doughty pursuer of mine.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he set out the funding or help that he can give to universities? He knows I am very keen on that issue. Universities have put forward some very good medical initiatives and some new medications and medicines as well, and Queen’s University Belfast is one of those universities. Can we do more with universities, business and Government? If we can, we can find the cure, which would be a big step forward.

George Freeman: I think we can do more and I welcome this opportunity to praise the role of Queen’s University Belfast in this field; it is a centre of real excellence in cancer science.

The standard treatment by the end of this Parliament will be underpinned by a commitment of an extra £300 million from Government in diagnostics. Last June, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published updated guidance on cancer referrals, which will make it easier for GPs to think about the possibility of cancer much sooner and to refer people for tests more quickly. This guidance includes new recommendations about brain cancer in adults, children and young people.

We are investing substantially in research. That is not to say we are doing enough—I will come to that in a moment—but we are investing £1.7 billion every year in health research. I am delighted that in the last autumn statement my right hon. Friend the Chancellor ring-fenced our investment, despite some difficult public spending pressures. We spend £0.7 billion a year on the MRC and £1 billion a year on the NIHR’s clinical infrastructure across the NHS. Cancer research spend by the NIHR rose by over a third during the last Parliament to around £135 million a year. Most of that investment—around £115 million—is on infrastructure. The model is that industry and charity can then run research projects through that infrastructure—I will come back to that point in a moment. That investment supports translating scientific breakthroughs into benefits for patients.

Spend specifically on brain tumour research cannot currently be separated out from total spend data for the cancer research infrastructure. I can, reassuringly, share with colleagues the information that six of our 11 NIHR biomedical research centres are conducting brain tumour research, and that the NIHR clinical research network had 30 brain tumour research studies that were recruiting patients in 2015-16. The NIHR is also funding research programmes and fellowships. For example, the health technology assessment programme is funding a £1.4 million trial involving patients who have received surgery for atypical meningioma.

The other main Government fund for health is the MRC. Over the five years to 2014-15, the MRC spent £10.9 million on research into brain and pituitary tumours, which spans basic discovery science, translational projects and early clinical trials. Both the NIHR and MRC also fund the Clinical Practice Research Datalink—the CPRD—which shares data for research. Four brain tumour studies have been published using CPRD data.

I want to mention the important role of charities. Those that follow my work will know that I have recently opened the door and made what has been described as a bold, generous and comprehensive offer to the Association of Medical Research Charities to come to the top table in the new landscape of life science research co-ordination that I am putting place. Medical research charities in this country raise £1.4 billion every year for research, from the smallest charities on the high street to CRUK, which has now become a major strategic funder and shaper of cancer policy.

I welcome the work that the 18 major charitable and public funders of cancer research are doing in the UK through the National Cancer Research Institute. Through that work and the work that the NIHR is doing with research councils, increased brain tumour research investment by charities drives increased support by the NIHR. Here is the challenge: our system works on the basis of bids and of accelerated funding. Once funding starts to drive clinical and academic results, that generates more funding, which drives more research. The danger in that model is that initial critical mass can be achieved, things can get squeezed out.

We have invited a number of applications for experimental cancer medicine centre status over this funding period, which are funded by the NIHR and Cancer Research UK. I am delighted to be able to announce that, on behalf of the arm’s-length bodies, NHS England will next month publish an implementation plan for the cancer taskforce strategy, “Achieving world-class...
cancer outcomes”. As part of one of the specific recommendations in that strategy, Public Health England is investigating how we can use new and existing data sources to identify secondary cancers and cancer progression more generally, including for brain tumours.

I hope I have demonstrated that some progress is being made, but as I have said, I do not think that progress being made is a reason not to do more; I think hon. Members have made a powerful case that we should. We formally accept that more needs to be done. The case has been made that we need to look carefully at what we can do. As the report recommends, I will be asking the NIHR to look at publishing a national register that considers how we spend public funds across research of different disease areas and different organs by therapeutic area, not least because it is a powerful way of helping to draw in co-investment from industry and charities. I shall be raising those issues with the MRC and, having recently convened the NIHR Parliament day, suggesting that at next year’s NIHR Parliament day we come back with that register and that breakdown of information.

We should look at issues around earlier diagnosis. I am prepared to announce today that we should specifically include brain cancer in the Genomics England programme, which is dealing with rare diseases and cancers, to make sure that it is properly picked up, and to talk to NICE about the point made about its guidance procedures. To pull all this together, I want to suggest that I should convene a task and finish working group in the Department of Health to touch on other issues that have been raised, including data collection, trials, off-label drugs, research barriers and skills.

I am conscious that I need to leave the sponsor of the debate a few seconds to close, but I hope that colleagues will see in my response that I have tried both to give patients some hope that we are listening and to strike a blow for good democracy, as well as good medical research.

7.29 pm

Helen Jones: In the few seconds available to me I would like to thank all hon. Members who have spoken today, particularly those who were willing to share their individual stories, because that is a terribly difficult thing to do. This debate and the inquiry that we conducted have been a vindication of the Petitions Committee process, and of our decision to take on inquiries into petitions. We have heard some encouraging words from the Minister today; we will look forward to hearing further from him. It is fair to say that we are now on the march; I hope in the future we shall continue with that.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10 (14)).
It is important that we are compassionate. The word “compassion” is mentioned a lot these days, and rightly so. We must have an ambition properly to accept our fair share of unaccompanied children. The Minister was very much leading in relation to the announcement on 28 January. We look forward to hearing further details on the commitment in the coming days. There was a promise to step up efforts to reunite lone children with their families in Europe and the United Kingdom. There was a commitment to bring children who are on their own in conflict zones straight to the United Kingdom to prevent them from making perilous journeys, and there was a promise of more expertise and resources to help to protect child refugees in Europe and the United Kingdom. It is important that we have the right ambition, and I look forward to hearing those details.

As well as the compassion in terms of the length of commitment, I want to look at the breadth and depth of that compassion. We should be in this for the long term. That is an issue for children as they arrive here. I want to see how that looks and what it could look like, to ensure that we meet the concerns that have been expressed, not least by the Children’s Society, to which I pay tribute and which I thank very much. Those concerns formed the basis of my application and that of others to hold this debate. Its recent report, “Not just a temporary fix”, makes the point in the title, highlighting the need for a lasting outcome for unaccompanied children in the UK. This issue can often be missed in debate. These children, who come from some of the most appalling backgrounds and are often traumatised, are at risk of exploitation, not least as they make these journeys. As they come into this country, we need to ensure that we have the right package of support for them.

A point highlighted in the report that I have mentioned is the transition to adulthood. That is unsettling and unpleasant for all children, but particularly for separated children who have fled war and persecution. They have faced exploitation and destitution and have no parent or carer in this country to safeguard their best interests. We need to step in to support them to avoid their being at risk of further exploitation and destitution.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on attracting such support for this very important debate. I am glad that he is talking about long-term stability. Does he share my concern, which I think he was touching on, that we may have arguments about the number of children we welcome into this country, but we need to address the rights of those children when they become adults, particularly if they have been in care? They do not qualify for loans if they want to go on to higher education. They do not qualify for various benefits. They do not qualify for the Staying Put scheme. They do not qualify for housing. They do not qualify for the Staying Put scheme. They do not qualify for various benefits. They do not qualify for loans if they want to go on to higher education. Their vulnerability does not change on the day they become 18, nor the danger they are in if they go back to their country of origin. We need to have a better long-term plan for those children as they progress into adulthood in the safety of this country.

Mr Burrowes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend: he is already talking about a long-term plan for separated children. Undocumented children may well not even make an application for asylum, not least because they are under the cover of being children and have the
[Mr Burrowes]

protection of the state, but as they get close to the age of adulthood, an application needs to be made. Their status becomes insecure and uncertain and they are very much at risk of going through the care system and, sadly, out on to the streets, where they are prone to further exploitation. I will touch on that issue as well.

The support for those vulnerable children who have found their way by so-called irregular means differs from support under the formal resettlement programme. I pay tribute to the Government for the vulnerable persons relocation scheme and the 20,000 commitment. I think that 1,500 people have been resettled. That is part of a package that is not just about numbers. It is a serious package of support involving local authorities and communities. I understand that at the recent meeting in Geneva, attended by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, the British Government were praised as an example of good practice that other countries need to follow for their serious commitment to long-term support for these vulnerable people. That needs to be matched, including for those who arrive by different means. People may not arrive through that formal scheme, but they are no less vulnerable; their concerns and needs are no different. It is important that we do not in effect discriminate against them because of how they arrive.

When a child arrives by means of a formal resettlement programme, they are offered a five-year humanitarian protection visa. The Government have previously responded to concerns about what happens when such children turn 18; the likelihood is that they will be granted indefinite leave to remain. However, undocumented children, particularly those who arrive in the United Kingdom unaccompanied and by irregular means, are granted unaccompanied asylum-seeking child leave. That leave fails to represent the long-term solution that we all want, as it is granted for a period of 30 months or until the child is 17 and a half years old, whichever period is shorter. At that point, whichever comes first, the child is treated as an adult migrant and is not subject to the same protection that they had, but their needs have not suddenly changed dramatically just because an age threshold has been reached or they have reached the end of their UASC leave. We will fail that vulnerable person unless we provide long-term support.

The Children’s Society has found that the widespread granting of UASC leave, with further determination delayed sometimes until just before the child turns 18, does not serve the best interests of children and leaves them open to risk. We need to look carefully at who we are dealing with, because UASC leave often fails to represent a long-term solution, and it leaves young people anxious and uncertain about their future, which will store up problems. Such young people are transitioning to adulthood, and they want to have a say. Any child wants safety, support and a loving home, which continues as they get older—for these children probably even more so, given their background. The Government increasingly do that for care leavers. This is not just something that ends at 18; it is a longer-term commitment. So many of these vulnerable people, wherever they come from, need longer-term support.

We must have a different understanding of children. We should not rely simply on their reaching the high threshold set by refugee conventions and the established legal understanding of “refugee”; we should also recognise the needs of separated children who may not necessarily meet that threshold. Such children are at particular risk. We have seen across Europe that, appallingly, some 10,000 children—we do not know the exact numbers—have gone missing, many sadly into the hands of traffickers and exploitation. Such children are at risk, and they must be treated as such. We must consider how to categorise and support them properly with a child protection status that recognises their inherent at-risk status, which will not end just because they have come to this country and a place of safety. That status continues because of their background and their need for support so that, when they reach the age of 18, or if their ordinary application for asylum fails, they do not run the risk of further destitution and exploitation. It would be an appalling dereliction of our duty if, after we help to provide sanctuary from the risk of exploitation and destitution, they face that same cycle of risk in this country.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I declare an interest as a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation and as a Kent MP. Kent County Council has an overwhelming case load of unaccompanied, vulnerable and needy children for whom to care. Does he agree that not enough local authorities will help out and take those children identified by Kent and that much more co-operation is needed between local authorities?

Mr Burrowes: There is a proper long-term duty that has a disproportionate impact on Kent County Council. A case has been made in previous debates for how we could find a new way of enabling a fair distribution across the country. We recognise that local authorities have been willing to come forward, along with many community and other organisations. Towards the end of my speech I will mention some organisations that want to share the burden with local authorities. Communities want to come alongside to provide long-term support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his commitment to the issue. When unaccompanied children are settled here and a parent is later found, does he agree that they should have the same rights to family reunion as adult refugees? I know that is a controversial subject, but other countries seem to manage it without any fear of abuse. There are fundamental rights to family reunion that should be upheld.

Mr Burrowes: Family reunions are currently prevented by the rules on unaccompanied children, which are not in line with the rules for adults. The position that children cannot sponsor their parents or carers to join them means that they do not have the same rights as adults, which is a particular concern. The Government, considering their own and international legal obligations to protect the best interests of children already in this country, should not be in a position where they are effectively denying a child the right to be reunited with their family and to be safe.

It is important that we consider the situation more broadly, such as the issue of dependency in relation to families. Who is the family? There should be a broader
understanding of dependency. It might not be the father or the mother; it might be a brother. I have visited Calais, and I have seen the appalling conditions at the Dunkirk camp. I spoke to a young person from Afghanistan who was fleeing a war-torn area, and he was desperate to be with his brother—this was when the French police were dispersing people, and he was at risk of being dispersed into the hands of traffickers. We need to find ways of providing safety for such people, and of recognising that his dependent relationship was with his brother. We need to find practical ways of supporting such people.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. It is good to see Members from so many parties here. Does he agree that funding for local authorities should be increased so that they can do the necessary child protection work so that we can speed up the reuniting of children with their parents?

Mr Burrowes: There will be significant financial costs, and I hope that we will see the details of the commitment to relocate more unaccompanied children. The financial costs need to be clear. We need a proper package to be able to make that commitment—the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme included a financial commitment to local authorities—because we must take account of the additional costs of working with highly traumatised, vulnerable children.

In the childcare system, more than 24,000 missing children were reported from January 2012 to December 2013. Given that figure, we need to ensure that the care system is up to speed and fit for purpose so that children who risked going missing on their journey or, indeed, in their own country do not face the same risk of exploitation and destitution in this country. It is important to work with local authorities to find the best long-term solution, and I particularly draw attention to undocumented children who may never apply for asylum. We need to bring those children out into the open to show them that there is a future and a pathway for them, and I hope that we will see the details of the commitment to separated children coming to this country. In his response, will the Minister confirm a link with the offer of long-term fostering support from an excellent fostering charity, Home for Good?

Mr Burrowes: Yes, certainly. I championed child trafficking advocates along with other Members across the House, and we were pleased when they were eventually included in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The scheme has been pilot with mixed results, but it is important to acknowledge that trafficked children have a similar profile to separated children coming to this country. In his response, will the Minister confirm a link with the advocates who help those at risk of being trafficked, as well as their relevance to separated children? If the scheme needs to be expanded, let us hear the details, but the national roll-out must properly include unaccompanied children.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is important to a great number of us. Does he agree that, in this almost impossibly hard policy area, we must be driven by our heart and our head? We must focus on what works in the longer term for these children. We must be driven by evidence-based programmes led by experts, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for a long-term, enduring commitment to some of the most vulnerable families caught up in this tragic conflict. That would be something of which we, as a nation, could be truly proud.

Mr Burrowes: I agree. We need to be guided by the UNHCR on vulnerability and on its assessment of children at risk. It is encouraging that the Government’s approach has focused on vulnerability, and that approach needs to continue for those in the region, in Europe and in this country. That must guide us throughout.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I share with everyone else an admiration for the hon. Gentleman’s securing of this important debate. We know that children of Vietnamese origin are much more likely than not to go missing. Does he agree that there should be a specific focus on that group of children, who are absolutely at risk from exploiters and traffickers, and that, at the moment, we are failing them by not having that focus?

Mr Burrowes: I agree that we need to do that. The right hon. Lady and I are both members of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and I share her concern. Following the passage of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, we need to make sure that we recognise the inherent risk faced by such children and that there is a package available to do more than the current care system to provide help. We must end the uncertainty on the status of those children and ensure that there is a long-term commitment to their protection. Those children in particular are struggling, and there was a debate during our consideration of the Immigration Bill on restrictions on unaccompanied children receiving leaving-care support provisions, such as access to accommodation and subsistence, as well as foster placements, education, training and legal advice. Whether those children are applying for immigration or for asylum, we need to recognise that those needs continue.

Mrs Grant: On the issue of advocacy to which my hon. Friend referred, children are being trafficked younger and younger, facing loneliness and bewilderment. Does he agree that implementing a child advocate scheme similar to the one recently trialled by the Government could bring not only clarity to local authorities but the certainty and continuity of a long-term plan for children?

Mr Burrowes: I agree. We need to do that. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides for the development of a community sponsorship scheme. “To harness the generous offers of support from the UK public by developing a community sponsorship scheme.” That is welcome, and we need to see how it might work, particularly for separated children. For example, Home for Good, a fostering charity, has signed up more than 10,000 UK households willing to provide a home for such children. We need to use that welcome offer of support, which goes beyond what was happening back in September—“I’ll give my house.” It’s a practical offer of long-term fostering support from an excellent organisation. Home for Good, among others, asks the Government to tell us how they will use the resources
offered by charities, faith groups, churches and businesses to support unaccompanied children. I look forward to hearing the debate, particularly if it focuses on a long-term plan for separated children, and I welcome all hon. Members’ contributions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I propose to start the winding-up speeches at about 10.30 or 10.35. A number of Members have indicated that they want to speak, so if Members can restrict their speeches to four to five minutes, everyone should be able to speak.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on presenting his case and giving us all a chance to participate in this debate.

The migrant crisis was undoubtedly one of the defining issues of 2015, and it will undoubtedly be a defining issue this year as well. It is impossible to avoid it, and hard to find a member of the public who does not have an opinion on it, whether we consider the negative consequences seen in Cologne or the positive stories of relocated refugees settling successfully into a new society. It is a major issue that will take some time to resolve. In Belfast and in Northern Ireland, we have had our first refugees, sponsored by the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has encouraged them to relocate and be part of Northern Ireland. Church groups have also gathered around to ensure that that happens.

We have all seen the images of what ISIS or Daesh do: they behead, rape, murder and pillage. It is not hard to understand why any human being would want to get as far away from that as possible. More than 14 million Syrians in the country are in need of help, 7 million of whom are internally displaced, and nearly 5 million have fled abroad, including the hundreds of thousands making their way into Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to be rational and not let our emotions make us lose the run of ourselves. Syrian nationals were the fourth largest group of asylum applicants in the year to September 2015.

We cannot ignore the heart-breaking plight of genuine refugees. In 2015, some 3,043 asylum applications were received from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, 56% more than in 2014 and 141% more than in 2013. More than half of all applications were from Eritrea, Afghanistan and Albania.

I want to underline the plight of Christians fleeing Syria. Some 900,000 Christians have been displaced in Syria, many of them families and children. Although we focus on Syria, it is clear that there is quite a spread of people seeking to come to Europe. We must be careful to do the right thing and have a compassionate approach, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned.

Regardless of our approach, we must ensure that refugees are processed correctly, in order to give genuine refugees the security that they need. It is true that the threat of potential criminal elements or security threats. We have all seen the distressing images from the Mediterranean. The news last night referred to the unscrupulous people in Libya and elsewhere who fill boats full of people, often without regard to safety. They are an obvious threat to people making the perilous and often fatal journey to Europe.

When it comes to children, especially unaccompanied children, we must act. We must be compassionate and do the right thing. The Syria crisis, in addition to the political situation across the middle east and north Africa, has resulted in an ever increasing number of unaccompanied migrant children making their way to Europe. Concerns about such children have been raised, not least after Europol warned that at least 10,000 unaccompanied children have gone missing since entering Europe. We must ask ourselves where those children are, what has happened to them, whether we are concerned and whether we are doing our best to find them.

People will know that I am a Christian and have strong views on these issues. From a compassionate point of view, I would say: where are those children, and what are we doing about them? Our Saviour said: “Suffer the little children to come unto me”.

What are we in this House doing as Christians? What is this House doing as a leader of society to help those children?

Mrs Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a more consistent procedural approach across London boroughs and local authorities would also help to deal with the problem of missing children? Children go missing in this country too.

Jim Shannon: I accept that, and I thank the hon. Lady for outlining the issue clearly. Yes, we should have learned something in our own society about how to deal with and respond to the issue. We need, honestly and consciously, to take it seriously.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that it is important that registration occurs at the point of entry, so that we can track children and ensure that appropriate child protection measures are in place?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree.

At least 3,000 displaced children will be resettled in the UK, but the problem is that the Government initiative to relocate child refugees will not include those already in Europe. It is not the case that the whole of Syria is marching into Europe, although sometimes people listening to the news might think that it is. That is not how it is; let us keep things in perspective and focus on the important issues. The European Commission’s chief spokesman said that 60% of those arriving in the EU as part of the movement were economic migrants rather than refugees. We must empathise with genuine refugees.

I am conscious of time, so I will finish with this comment. We should do what we can do to help. There are screening and security issues to be addressed, but we need to be part of the humanitarian effort, most definitely with regard to children. I can only hope that this debate will put pressure on the Government to reconsider and start helping with the efforts to assist unaccompanied children who are already in Europe. We need to get the right approach, reconsider the current one and be part of the humanitarian effort to help those poor children, who absolutely need and deserve our help.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I will start with a quote that some Members may have heard before. On 14 December 1938, Mr Noel-Baker asked:

"Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that these children in Germany in many cases are in really terrible conditions, without adult protection and without the means of finding food, and is he aware that the machinery of the Home Office for granting visas is so inadequate that the visas cannot be obtained in sufficient quantities to save their lives?"—[Official Report, 14 December 1938; Vol. 342, c. 1976.]

Unfortunately, 78 years on, not a lot has changed. We do not have much time to debate that issue, or indeed to debate what we could most effectively do to help children in the camps surrounding Syria, for instance, because this debate, secured by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), rightly focuses on what we can do for children who are already in the United Kingdom. As a minimum—the hon. Gentleman touched on this—we should provide a five-year humanitarian protection order, in line with those people being relocated under the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme. That approach is needed simply because it provides security for the children and because it also makes the job of local authorities much easier, regarding what they have to plan for in the future for those children.

We also need the Home Office to extend the guardianship pilots for trafficked children to include unaccompanied children. I know that the Children’s Society is keen that the Minister for Immigration provides an update on the child trafficking advocates pilot, as well as clarification of whether he recognises the importance of there being an independent advocate for separated and unaccompanied children, particularly in their transition to adulthood and in providing support with regularising their immigration status before they turn 18. Indeed, there are strong arguments for extending that support beyond 18 to 21, as is the case with care leavers.

The provisions for transfers or disposals need to be addressed very early on. The worst that can happen to a child is that they remain in one place for an extended period only to be moved on much later. Action needs to be taken very soon on where children will be relocated within the UK.

We need effective and improved co-ordination mechanisms. My understanding is that in London, which was mentioned in an intervention earlier, the Greater London Authority is taking responsibility for co-ordinating certain aspects of the arrival of children, but that the mechanisms are not working very effectively. As I understand it, the latest figures suggest that a maximum of 10 children have been distributed through those mechanisms. Clearly, more action needs to be taken at a London level, so that co-ordination is in place and the boroughs can tap into what has been organised.

We also need to ensure that where family ties exist, every effort is made to ensure that family members in the same local authority area can provide support to unaccompanied children where appropriate. As well as improving conditions for the child, that approach has the advantage of reducing the burden on local authorities.

We need to make sure that there is better resourcing for foster carers, and we would like the regional assessment hub model to be explored further, although that is not a call to reduce the scrutiny of foster carers. A national register would also make a substantial contribution, because it would enable foster carers who move from one local authority area to another to remain available to provide foster care. Of course, the need to check things such as the foster carer’s new home would remain; a national register would not deal with such issues.

Some authorities are clearly on the frontline in providing funding—Kent has already been mentioned. The Home Office needs to model scenarios to compensate local authorities that step up and take responsibility for unaccompanied children. The Government also need to identify which authorities are currently overburdened and have to rely heavily on out-of-county options for their own looked-after population before they take on any additional unaccompanied children.

The target advocated by Save the Children and others—including my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who has outlined his blueprint for 3,000 children—is attainable, and it would make a substantial contribution towards dealing at EU level with the 30,000 or so unaccompanied children who are already in the UK. However, we need many of the measures that I and previous speakers have discussed this morning, to ensure that the framework—the support network—is in place before those children can be supported.

Several hon. Members rose—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. If Members can aim to speak for about four minutes, everyone should be able to get in.

10.4 am

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I very much welcome this debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing it.

I imagine that we are all here today because we want Britain to play its part in dealing with the refugee situation and in looking after the unaccompanied children in this country, and across Europe and the middle east. The debate is very much about how we do that and how we ensure that we do it well.

I visited Calais last year—I think it was in October—and clearly I saw awful conditions there. There were very few children; the few children I saw were with their parents. However, we know that there are some unaccompanied children there and that those children who are there are usually in their teens, although some may be younger than that. I have also visited a refugee camp in Turkey, where I saw pretty good conditions—okay, it was a refugee camp that the Turkish Government chose to show visitors. However, I spoke to people there who were living in relatively good conditions, and without exception they wanted to come to Europe all the same.

I also represent a constituency in Kent and as my neighbour—my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), who was here earlier—has already mentioned, we have a large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Kent. It is one of the areas that is feeling the effect of this issue particularly heavily, but we also have experience of how to deal with it well.

In the limited time available to me, I will just make a couple of other points. The first is that in addressing this problem of unaccompanied children, we must
absolutely be compassionate, but we must also avoid being emotional and failing to think through the unintended consequences of whatever choices we make. And we must realise that we are making choices.

In the debate as to whether we should bring 3,000 unaccompanied children over from Europe, for instance, we should be mindful that, although we usually talk about Syrian refugees, half of those unaccompanied children in Europe are Eritrean, and many others are from Afghanistan and Albania, although there will be some Syrian children among them. We need to be conscious that those who are calling for more children to be brought here are calling for children of many nationalities to be helped. That would be one decision, and a different decision from choosing, for instance, to focus our efforts on helping children who are fleeing Syria. I am not saying that the children from other countries do not need help; any unaccompanied child needs some help. I am just saying that there is a decision to be made.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend has, in fact, just answered the question that I was going to ask. Does it make children any less vulnerable or at risk that they are from a country other than Syria? However, she just answered that question, for which I thank her.

Helen Whately: Indeed I did, but I very much appreciate my hon. Friend’s point and thank her for it.

My second point, which is very much in keeping with the tone and focus of this debate, is the importance of doing a really good job by those who come here. The worst thing is to raise hopes among young people—in fact, it is even worse to encourage them to come here—and then to let them down and not do a good job. Having talked to organisations that are active in Kent in looking after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, I know that it is difficult to do a good job. Children need an enormous amount of help, and they really need foster homes; they need to be placed in a family environment, and to be given health, mental health, schooling and all of that.

The particular challenge that we have in Kent is that foster homes are full. We have around 800 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are under 18 and around 400 to 500 care leavers, so we have a huge number of children to look after. We need a national drive to find more foster homes, to ensure that children who come here can be looked after and British children who need foster homes can also be found places in foster homes. There is a limited supply of such homes.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate said that 10,000 foster homes were available through the Homes for Good charity. That sounds like a fantastic supply and there needs to be some way of matching the demand with what appears to be the supply; I hope that the Minister can pick up on that point.

Finally, we need a plan for what happens when these children reach 18, and for care leavers. In Kent, we welcome the extra funding that the Government have provided for under-18s, which has made it more feasible to look after under-18s, but there is a question about care leavers, as they still need extra help, which requires extra money.

The most important thing is that when we bring unaccompanied children here, we do a good job. We must not raise hopes and then dash them; we must do a very good job by those children, so that they have a really good start in life.

Several hon. Members rose—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): If Members take about five minutes, not everyone will get in.

10.9 am

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) because her points about emotion and about our fostering and adoptive care provision are crucial to the debate. Those points need to be focused on, not just by us in the debate but by the Minister, and I hope that he will use the debate and the contributions offered to formulate his policies and plans—I say this with the greatest respect—before Monday. If we are removing emotion from the debate, Parliament should not cajole the Government. If on Monday a vote went against the Government, and Parliament cajoled them into a position that they were either unprepared for or unwilling to engage in, it would be a disaster for unaccompanied children.

I will focus a tad on emotion. I recall that back in the summer I felt that the Government’s position was callous and heartless, and that it lacked the compassion of which we, as a country, should be proud. That was my emotional position at that time and I now accept that it was wrong. It was misplaced. It would have been wrong to resettle vulnerable people in this country without provisions such as homes, schools and GPs. Those things give them the best chance to assimilate, and so too with young unaccompanied children. It would be no justice to those who need the support, help and friendship of this country to bring them here without adequate support mechanisms in place. I hope, therefore, that the Government will take the opportunity not only to formulate their plans but to seek and receive the endorsement of Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, so that we know that what we do has both the helping hand and the endorsement of organisations and NGOs that respect what this country is doing and recognise the contribution that we can make.

We have a proud history in this country, and the important point that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent made is that when we consider today those many thousands of young people elsewhere who need our help it would be remiss of us if we did not also consider those in this country. If we could encourage more families to come forward as prospective adopters or foster carers, that would be a wonderful achievement for us, as a nation. If you take the Scotland and England figures together, there are more than 7,000 children in care homes so the idea that we would bring others to add to their number—and in many cases, their plight—is not something I can support. In building that support and that help, and in opening up the opportunity, I hope that this discussion can be of benefit not only for
those seeking to come to a country of safety and sanctuary but for those who currently live without the true love and support of a family in this country.

I will conclude now, Ms Vaz, to give you some extra time for others. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, not just in his response to the debate but over the coming days and, with any luck, in advance of Monday, about just how best we can get a scheme that we can be proud of and that does justice to those who so much need it.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Robinson. That was excellent, and perhaps other Members could follow the example.

10.13 am

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing the important debate. When he started his speech he made some cracks about needing a long-term plan, and I want to talk about time, because one of the problems with the immigration system is that it does not recognise how important timeliness is in a child’s life. A week, a month or a year in a child’s life, in comparison with an adult’s, is an enormous amount of time. One of the problems is the lack of timely intervention and support for vulnerable children, in France and also when they are in the UK.

In the case of ZAT et ors in the immigration tribunal, the judgment said:

“Insufficient and inappropriate reception conditions for unaccompanied asylum seeking children”—in France—“were considered to impair their effective access to the asylum procedure”.

We also learned that the children in that case were not eligible for legal aid, and that there was an endlessly bureaucratic process for their cases even to begin. I hear about Home Office officials being sent to France to help sort out those things but I do not see the speeding up of individual applications as a result, so that is the first step we should take.

The second step is trying to help local authorities that are acting on the issue. A number of Members have spoken about the situation in Kent. I attended a presentation by Philip Segurola from Kent and, strikingly, in September last year, instead of the usual 20 or so individual unaccompanied children more than 200 arrived there in a single month. We need to support local authorities better to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Beyond that, we know that child advocates work—the mixed results claim about the advocacy trial is spin. The independent University of Bedfordshire analysis of the outcomes of the trial was overwhelmingly positive. It showed that children experienced someone being on their side. That is the most essential thing. With overburdened social workers, children do not have an experience of anyone being on their side in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of asylum seeking, and it is urgent that we ensure that every child at risk of trafficking or who has been trafficked, and also asylum-seeking children, get access to an advocate who can be on their side. Although it is true that some of those children went missing, in almost every case in the trial it was before they were allocated an advocate. A number of the case studies in the Bedfordshire report showed that it was the child advocate who found a child who had gone missing. That is the second area where we need to act urgently.

Thirdly, we need to change a procedure that has existed for decades. When a child applies for asylum, the Home Office does nothing—it does not take action; it does not investigate the claim; it waits until just before the child’s 18th birthday to take any action in relation to the claim. The process was described by the Home Affairs Committee as serving “administrative convenience more than the best interests of children”, and that is right.

I understand that it is difficult for a child to make a compelling case for asylum, but the state has a responsibility, at an early stage, to investigate the nature of the claim because three, four or five years later it is difficult to be able to support such a child. We are in a situation where children are failing to be supported in Europe, all over the place. In Lesbos they are being fed by sandwiches being thrown over a fence. That is unacceptable, and we should not be part of it.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): My right hon. Friend makes an important point about not knowing the full situation and about a number of children disappearing. In light of that, I have put parliamentary questions to the Minister about the number of take charge requests that have come to the British Government and I have been told that they cannot provide that information. It really troubles me that we do not have the information on which to even make the decisions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a huge problem? How can the Government reassure us if they do not even have the facts?

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed, and it is not only the UK that does not have the facts; strikingly, many Administrations all over Europe, including in countries we admire for being bureaucratically effective, such as Germany, do not have the statistics. We really are not looking after children. The state is the parent in those circumstances and, frankly, we are the kind of parent who, if we were a human being, should be facing court for failure to adequately parent. That is not acceptable, and action is needed urgently.

10.19 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) for bringing this important debate to Parliament, and I thank you, Ms Vaz, for chairing this debate. I hope I can get through my speech very quickly.

I will talk about the experience of refugee children who do not have parents to care for them, but first I want to talk about the situation with unaccompanied children who are given the opportunity to come to the UK and the Government’s record on that. To be clear, I am referring to Governments of all colours; I am not in any way making a party political point. The Government have pledged to do more, and I am glad, because their record up to now has been pretty abysmal. When unaccompanied children come to the UK, they are placed in local authority care. Local authorities and communities do their best to care for them, but as soon as they turn 18 the situation changes drastically: they
We need to be doing everything we can to take action human beings whom we have a responsibility to help. We should be thinking about these children as young think we should be removing emotion from the debate. The Government have not been flexible enough. I do not do not doing more to help those who have nothing? The why dropping bombs on people in Syria would help to help. They wanted to know what Members and the foreign country. They wanted to know what I was doing to help children who are like them, but who are alone in a passing young people, and they grilled me at length and the children there were talking to me about refugees. Every hour, displaced children are hoping and praying nightmares and finding that real life is worse. Every day, unimaginable. Refugee children are waking from their displacement. The other night, my four-year-old woke up displaced children and young people find themselves in after children.

I will now turn my attention to the circumstances that displaced children and young people find themselves in throughout Europe, the middle east and other parts of the world. The other night, my four-year-old woke up having had a nightmare. I went in and gave him a hug and he went back to sleep. He had all his favourite toys around him. He had his own pyjamas on and was in his own bed. He knew that his mum and dad were just along the corridor, able to come in and give him the comfort and support he needed. The horror and terror that unaccompanied children must experience is unimaginable. Refugee children are waking from their nightmares and finding that real life is worse. Every day, every hour, displaced children are hoping and praying for comfort and safety. How can we, when we have the means to help them, justify leaving them in that situation?

I want to address two issues, predominantly: timeliness, to which the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona MacTaggart) alluded, and procedural appropriateness. The second camp was less ordered. Infrastructure was sparse and the detention centre housed vulnerable children. The barbed wire looked less than comforting. It is practically impossible to monitor where a child is. Children travelling on their own are vulnerable at every stage, as we have heard repeatedly. The lack of safe routes once they have arrived in Europe is appalling and frightening—think of travelling up through Albania and the like. To protect a child, we need to know where they are. I was struck by two things: the size of the problem and the inadequacy of the provision. Do not get me wrong; the Greek population are doing a staggeringly good job. They did not ask for their islands to be the front door to more than 856,000 refugees in 2015. Lesbos is the same size as one of our constituencies in the wrong; the Greek population are doing a staggeringly good job. They did not ask for their islands to be the first camp was a functioning United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees camp. There were huts, and people had few possessions—only what they could carry. Charities such as Save the Children were doing a sterling job, providing safe places for families and vulnerable children. The play scheme, like any play scheme, was noisy and messy.

We give these children a home and a family. They make friends and learn English. Then, when they turn 18, we send them back to the war zone they came from. Between 2008 and 2012, we sent nearly 2,000 children back to Afghanistan. In the same period, we sent 345 children back to Iraq and at least 22 back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2009 and 2010, we sent back children who were stateless. I do not even know how that works. They were stateless. No state was accepting responsibility for those children, and we sent them out of our country. A bairn who comes to our country as an unaccompanied minor and has no rights anywhere else is refused the right to stay after they turn 18. That is inhumane.

Things must change, and I am therefore pleased that we are having this debate today. The Scottish National party is calling for the UK Government to ensure that all separated children are allocated an independent legal guardian. I am glad that that point was made earlier. It is important that the kids have a voice and someone able to fight their side and navigate our incredibly complicated immigration system. We would like the UK Government to backtrack on the provisions in the Immigration Bill that discriminate against former looked-after children.

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Y ou have one minute.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I will be as fast as I can, Madam Chair.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): You have one minute.

Heidi Allen: Our ability to save the lives of children is immediate, doable and incumbent on us as members of the human race. In the past two months, I have visited minors in our midst, especially that experienced by those who have come by irregular ways and means. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) agree that the right thing to do is, as she has outlined, to find a new gear in the process of identifying children and young people in Calais and likewise in Lesbos so that they can be reunited swiftly with their family? We also need to extend our work with vulnerable unaccompanied children in the region so that they do not make this perilous journey and risk an uncertain future.

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more. We have to ensure that we are not a magnet. The trade is absolutely immoral. We need to ensure that handling procedures for all vulnerable people are speedy and timely. We need biometric machinery so that people are registered where they arrive. We need to do the same in Calais. We have a duty to ensure that they are looked after on this journey. An increasing concern is that money given to Frонтекс is not being spent correctly. Improved monitoring is a must.

Young single people are at particular risk on all parts of their journey. As my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said, they continue to be vulnerable once they are here, and we have a duty from the time they set sail. Taking people from camps in North Africa and Syria helps to show that assistance is there. A friend whose family comes from Lesbos said:

“It is not like an earthquake over in minutes. This is never-ending, like living on a motorway with daily car crashes. Some of the islanders can't sleep and see boats when they are not there.”

The Greek people are tired, but I worry about having debates on numbers when we do not know the extent of the issue, when processing is not being done properly and when facts are scarce. Those things are critical. The amendment this week talks of 3,000 children, but as a mother, I have to ask: what about the 3,001st? Understanding situations properly is the key to sorting them, and we must ensure that councils are helped to provide the right support. Processing people quickly and decently is imperative, which brings me to the “jungle”. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) said, we need to do the same here. Keeping people in squalor is not deterrent; it merely dehumanises. The French authorities need to speed up decision making, ensuring that reunification of family members happens swiftly, if appropriate. To do the right thing should be possible in Europe.

It is being recognised that we in this country are making decisions more swiftly. That is to be welcomed, but I, like many other Members here, want to see more. In the coming days, I look forward to the Minister, who has met with us on many occasions, meeting Save the Children. It can provide up-to-date local information, but I want to know what more we can do in practice to assist the processing, both in technical and influential terms. I want to make sure that vulnerable people get the help they acutely require. We have heard fine words today; please let us see some action.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): We have five minutes left for the last two speakers.

10.30 am

Angela Crawley (Linlithgow and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) for securing this important debate. Given the dramatic rise in the number of children travelling through Europe in recent years, it is impossible to remove emotion from the debate. Too often, too many children are left unaccounted for and unrecognised in a system that focuses on bureaucracy, timing and filling in forms, and fails to remember that these are children and they are our responsibility. As a result of the ongoing crisis in Syria—sadly, in no way unique or the first of its kind—too many children are facing perilous journeys. Last month, while I was in Calais, I spoke to volunteers from Help Refugees. Both Annie and Maddie spoke of the utterly horrifying fact that too many children aged as young as nine are climbing into trucks, trying to get to the border and being sent back. One child, Hasan, had taken 15 perilous journeys. He had attempted to cross the border and been sent back. However, today he will reach the UK and he will be reunited with his family. That is a good story, but that is only one good story in the face of so many stories of children who may or may not make it.

I spoke to a mother who had put her two young children aged two and seven on the back of a truck in the hope that they would make it to the UK. I do not know whether they did. She will never know where those children are. This is the emotion of the debate and the reality. We do not know where those children are and that is the reality that we must face.

Save the Children, living up to its name, has put pressure on the Government to resettle the 3,000 unaccompanied children already in Europe. That is a responsibility that we in the UK must take seriously, and we must step up to the plate. However, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) said, in order to protect children we need to know where they are. That is vital. If I drive one point home in this debate, it is that there are too many children whose whereabouts we do not know; we do not know where they are going and we do not know where they will end up. That is not good enough.

The standard of care that we know they will receive when they get to the UK will be exceptional. It will be top class and delivered by some of the best local authorities across the UK in Scotland, England, Wales and elsewhere. Funding local government to deliver the services is absolutely vital. The stark reality is that three times more teenagers are deported than the Home Office previously admitted, which highlights that this bureaucratic system that focuses on bureaucracy, timing and filling in forms, and fails to remember that these are children dehumanises. The French authorities need to speed up decision making, ensuring that reunification of family members happens swiftly, if appropriate. To do the right thing should be possible in Europe.

Heidi Allen: Our ability to save the lives of children is immediate, doable and incumbent on us as members of the human race. In the past two months, I have visited
Lesbos and Calais. Given the world’s attention on these unprecedented levels of migration, I was astounded to find a lack of coherent asylum processing and support for the most vulnerable refugees—children. In Lesbos, aid workers told of the promise of hotspots and resources to identify and process migrants, but we saw little more than organised chaos. Children identified as unaccompanied were held for their safety in a disused jail—welcome to Europe. So it was not altogether surprising that many sought to avoid that fate by ducking through the net of the authorities, but at least there was some kind of system. If I thought that was bad, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw—or did not see—in Calais. There was no asylum processing and no sign saying, “This way to safety.” Neither were there signs saying, “This way to avoid prostitution, trafficking and abuse.” The camp is eerily quiet until late morning because during the night, everyone, children included, is trying to board anything with wheels.

We met a young boy from Syria called Karim. He was desperate for human contact and hugged us and smiled sheepishly. He disappeared days after our visit. After the jungle was semi-demolished, a census carried out by self-appointed good British people, Help Refugees and Citizens UK, discovered that 129 children had gone missing. Karim did turn up a week or so later in Kent, thank God. However, he should not have had to make such a journey of danger and desperation.

In January, the Government said that they would work with the UNHCR to resettle unaccompanied children and with charities to assist and protect the children in transit across Europe. I do not doubt the herculean efforts of the Government in the region, but in Europe we must do more.

I have one final thought. I travelled home from Calais on a train with three young boys from Syria, the first to be resettled in the new reunification process. There should have been four, but there was no room in the car to the station for four children, so one was sent back to the “jungle” for one more month until the next car came along.

When the great British public are feeding and safeguarding the refugee children of Calais, I am filled with immense pride, but also embarrassment that they are having to do that work. If the British people are there, so should the Government be there. It is not France’s problem. Our compassion, Dunkirk spirit and geographical proximity have made it our problem, too, so I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to find those children before it is too late and bring them home for good.

10.36 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing this debate, on his commitment to the issue and on opening with an excellent speech. The debate has continued in that fashion, with a series of powerful, thought-provoking and wide-ranging speeches setting out the huge scale of the humanitarian challenge that the crisis poses and the action that is necessary to support unaccompanied children who have fled their home countries as a result.

What has underpinned the speeches is a belief that those children should be treated as children. We should provide for them as we would want and reasonably expect our own children to be provided for were they to be in the same situation, arriving alone in a strange new country. It is hardly a radical idea, yet in so many respects Governments across the EU have failed to take that approach. Looking from the outside, too often it seems it is not the best interests of the child that informs policy but perceived national interests in closed borders and fencing, and Government targets and party politics.

It would be impossible for me to cover in the short time available the full range of the debate in any detail, so I will make a few short, sharp points in a handful of different policy areas, echoing some of the arguments and concerns that Members have raised. The main focus of the debate has of course been on providing durable solutions. I agree with hon. Members who have said that it is time for the Government to think again about the nature of the leave that is provided to unaccompanied children, particularly in the form of UASC leave.

We could argue all day about how safe it is to return an 18-year-old lad to Afghanistan, for example. For the record, I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that such a practice is reprehensible. Even putting that to one side, what we say will happen to someone when they turn 18 has an immediate impact on a child facing up to that threat in the here and now. Dangling what amounts to a sword of Damocles over an unaccompanied child is plain cruel, creating uncertainty and anxiety and stoking fear. It is not in any child’s best interests and not what we would hope or expect for our own children. It is far short of the long-term plan of support that various Members highlighted.

Ultimately, those who are granted UASC leave are granted it on the basis that there are inadequate reception arrangements in their country of origin—in other words, they would face destitution, discrimination, homelessness and lack of access to medical treatment if returned home. Although that does not mean they will get protection under the refugee convention, it surely merits something of an equivalent nature. There is a strong case for saying that no child should have to leave immediately on reaching adulthood. Furthermore, there is a powerful argument that in many cases we should be prepared to say that these kids, whose rights under the conventions would be breached if they were immediately removed, should be offered permanent settlement immediately.

I ask the Government to think again about the effect of the Immigration Bill, which we will be considering again next Monday. They should think particularly about the proposals to remove the ability of local authority social work departments to provide support to unaccompanied kids up to the age of 21. The Bill would remove that support at the age of 18, a change that is opposed by a host of Members, the British Association of Social Workers and others.

I support Members’ calls for the roll-out of guardianship and advocate schemes throughout England and Wales. In Scotland, a successful pilot showed that guardianship schemes can be crucial in helping unaccompanied children and young people to be heard and to realise their individual potential. Northern Ireland and several other
countries throughout Europe have similar schemes. I urge the Government to roll out the scheme to unaccompanied children in England and Wales.

I back what the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said about family reunion. It is plain wrong that unaccompanied children cannot apply as sponsors for their parents or carers. Such a failure to provide for reunion is a clear breach of children’s best interests.

Members touched briefly on legal aid in their speeches. Will the Government revisit some of the previous Justice Secretary’s reforms so that more than 2,500 unaccompanied children will no longer have to try to act as their own solicitors? Legal aid should be available for non-asylum immigration and family reunion cases. Such matters are not straightforward. As a solicitor in Scotland I was able to assist with such applications, with recompense from the Scottish Legal Aid Board in the form of advice and assistance funding. I know that was welcome, and it was clearly justified.

I echo the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) made about Calais, where a significant number of unaccompanied children are living in what are essentially shanty towns. A significant number of those children have strong connections to the United Kingdom. Charities have estimated that there are more than 150 unaccompanied children at Calais who they believe would be able to come to the United Kingdom using take charge requests. As the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) said, the tribunal judgment was that the system in France is working at barely a snail’s pace.

As I understand it, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has made an offer to the Home Office to provide support, including through the distribution of an information leaflet; technical comments and suggestions on the implementation of the Dublin regulations; assisting persons of concern, particularly unaccompanied minors, with the identification of relatives in France; supporting the family links evidence gathering process; and a referral or signposting mechanism for individual cases. For the life of me I cannot understand why the Government would not accept that offer. I hope we hear from the Minister that they are going to do so.

We could have a whole separate debate on the situation across Europe, but I shall leave that for another day as time is running short. In all the policy areas I have mentioned, we need to rethink our approach as a country. I hope that the Government will listen to what Members have said.

10.43 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) for securing such a timely and appropriate debate. I also thank him because whenever I hear him in Committees or the Chamber, he is always moderate and thoughtful and really has the best interests of the most vulnerable people in his heart.

Nobody who has heard today’s speeches can be in any doubt about the level of concern Members have about the growing number of unaccompanied children in Europe, or their frustration at the Government’s response. The debate is timely as it comes just a week before the House will have the chance to consider an amendment to the Immigration Bill that would require the Government to relocate and support 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children from across Europe. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for pushing that issue for a long time.

The amendment is small but significant, with the potential to provide safety and stability to children for whom conflicts in their home countries are far beyond their comprehension, let alone their control. As Members will know, the amendment was tabled by my colleague Lord Dubs, himself a refugee who arrived in Britain in 1939 as one of almost 10,000 Jewish children saved by the Kindertransport. The quote from 1938 that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) read out was therefore particularly pertinent.

Lord Dubs’ amendment passed in the Lords by more than 100 votes and has the support of a wide range of charities and campaign groups. It will have the support of Labour Members in the Commons next week, and I implore all Members of all parties to support it. I do not pretend that the amendment will solve the growing problem on its own. The number of unaccompanied children who are now making such treacherous journeys to Europe is an incredibly serious and complex issue. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate said, two more children died making the journey last night.

In February this year, children accounted for more than a third of all refugees and migrants in Europe, compared with one in 10 in June 2015. Beyond the refugee crisis, 982 of the 3,266 people identified as potential victims of trafficking in the UK last year were children, who are vulnerable to unimaginable exploitation and violence. As with so many other challenges we face, our response to unaccompanied children in Europe, whether they are here as refugees or as the victims of traffickers, will require an EU-wide solution and EU countries working together to address a problem that cuts across borders.

I echo the points made by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen). There needs to be an improved framework to support migrant children in Europe and reduce the risks of them falling into the hands of traffickers or suffering sexual exploitation and violence. Recent reports by UNICEF and the Children’s Society have emphasised the urgency of finding a more durable solution, and I hope that the Minister will reflect on that in his response.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Save the Children estimate that there are currently 24,000 unaccompanied refugee children in Europe, so we believe that 3,000 would be a reasonable figure for the UK to take at this stage. That would be in addition to the number already being taken under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme, a scheme that we fully support but that does not allow for the resettlement of vulnerable refugees who have already reached Europe. Given the sheer scale and immediacy of the problem of unaccompanied refugee children in Europe, we believe that the amendment is fair and realistic.

Now for some asks. The Minister has stated that he is sorting out the issues relating to the Dublin III resolution, but so far he has not told us about the facts. Will he do...
I end where the hon. Member for Enfield, Children are vulnerable to the most horrifying exploitation recognise and respond to public and parliamentary every stage they have been reluctant to do so. They must on the Government to do more to help vulnerable refugees fleeing violence, abuse and oppression, but at

I am sure the Minister will appreciate that it is not enough to simply allow children to find sanctuary in this country; we must afford them the security and safety that we would expect for our own children. Yet in April 2013, the Government implemented changes to the legal aid system that mean that separated or unaccompanied migrant children are no longer able to get free advice and representation for their immigration cases. However, just yesterday the Supreme Court ruled that the former Lord Chancellor acted ultra vires when he made changes to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 using secondary legislation.

The cases that were affected by the changes to the 2012 Act primarily involved children who have non-asylum immigration claims. Their claims are often about their right to a family and private life, and the children have often grown up in the UK in foster homes and have no lasting connections to their country of origin. Cases include those of lone children making citizenship applications; child trafficking victims; children involved in international adoption processes; and children who have been abandoned or estranged from their care-givers.

The restriction in legal aid means that some of the most vulnerable children are left without clarity as to their immigration status as they turn 18, which affects their access to housing, education and employment. I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for making that point more completely. Without legal aid, the children affected no longer have independent access to legal professionals who can help establish their immigration status and advise them on their options to find a permanent solution. They are at increased risk of removal to countries to which they have little, if any, connection. Worse still, children desperate to resolve their legal issues are faced with the intense risk of being exploited through unregulated labour, or of being sexually exploited or groomed by criminal networks, because of the need to raise the funds to pay for their legal fees. Can the Minister tell us that he will look into reinstating legal aid for all separated children for their immigration cases?

Although the debate is timely, it is also depressingly familiar. For a number of years Labour has been calling on the Government to do more to help vulnerable refugees fleeing violence, abuse and oppression, but at every stage they have been reluctant to do so. They must recognise and respond to public and parliamentary pressure and support unaccompanied children in Europe.

Children are vulnerable to the most horrifying exploitation and abuse. I end where the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate began: the Government must offer these children not just a temporary safe haven but a lasting solution, and the opportunity to make the UK their safe and secure childhood home.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): This debate has been marked by passionate and compassionate contributions. The Members who contributed did so with a genuine desire to inform the debate, based on their own experiences. Many of them have travelled out to areas affected by the migration crisis and to the refugee camps. This has therefore been a very well informed debate, and the Government will continue to reflect on the points made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, who always speak with a genuine desire to make a difference on these extraordinarily difficult issues. The Government must act appropriately to make the biggest difference that we can on the challenging issue of vulnerable children who have been affected by conflict and are fleeing persecution.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) not just on securing the debate but on his continued focus on these issues. I very much appreciate the conversations we have had over many months—indeed, over many years—on these themes. He focused principally on what happens in the UK, an issue that he feels keenly, although many contributors strayed more widely. We will continue to reflect on the points that he and others made this morning.

In the time available, I will struggle to do justice to this very good debate, but I will address a number of the points that have been made. I echo a comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer): it is right that we have a sense of compassion, but we have to act with head and heart to do the right thing in an extraordinarily difficult situation. It is worth reflecting on the fact that up to 90% of asylum seekers pay a criminal gang to reach Europe. We therefore have to be careful not to do anything to encourage vulnerable individuals to put their lives in the hands of criminals seeking to exploit migrants for profit. I know that things can get twisted in their presentation, but none of us wants more children being exploited or losing their lives after being pushed out to sea in the Mediterranean. We must prevent that appalling tragedy.

The UK has a long and proud history of offering sanctuary to those who genuinely need it, including children. The Government take our responsibility for the welfare of children seriously. The crisis in Syria and events in the middle east, north Africa and beyond have led to an unprecedented number of migrants and asylum seekers, including children and families, arriving in Europe. Some of those children have been separated from their families and, as we have heard, have gone on to reach the UK via northern France. It is absolutely right that Britain fulfils its moral duty to help refugees. The Government take our responsibility on asylum cases involving children very seriously.

As we have heard, last year there was a 56% increase in the number of unaccompanied children arriving in the UK, which placed significant pressure on some local authority children’s services. It is important to understand that nearly two thirds of those children are aged 16 or 17 upon arrival.
From the points that have been made, I know that Members are aware of the pressure faced by Kent County Council, currently caring for nearly 900 unaccompanied children, 300 of whom have had to be placed in other local authority areas. I have previously put on the record my gratitude for the way in which Kent and other local authorities such as Croydon responded to the pressures, but I have also been clear that a national response is needed to ensure that all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children get the support they need and are appropriately safeguarded. The current situation is not in the best interests of either the children or those councils. That is why a voluntary transfer scheme was put in place last summer, and additional funding has been made available to local authorities that take on the legal responsibility from Kent County Council for caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

However, it is clear that we need to go further to promote a fair and equitable distribution of cases across the country in a way that protects the best interests of those children. Government officials continue to work with the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, the devolved Administrations, local government organisations and a range of charities and non-governmental organisations to put in place a longer-term, more sustainable transfer scheme that will assist not only Kent but other local authorities caring for high numbers of unaccompanied children.

I believe that a regional approach to the transfer of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is the best way to support local authorities, which are legally responsible for caring for those children, but that will work only if local authorities are funded appropriately. I know that that is a concern for many. The Home Office provides funding for the care of UASCs, and last week I confirmed that all existing rates, including the rate offered to local authorities willing to accept the transfer of unaccompanied children from Kent—as outlined in the joint letter from the Home Secretary, the Education Secretary and the Communities and Local Government Secretary last November—will continue until a new transfer scheme is introduced. I hope that local authorities will support the transfer scheme and that it will remain voluntary. However, we are keen to avoid a repeat of the situation in Kent last summer, which is why we included provisions in the new Immigration Bill to underpin the voluntary transfer scheme, and, if necessary, to enforce it.

Comments have been made about advocacy services. All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are entitled to legal aid throughout their asylum application. It is right that they are supported throughout their application. I am aware that there have been some instances in which children have been unable to access advocacy services in a timely manner, which has been particularly problematic in areas with a high concentration of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. My officials continue to work with the Legal Aid Agency to ensure that such problems are resolved as quickly as possible to progress cases in a timely manner. It is imperative that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have access to legal advice as soon as possible. Equally, I am working closely with my colleagues in the Department for Education on the issue of fostering.

On the issue of independent child trafficking advocates, the Government are committed to supporting trafficked children. When children are found to have been trafficked, their safety and welfare must be addressed as a priority. In January 2014, the Government announced proposals to trial specialist independent advocates for trafficked children. That trial formally ended on 8 September 2015, and the Government report on the child trafficking advocates scheme was published on 17 December 2015. We are continuing to engage with parliamentarians and stakeholders to determine how best to support trafficked children, and we are considering the use of independent child trafficking advocates. We will update Parliament in due course, but I recognise some of the benefits to supporting children that were highlighted.

It is not true that the Home Office does nothing in relation to asylum places before the age of 17 and a half. The Home Office works with the Refugee Council to ensure that children can access legal support, and each child is given a statement of evidence to help prepare their case. The Home Office decides straightforward cases within six months.

Hon. Members touched on a number of other issues, but I want to talk about the call for the Government to take more action on issue of resettlement. I intend to follow through on the statement that I made at the end of January, and I will make a clearer statement to Parliament in the coming days. I recognise the call for the Government to take more action. The UK has been working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on this issue, and we will do more. I acknowledge the call for more information. I am not able to give it this morning, but the Government intend to reflect carefully on the advice we received from the UNHCR, and we will come forward with more information in due course.

I am conscious that we are rapidly running out of time, and I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate for the fact that I have not left him much for his right of reply, but I have sought to reflect on the issues raised. If I have further thoughts to give, I will write to him. I very much welcome today’s debate, which has helped to inform this very important issue.

10.59 am

Mr Burrowes: I welcome the fact that 27 hon. Members have been involved in considering this motion about unaccompanied refugee children. Over the coming days, ahead of Monday, we look forward to the Minister’s response to show the length, depth and breadth of our compassion for the most vulnerable unaccompanied children.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
M6 Toll Road

11 am

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the M6 toll road.

It is a great pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

On 4 February, a day that will live in infamy for west midlands motorists, the M6 motorway was paralysed for more than 24 hours. Drivers looked for alternative routes, which meant significant knock-on effects on nearby roads such as the M42. The only road that was not heavily congested was the M6 toll.

Our country’s only toll motorway was originally designed as the Birmingham relief road, but it brings no relief, so it does not serve the function for which it was originally intended. High prices have driven ordinary motorists from the road, creating a rich person’s motorway, which is underutilised even in normal, everyday conditions.

During times of crisis, when we need a relief road the most, the contingency plans in place might have been deliberately designed to never be used. To open the toll to general traffic costs £300,000, an astonishing sum that represents, at best, a generous estimate of the cost of a day’s toll take—although the toll waiver might not even be needed for a full day, but just for a few short hours. Worse, the final decision to implement the plan, dubbed Operation Freeway, rests with civil servants, who are not accountable to local residents and cannot be fairly expected to make snap decisions about such huge sums of taxpayers’ money.

If the M6 toll is to serve the best interests of the west midlands and our economy, as it was built to do, we must see fundamental reform of how it operates, especially during gridlock and crises. There are several options to consider. We could move towards a system in which the toll road is free to use during periods of gridlock, with an annual fee paid to the operator to secure that service and access, rather than having a one-off, never-generated fee. Midland Expressway Limited needs its compensation, but at the moment it is in the worst of all worlds: it never gets the money anyway, because it is never triggered. Alternatively, an annual fee could purchase an allotment of days of access—five days during the year, for example. Only last night, the M6 northbound, at junction 6, I think, was again entirely gridlocked due to a spillage of diesel. In such cases, such an option could be triggered for a few short hours to bring genuine relief to the people of Birmingham.

Either way, we must vest the final authority to implement such measures in people who are properly accountable to local residents. The new West Midlands combined authority, under the excellent leadership of Councillor Bob Sleigh from Solihull, is the ideal institution to make such a decision. The WMCA’s leadership would be able to take a broader view of the best interests of residents and of the region than a Highways Agency official can do. For example, February’s gridlock is estimated to have cost the west midlands economy an eye-watering £40 million in such things as lost days, products not reaching their intended destinations and people not being able to turn up to work.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. My constituency is very close to the M6 toll and, indeed, to the M6. Does he agree that any cost is not only financial? When the M6 is blocked, the ensuing gridlock impacts on local communities, on places such as Brownhills, which has the A5 running through it. They can be adversely affected by the extra traffic, so we need to look at ways in which to mitigate that.

**Julian Knight**: My hon. Friend makes a good point, as a strong advocate for her community. As I said at the start of my speech, there is the damage to arterial routes and the heavy congestion in surrounding areas, but emergency services and their access to those areas are also affected. The West Midlands police and crime commissioner is deeply concerned about what happened on 4 February, and has happened on other days. The PCC would like to see action and a fairer means by which we can gain access to the M6 toll when necessary. It is unfair, however, to expect specialist public servants to take such considerations into account, especially at short notice. That is precisely why they are not the right people to be making those decisions.

We should also consider lowering the day-to-day cost of the M6 toll. When it opened in 2003, the standard fare for cars was only £2, compared with £5.50 today. The charge for vans has also more than doubled, from £5 to £11. The result is a very quiet road, which is an absolute pleasure to drive on for the minority prepared to pay for the privilege, but it does not serve the wider community as it should. In effect, motorists are presented with a game of chicken as they approach the turning for the M6 toll: do they take the risk? Do they go through Birmingham and all those junctions, or do they pay the money to take the M6 toll? I genuinely believe that if we lower the cost, more motorists will make the decision to take the M6 toll, and that alone will help congestion.

A report on the M6 toll was done for Alistair Darling, then the Secretary of State for Transport, soon after the road was opened. It concluded that the road was bringing relief and helping to decrease traffic in the M6 area. According to later reports, however, since the escalation in toll prices, relief has not taken place; a lot of the good work that was done has now been undone by the very excessive charges.

International comparisons are certainly not flattering. Depending on the time of day, the M6 toll charges a car driver between 14p and 20p per mile, compared with averages of 9.6p per mile in France, 8p in Italy and Spain, and only 6p in the world’s largest economy, the United States. It is no coincidence that those countries have a broad network of toll roads, whereas Britain has never built a second. If the operator is interested in the long-term future of road charging in this country, it is in its interests to work with us to make the M6 toll more accessible and attractive to motorists. That could even have an immediate benefit—an increase in traffic—which would be good news for Roadchef’s Norton Canes service station, which has always seemed quiet on the few occasions when I have stopped there.

Renewing support for the project might also allow us, once again, to take an optimistic view of the future of the M6 toll—for example, it could be extended to connect with the M54, as originally intended. Opening up the toll to more traffic will also have considerable benefits for motorists and the wider west midlands region: journey times will be cut; emissions will be reduced as congestion on the free roads is eased by the
better distribution of traffic across the system; and better road access will open up the local economy and better connect west midlands businesses to suppliers and customers around the UK. If a day’s gridlock costs the local economy £40 million, the benefits of year-round smooth operation must be considerable indeed.

The system is in clear need of reform, which offers the Government a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the strength and benefits of the devolution agenda. The new combined authority provides the ideal means to put that vital piece of regional infrastructure under democratic, accountable local control, which would not only lead to better management of the road, but be a concrete demonstration to residents of the benefits of the new arrangements and of our decentralisation agenda. Too many voters see the WMCA as just another layer of bureaucracy; they do not yet appreciate the important role it can play in promoting regional growth. If they see action on the M6 toll to ease congestion in the area, they would see a real benefit of the WMCA.

Other measures should also be considered. I have proposed elsewhere that the WMCA be given control of air passenger duty. Birmingham airport is an important employer in my constituency, and we must be allowed to maintain a level playing field for it and its counterparts in Scotland, where the First Minister has announced plans to scrap APD entirely. Control of the toll would be a positive first step. The Government have placed the northern powerhouse at the centre of their agenda, focusing on delivering greater autonomy and improved infrastructure to our cities and regions. There is now an excellent opportunity to put those principles into action in the west midlands engine. Empowering local leaders to fix the problems created by bureaucratic control and unlock the potential of our existing road network will benefit local residents and businesses, stimulate the regional economy, and make a powerful case for devolution.

I do not suggest that what I have outlined is a silver bullet and will somehow solve all congestion. I know that a lot of the traffic that goes on to the M6 gets off between junctions 6 and 8, an area not covered by the toll. However, if people are sitting in gridlock and can see a sign that says “M6 toll clear” but cannot get to it, that is a failing. I believe that the rich person’s motorway is a sign of failings in the transport system in the west midlands, and that by bringing some relief to the situation we can help the devolution agenda, save money for the economy, and promote growth and jobs.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz—for the first time, I think. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) on securing the debate.

The motion relates to the usage of the M6 toll road, so I shall begin by reflecting on how it is used. The toll 48,000 to 50,000; the Minister is correct. However, that is still below the 72,000 a day that was originally envisaged when the toll road was built.

Andrew Jones: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He makes a good point, and he has made an important case today. He highlighted the cost to the west midlands economy of the terrible incident on 4 February, but what he said was also part of a wider case about how road investment opens up local economic development. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) cited the social impact of the incident on 4 February. The two aspects of the matter are aligned. Our road network is not just an economic tool; it is how our society travels—how people reach schools, workplaces and hospital appointments, and go to see family and friends. If we have a failure in our road network we see that in all aspects of our lives.

What happened on 4 February was a terrible incident for the west midlands, and it is important to debate it. It may be helpful if I give a little information about it. On that day, the M6 between junctions 5 and 6 was closed for 24 hours following a serious traffic accident, which sadly involved a fatality. As my hon. Friend knows, the Secretary of State and I are keen to explore whether more can be done to prevent such a degree of impact on road users and business in future. The recent event highlighted our expectation that our road network should be reliable and resilient. The issue is not only what alternatives there are should parts of the network be unavailable, but how quickly and effectively key organisations are able to respond to the circumstances. I think that the incident on 4 February showed that we have to review that, and work to improve the situation.

I shall explain the incident in more detail. The M6 northbound between junctions 5 and 6 was closed from 1.50 am on Thursday 4 February 2016 until 1.45 am on Friday 5 February owing to a collision involving two heavy goods vehicles and a car. As I mentioned, very sadly that resulted in one fatality. Extensive incident investigation work was carried out by the central motorway police group before Highways England could fully assess the damage to the carriageway. Once Highways England had access to the road it became evident that all four lanes of the carriageway—a section about 200 metres in length—required resurfacing repair work as a result of the large volume of diesel that had spilt on to the carriageway causing widespread damage to the road surface. The closure of that section of road resulted in inevitable disruption for road users and communities. My hon. Friends the Members for Solihull and for Aldridge-Brownhills discussed the impact in their constituencies, and many other areas were affected. In fact I was caught up in the traffic jams myself, and so was the Secretary of State. There was a big impact across the west midlands.

As hon. Members would expect, Highways England has diversion routes agreed with relevant local authorities to mitigate the impact of incidents on the road network. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull is aware, there is an agreement in place with Midland Expressway Ltd to make use of the M6 toll road in cases where there is an extreme event over and above that associated with a serious road traffic collision. The agreement is known as Operation Freeway and it enables tolls to be suspended for an agreed period of time—24 hours. As the M6 toll road is a commercial operation, suspension brings with it a fee of £300,000 excluding VAT per day, which is a significant cost. The arrangement is a little clumsy—it has never been used, despite the fact that the agreement has been in place a long time.

Julian Knight: The current figures I have are about 48,000 to 50,000; the Minister is correct. However, that is still below the 72,000 a day that was originally envisaged when the toll road was built.
Highways England has criteria for deciding whether to activate Operation Freeway. The deciding factor is whether the road is likely to have to be closed for a number of days, rather than hours. After the event on 4 February, Highways England took the decision not to suspend the toll because the incident did not meet the criteria for activation: it was not seen to be an extreme event impacting the carriageway over and above what is associated with a serious road traffic collision.

I know my hon. Friend has his own ideas about how the west midlands could make better use of the M6 toll road, not only when there has been an incident but at times of heavy congestion. We all know that there are many periods when the M6 and M5 suffer from heavy congestion. I also note my hon. Friend’s concern about the most appropriate way in which to take the decision whether to implement Operation Freeway. He has made important suggestions today, and we are due to meet—I think our meeting is only a few weeks away—to discuss that very issue. Of course there are a whole range of issues which we need to consider, including cost, policy and value for money. I look forward to the meeting, and it is clearly appropriate to review everything, in the light of the serious incident that occurred.

It may be helpful if I now talk about how local areas can shape the decisions that are made about them. If there is desire locally for specific schemes or improvements through local authority groups such as the West Midlands Combined Authority, there is a process to put forward ideas as part of the development of the second road investment strategy. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government agreed a devolution deal with the WMCA in November, in anticipation of its transition to a formal combined authority. The deal sets out the terms of a proposed agreement between the West Midlands Combined Authority shadow board and the Government to move forward with a radical devolution of funding, powers and responsibilities. In particular, it sets out the expectation that the Government and the WMCA will work together through the development of the second road investment strategy to examine options for the most effective way to facilitate the movement of goods and people, and manage congestion in the region on the strategic road network.

At this year’s Budget we launched the process for the second road investment strategy. Over the next couple of years, we will seek input from stakeholders on what the Government should fund during the period 2020 to 2028. We are one year into the first road investment strategy, as my hon. Friend knows. It is on budget and on schedule and has proved to be a success so far. As we develop and build on that, we have a secure stream of funding through road hypothecation—the reforms to vehicle excise duty—so we have visibility for many years ahead on road investment budgets.

As we develop the content of RIS 2, I want to ensure that we are able to take input from a much broader range of people. The core work preparing that will be the route strategies prepared by Highways England; they will be the basis for that work. However, I want people to be able to contribute on a local basis—certainly colleagues here or local authorities, combined authorities or local enterprise partnerships.

We should view our road investment strategy as a key facilitator of our longer-term economic growth, so over the next couple of years I want to ensure that we receive input from as many stakeholders as possible on what that scheme will look like. Of course, we already have significant commitments to the strategic road network in the west midlands in the current road investment strategy, which runs until 2020 and is indeed an investment. It is a step change for our country; this is the first time we have had a statutory road investment strategy. It commits £15 billion of funding for strategic roads. That is on a national basis, but £3 billion of that spending is within the midlands. It includes key investments such as rolling out smart motorways—smart motorways have increased capacity by bringing in all-lane running, either full time or part time—and upgrading key junctions such as the M6 junction 10 and the M42 junction 6.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I apologise for my late arrival. I have just spoken to my local council leader about junction 6 of the M42, which needs to be redesigned. Would my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that Highways England takes account of the master plans of the local authority; the local plan, which is for a garden city at that location; the fact that the interchange station for High Speed 2 is to be built at that location; and the fact that the airport has its own separate master plan? We have concerns about the lack of joined-up thinking in the redesign of that junction, which is failing to take account of other planning proposals.

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend has clearly had a most timely meeting with her local council leader and makes a really important point. I am very happy to give a commitment and ensure that Highways England discusses the proposals with the bodies that she has just mentioned. I will raise that with Highways England personally, so that commitment is very easily provided.

I have met council leaders in the area. They came down to express their concerns about the incident on 4 February and to ask for my support in terms of what can be done to bring people together to find solutions. I have talked to them about how collaboration or communication on a local basis needs to improve, but they are building on some success, and the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull made on the importance of local decisions and local capacity for decision making is building are completely true. I have also met the police and crime commissioner about that incident.

We are at the beginning of a process. We recognise that there has been under-investment in the road network across our country for years. We are addressing that with the first road investment strategy. We are building on that work with the second road investment strategy. I want as much local input as possible so that we can provide schemes that make a difference on a local basis. The incident on 4 February was not just a personal tragedy for the family who lost a loved one; it also highlighted the lack of resilience and capacity in the network around Birmingham and the fact that we have to think about all elements of that capacity, including the M6 toll road, as we plan both for resilience and for extra growth. I am happy to have such conversations,
which have already begun, but we need to build on them. I am happy to work with everyone locally to make that happen.

I conclude by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull on securing this debate. Ensuring that we are making the best use of our network is an important issue that is worthy of debate, and he has my support on proceeding with the local issue. The Department and Highways England are investigating whether improvements can be made to respond better to incidents such as the one on the M6 on 4 February.

Mrs Spelman: There is a real appetite locally for the Minister to visit the area to see how the loaded M42 and M6 easily snarl and how that relates to other transport infrastructure. He is the roads Minister, but the midlands motorway crossroad combines with Birmingham airport, the west coast main line, the M6 and the A45. We would be grateful if he paid a visit so that we can show him the situation first hand.

Andrew Jones: That is another commitment that I am happy to give. I would be delighted to visit the area to see the situation for myself. Seeing an area first hand helps to bring the issue home. I am familiar with the area—having been caught up in a traffic jam for many hours on 4 and 5 February, I saw even more of it than I normally would. I am happy to make that commitment and to work with colleagues, both here and locally, to improve the situation.

This is an important issue for the west midlands, and the serious incident highlighted the lack of resilience and capacity. We need to work together, with continued dialogue, to improve the situation for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am
Sitting suspended.

Children’s Homes

Mrs Cheryl Gillan in the Chair

2.30 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered children’s homes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. In October last year, the Prime Minister announced a review of children’s homes led by Sir Martin Narey. The final report is due this spring. The review “will look at which children should be in residential care, how it can be improved and how government can achieve the very best for every single child in their care.” It is a huge and complex task, and an important review. The area that interests me in the review is the commissioning of residential care homes and distant placements.

By way of context, Ofsted figures show that in 2015, 69% of children’s homes were in the private sector, 8% were in the voluntary sector and 23% were run by local authorities. The number of children’s homes run by local authorities has decreased and the number run by the private sector has increased. Seventy-one per cent of private providers own one to two homes. The largest private companies provide just over a quarter of all placements. Owners range from families to private equity and venture capital companies.

I first initiated a debate on children’s homes in March 1995, on the issue of the registration of children’s homes. At the time, homes providing care to fewer than four children did not have to register and were not inspected. Social workers were responsible for fire inspections—the situation was completely astonishing. Clearly, we have come a long way since then in regulation and inspection, but in that debate, I expressed concern about the most vulnerable children being placed hundreds of miles away from home, with all the horrendous problems and risks that can flow from that. The present situation in the continuing unequal distribution of children’s homes demonstrates a continuing catastrophic failure in the care market for some children. It seems to be working for the providers but not for the children themselves.

In 2012, a joint inquiry into children missing from care was conducted by the all-party group on runaway and missing children and adults, of which I am the chair, and the all-party group for looked-after children and care leavers. It was supported by the Children’s Society.
One of the main conclusions was that the unequal geographical distribution of children's homes meant that large numbers of vulnerable children were placed at a distance from their home area. We found that many placement decisions were last minute, driven by what was available at the time rather than by the needs of the child. This meant that the child was often not involved in planning. Children told the APPG inquiry that they felt dumped in children's homes many miles away from home. That increased their propensity to go missing and to come to harm from, for example, sexual exploitation.

The recommendations of the APPG report, including a call for urgent action on reducing the number of out-of-borough placements, were accepted in full by the Government and changes were made to regulations. An expert group on the quality of children's homes was set up and reported to the Department for Education in 2012. A key finding in the expert group's report was that local authorities could not overcome the uneven pattern of supply of children's homes across England through their commissioning arrangements. In other words, the locations of children's homes were determined, and continue to be determined, by providers.

According to Ofsted, a third of all local authorities—54 in total, when excluding short-break provision—run no children's homes. With local authority and voluntary sector provision decreasing, this means greater dependency on the private sector for places in children's homes. That makes it even more essential that we address urgently the underlying issues that result in the unequal distribution of private children's homes and the resulting distant placements.

In 2012, the DFE data pack showed that homes were concentrated in the north-west, the west midlands and the south-east. As of March 2015, that situation is unchanged—Ofsted stats show that Lancashire, Kent and the west midlands have the highest number of places, and London the fewest. The local supply of children's homes places does not reflect the needs of local looked-after children. The situation is most extreme in London, which has 17% of the children's homes population but only 6% of children's homes. The north-west has 15% of the children's homes population but has 25% of the children's homes. In Greater Manchester, 71% of the children living in children's homes in Rochdale came from outside the borough, and in Stockport, the number was 63%. Some authorities in England have no children's homes at all and all their children are placed outside the borough.

Why are distant placements a problem? Children placed in care homes face huge challenges compared with other children in care. They are typically older and more likely to have emotional and behavioural difficulties. They are more likely to have substance misuse issues, more likely to have engaged in criminal activity, and more likely to be excluded from school and achieve worse GCSE results. They are also more likely to go missing from their placement, and those who go missing are more likely to go missing multiple times. Again, however, that was not the fate of all children in children's homes: stability of placement is a critical factor in improving outcomes, but distant placements can make it more difficult to secure that stability for a child.

Ofsted’s 2014 thematic review, “From a distance”, highlighted a number of serious continuing problems in this area. Its research showed that in far too many cases, the local authorities in its sample were failing to pay appropriate attention to the quality of care provided, leaving too many children without the support and help that they needed. It is not difficult to understand why: with pressure on social work time, it is easier to make time to visit a child in a near placement than a distant one. Last year, 520 London children were placed an average distance of 52 miles and an average journey time of 69 minutes from their home area. That makes it very difficult for children to keep in contact with their family.

It is not clear to what extent the situation has improved since Ofsted’s “From a distance” report. If we look at the single inspection framework reports published by Ofsted in the last year, we see that although in many authorities work with children in distant placements was generally good, in just under half the reports, the work with children living far from home did not come up to standard. The most common shortfall was that decisions to place children out of the area were driven by a shortage of placements close to home rather than by individual need.

The last Labour Government placed a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient accommodation for looked-after children in the local authority area, so far as is “reasonably practicable”. The intention was to ensure local provision for looked-after children so that they could be placed nearer home, with access to friends, family and support services. Local authorities are required to publish a local sufficiency plan detailing how they are meeting that duty. However, the numbers of children sent away from their home area remains stubbornly high, despite the existence of those plans.

Why are so many children still being placed in distant placements? A major reason, as the expert group said in 2012, may be that although individual local authorities can recruit foster carers to meet local needs, they are not able similarly to influence the supply of children's home places in their areas. It is also not clear if and to what extent the experiences and choices of children are influencing care provision. In preparing the “Real Voices” report on child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester, I talked to children who had been in children's homes. What was important for them was being listened to; they thought decisions about where they lived should be made with them rather than imposed on them, so it is important that there is choice in placements, including local choice.

The reasons for the geographical distribution may be that property costs are lower in some areas, that health and education support services are better in some areas, that the planning process is easier in some local authorities, that there are existing good relationships or that having a cluster of homes is easier. However, even in those areas that have a sufficient supply of children's home places to meet local demand in principle, it may not be possible for the local authority to guarantee placements to providers in advance, and providers will not hold places, meaning that in the event children may still be placed out of their home area although there is actually a sufficiency of local places.
That is the situation in Greater Manchester. In February 2014, Greater Manchester had 192 regulated children’s homes. In 2013, 390 children were placed in children’s homes by the 10 local authorities; 185 of those children were placed in another local authority area. Rochdale, which has a high number of children’s homes, placed 41% of its children inside the local authority area and 18% of children more than 20 miles away, while in the children’s homes in the borough, 71% of the places went to children from outside the area, and of those 45% were from outside Greater Manchester. By contrast, in Stockport, which also has a high number of homes, 88% of the children were placed within the local authority boundary, but again they accounted for only 36% of the local children’s home places; 64% were from other local authority areas and, of those, 28% came from outside the Greater Manchester Police area.

Private and independent providers dominate in both boroughs. In Rochdale, the majority of the private providers are homes containing just one or two placements, while in Stockport the homes are larger and there has been a long relationship with the Together Trust, a voluntary sector organisation. That may go some way towards explaining the different figures.

In terms of distance and familiarity with an area, a child from Bury placed in Stockport will feel a long way from home in a place that is unfamiliar, and they may well respond by going missing. Greater Manchester Police calculate that missing children in Greater Manchester cost the police up to £30.9 million a year, and there are additional difficulties in keeping children safe when information needs to be passed across police boundaries.

Given all that, it is ludicrous that we have an oversupply of children’s homes in some areas that do not guarantee a place for local children, while children from areas many miles away that have few children’s homes are placed in Greater Manchester. That chaotic situation sometimes has long-lasting consequences for the children concerned.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I am delighted that the hon. Lady has secured this very important debate. Will she join me in welcoming Sir Martin Narey’s review of residential children’s homes, and does she agree that sometimes children can have incredibly positive experiences in the residential care system?

Ann Coffey: I will of course agree with the hon. Lady: children’s homes are an important part of the care system. It is equally important that children’s homes offer the highest-quality care, and it is very important that children’s homes are where they need to be, which is the point I am making.

The situation is just as difficult where there is an undersupply of places. A local authority struggles to attract new providers when it cannot guarantee bed occupancy.

What is the answer? In 2014, the Select Committee on Education said:

“We can see the attraction of adopting a rule which prohibits the placement of children more than 20 miles from home unless there is a proven need to do so.”

That would work only if it were part of a wider strategy to tackle the unequal distribution of children’s homes. Local authorities could increase the number of homes that they run, especially in areas that have little or no private provision. They could do that by using available capital borrowing powers or, if they do not want to manage the homes directly, they could provide the capital and a provider could manage the home.

Alternatively, the answer might be the co-commissioning of private providers by a consortium of local authorities. At present, there are regional or sub-regional frameworks in place to purchase places from providers, but in practice those can amount to little more than “catalogues” giving information about homes. Co-commissioning is a challenge, but one that recent devolution facilitates. For the 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester, it offers not only an opportunity for all children’s services to look at how they can use their individual resources such as fostering services in a more co-operative way, but an opportunity to commission from the private sector the provision that will meet the needs of children in Greater Manchester. The DFE could helpfully publish a toolkit for consortiums of local authorities showing them how legally and financially they could structure regional and sub-regional commissioning of children’s home places to meet projected need, instead of merely relying on spot purchasing.

There is a large sum of unspent capital allocated for free schools. Perhaps providers could work with consortiums of local authorities to bid for that funding. Local authorities can currently access basic need funding from the DFE to provide sufficient school places, and capital funding for the childcare offer for two-year-olds. Why should that not be the case for residential placements for looked-after children?

Greater Manchester could provide the perfect test bed for any new approach, as could any other group of local authorities willing to work together, as the problems differ from area to area, depending on the number of children’s homes, local policies and the needs of the looked-after children.

Structural problems with the children’s homes market have no easy solutions. That said, if we mean what we say about seeking to “achieve the very best for every single child in…care”, we must overcome them. We cannot allow this situation to continue. I hope that Sir Martin Narey’s review will recognise that reducing distant placements should be at the heart of reforms to the children’s homes market and that therefore action must be taken by the Government, by local authorities and by providers to tackle the unequal geographical distribution of children’s homes.

2.46 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I would like to express my delight at serving under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan, and to extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) for securing this important debate. I come to the debate with a career of more than 20 years as an English teacher, and the subject of the debate is close to my heart. I have had the experience of teaching young people who have had the misfortune, the upset, of being caught up in adverse family circumstances and have become what we now call looked-after children and sometimes residents of children’s homes.

Putting a child in a children’s home must be a last resort, for reasons that I will go on to explain. It is no great surprise that children who find themselves in
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We all agree that we need to ensure that all children who need extra support are able to access it. We need to
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There is no reason why children living with kinship carers should not be treated in the same way as children in foster care. Their stories are no less traumatic and not less distressing, and their vulnerability is no less real. Supporting families is vital, and it has been the entire approach in Scotland. Action is increasingly being taken earlier in children's lives to address any concerns before they escalate, which has reduced the number of children on child protection registers by 4%. The way forward must be stable, secure placements either at home with their parents or in a different home environment where the child can benefit from the security and stability upon which child development thrives.

At the end of last year, I was involved in a Backbench Business Committee debate on the sexual exploitation of young people. The Chamber was urged by various speakers to consider examples from Finland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Name any country in Europe, and good examples of best practice were being held up for the Chamber to consider. Although it is important to learn from other nations, I said that we had some excellent examples in Scotland, where a child in foster, kinship or residential care can continue their residency up to the age of 21 and where support can also be provided to care leavers up to the age of 26 if it is considered necessary and desirable. Although I held up such examples of good practice, I am afraid that my contribution was covered over by the chatter in the Chamber. Of course there are excellent examples in mainland Europe, but we must learn from each other in the United Kingdom because the whole point is to have the best outcomes for all the children of the United Kingdom, wherever they live.

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or physical trauma and abuse, and they have sometimes missed many years of education. Such children are likely to require bespoke treatment, which is the important point. In such situations, geography is likely to fall way down the list of priorities. It sometimes is not appropriate to place children close to their family, or close to where they originally came from, if they have suffered abuse or trauma. We need a flexible approach to placing children in care homes that puts their needs and requirements first. We must not allow ourselves to substitute quality for locality.

The gap between referrals and placements is a growing concern, as discussed in the “State of the Market” report by the Independent Children’s Homes Association. The report states that the number of referrals received by homes is going up. Some 66% of providers report higher referral rates, but only 32% report growth in occupancy rates. What appears to be happening is that local authorities are just blanket emailing and bombarding providers with possible referrals. They are not checking whether the provider is appropriate for an individual child or sifting to find the most appropriate provider to make a referral to, which shows the disregard within local authorities of trying to get a bespoke service for each individual child. Just bombarding providers wastes their time and does not get the best deal for the young person—local authorities need to look at that.

Another concern in the “State of the Market” report is the lack of market confidence within the children’s homes sector. There is still significant uncertainty in the sector, with 60% remaining unsure, or worse, about their current outlook. Although that is down on the previous year’s figure of 78%, it is still worrying that the majority of respondents in the sector remain uncertain about how they will operate. There are a number of reasons for that. As I have outlined, there is the complexity of cases and the occupancy rates, but there is also the lack of funding for children’s homes. Unless we begin to address those problems, confidence and service delivery will begin to be negatively impacted. We must do more to relieve the pressures on the sector, which needs proper funding.

Those who run children’s homes provide a vital service to people who have fallen on the toughest of times. We should be doing everything we can to make life easier for such service providers and to allow them to provide the care that they want to provide. The points that they have raised are a warning sign that we cannot ignore. If we do, we will be failing some of the most vulnerable people in our society by not allowing them to grow and develop the opportunities that so many of us have been fortunate enough to enjoy.

2.58 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship and to participate in this debate, Mrs Gillan. I also commend the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) on securing this debate on an important topic. It has been interesting to listen to the contributions so far. A number of important points have been made.

So far—I am sure this will continue—there has been clear agreement that it is vital to ensure that care is provided in the most effective and appropriate way for all of our looked-after children. I appreciate that this debate has an English perspective, and I will focus to some extent on what I have heard today and on what differences there are between how things work here and how they work in Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, it is useful that we can all listen to one another, because it is vital that lessons are learned and that best practice is shared in all corners of the United Kingdom, and more widely, on such an important issue. Of course there are no easy answers, but we must appreciate that much can be done.

This topic should concern everyone. The hon. Members who have spoken, including the hon. Member for Stockport, have noted the vulnerability of many of the children who find themselves being looked after. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran pointed out, all those children are particularly vulnerable. They all deserve our care and concern, and we have a collective responsibility, particularly in this place, to be as aware as possible of the issues facing them in order to facilitate the best possible outcomes and safeguards, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) said, for these most vulnerable children.

Local authorities have a responsibility to provide support to our looked-after children and vulnerable young people. We know that a young person might be looked after for a number of reasons, including neglect, abuse, complex disability requiring specialist care or involvement in the youth justice system. Those are all challenging situations for young people and merit our support. I was heartened to hear my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and the hon. Member for Rochdale refer to the positive intentions and hard work of many who work in and with the sector. It is vital.

Looked-after children have often had to deal with myriad challenges in their lives, so we should take seriously our obligation to minimise those challenges rather than add to them. Where possible, for instance, avenues other than children’s home accommodation might be more suitable to the needs of the children concerned. For instance, as we have heard, kinship care might be possible. Kinship care is not always fully understood and can be far more challenging than many people realise. For that reason, the SNP Scottish Government have provided additional support to kinship carers and were the first to introduce kinship care payments to ensure that children looked after by relatives, which I acknowledge is not always possible, are entitled, as they should be, to the same support as those placed with foster care families.

As my hon. Friend said, I am enthusiastic about the £10.1 million in support that the SNP Government provided to councils last year to increase kinship care allowances. Importantly, we have also extended support to eligible children on the edge of care, who are subject to what will be known from this month as a kinship care order. Because vulnerable children come in all varieties, we must consider their needs as a whole in deciding how best to deal with them.

As we have heard from a number of speakers, the circumstances leading a child or young person being looked after or taken into the home of a relative can be heartbreaking, confusing and complex for the family as well as the child. If we can encourage a family relationship that provides some stability and support, we must do
so, but like moving into care, such situations are significant and involve huge upheaval, and we need proper frameworks in place. The additional investment in Scotland recognises that we need to make practical provision for people who have had to struggle more than they should, in order to provide the stability that such children need and that some of the most vulnerable people in our society deserve.

Anne Swartz, chair of the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance, has applauded that way forward and rightly commended kinship carers’ tireless efforts to raise the bar. I applaud them as well as her for their efforts. It is important that such work continues. I look forward to hearing more about the work between the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance and the Scottish Government on that issue.

However, kinship care often might not be possible. Due to the variety of situations involved, some children might have to be looked after in children’s homes, and additional considerations need to be taken into account there. The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) rightly pointed out that in some cases, the experience of children looked after in children’s homes can be very positive, and I agree. It is absolutely true, and we must not lose sight of it, but we must also acknowledge and work on the genuine issues and decide the best way forward.

Any action that we can take to minimise additional complication in the lives of children in such situations and maximise stability and support is vital, especially if we do so at the earliest stage possible, as it can have a profound impact on children’s lives. On the basis that a significant number of children in Scotland and the UK are affected by this debate, we must consider the matter as a whole and where the issues might be, so that we can move forward.

In England, the number of children being looked after is rising, which is not what any of us want. In the year ending 31 March 2015, nearly 70,000 children were looked after by local authorities in England, and the absolute number of looked-after children has increased by 6% since 2011. That number has increased steadily over the past seven years, and is now higher than at any point since 1985.

Ann Coffey: I am always anxious to learn from Scotland’s experience, because I am a Scot, but I have been waiting to hear the hon. Lady share experiences of accommodating children in children’s homes in Scotland. What observations does she have about the children being placed in those homes, and how far those children’s homes are from their home authority? What are the Scottish Government overcoming, and how do they work with the private sector? That is the focus of the debate.

Kirsten Oswald: I will come to some of the points raised by the hon. Lady, particularly the issue of distance, which I know is a concern of hers.

Most looked-after children in England are between 10 and 15 years old. More boys than girls are looked after, and the gender distribution seems relatively unchanging. Although the majority of the looked-after population is white, children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds appear to be over-represented in the looked-after population. Those figures are concerning. Those are our children, and we must be conscious of the impact on their lives.

As the hon. Member for Stockport and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, things in Scotland might be different—useful progress has been made in recent years—but we must all consider what needs to be done and can be done at any time, because there is always progress to be made. I am pleased that under the Scottish Government, the number of children in the care system has dropped for the third consecutive year. It means that there is a possibility that we are taking action earlier in children’s lives to address some concerns before they escalate.

Between August 2014 and July 2015, the number of looked-after children in Scotland decreased by 1%, and the number of children on the child protection register decreased by 4%. We recently introduced a successful programme to help find permanent homes for vulnerable youngsters, and the Centre for Excellence for Looked-After Children in Scotland will receive around £580,000 a year to support improvements in helping looked-after children find a permanent home, because we have seen the positive outcomes of doing so.

The permanence and care excellence programme aims to find permanent homes for children in care. It has been piloted by Aberdeen city and Renfrewshire councils, and importantly, it brings together multi-agency staff teams to build capacity so that we can continue to improve service and outcomes, which the hon. Member for Stockport was rightly concerned about, for some of our most vulnerable young people. I think we agree that it is vital that, wherever possible, children should be able to achieve a permanent home, including through family rehabilitation where appropriate, at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, there are still children and young people who spend too long being looked after or on the child protection register. Sometimes it is appropriate to consider children’s home needs, and how we might provide better support, and sometimes we must acknowledge that that support needs to extend beyond what it might have been traditionally. I echo my hon. Friend’s sentiments about the positive impact of extending the right to stay in foster, kinship or residential care settings up to the age of 21, and supporting care leavers up to the age of 26 to help them move to independent living. When children cannot live at home, we owe it to them to help them find a stable, loving environment where possible and move forward in their lives as they get older.

Patricia Gibson: Perhaps one of the defining differences between England and Scotland is that in Scotland there has been far greater emphasis in the past five to 10 years than ever before on supporting families, using kinship care where appropriate or foster care, and moving away from children’s homes wherever another solution can be found.

Kirsten Oswald: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I agree with her. The hon. Member for Rochdale also emphasised that it is very important that the whole range of options for each child is fully considered. I acknowledge the great eloquence of the hon. Member for Stockport on the topic of authority placements. I sympathise with her concerns about the potential for
increased difficulties for some children who may find themselves in such situations. I think she is correct that children accommodated far from home may be particularly vulnerable. I am concerned about some of the pull factors that may lead them into potentially damaging and dangerous situations. She made the point very well—she was passionate about this—that there is the potential for a significant impact on these children.

However, I acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for Rochdale that on occasion there may be sound reasons for distant placements. The Education Committee was very thoughtful in its assessment of the situation, and I look forward to hearing more when the report that was referred to earlier comes out.

In contrast with England, I think there has been some progress in Scotland in recent years, which it is useful to look at. The number of children in the care system has dropped for the third consecutive year. However, in our aspirations, I think we are all of one mind here. I hope that our shared desire to see the best possible outcomes for all of our children can lead to further progress and lead us to listen carefully to one another. We must always remember that children who need to be looked after, in care or in the situations we have discussed today, face challenges that we, their peers, and wider society often struggle to understand.

We need to make sure that our systems are in place to give them the best help possible at the earliest possible stage to lay the trust and foundation for a successful and happy life.

3.12 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. First, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) for securing this important debate this afternoon. She is probably the most knowledgeable MP in the House on this issue. As she said, she spoke on this issue in the House more than 21 years ago, and it could be quite frustrating for her that 21 years later she is still raising some of those same issues. It shows her tenacity that she has not given up and, hopefully, we might see some movement this afternoon. We live in hope.

We have heard thoughtful contributions this afternoon from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), and from the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) who is a Front-Bench spokesperson for the Scottish National party. We have had very thoughtful contributions. Debates are sometimes disappointing. I was in the debate on brain tumours yesterday and there was standing room only. I would not like to think that this debate is any less important than one that needs to have large numbers of people contributing, but let us hope that in our contributions today the quality will outweigh the quantity. I also thank the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for her interventions.

What comes across very clearly is that we are sending a message to Sir Martin Narey—the hon. Member for Telford mentioned him—before the publication of his review that we hope to see reforms that will support and improve the lives of looked-after children in residential care. This debate has been on the wider aspects of the Narey review, but there are two areas that I wish to touch on this afternoon: out-of-area placements, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport, and the criminalisation of looked-after children.

Ever since the passing of the Children Act 1989, there has been a strong statutory duty on local authorities to place a child who enters the care system in the local authority area and ensure that their needs are met. However, guidance released by the Department last summer stated:

“There will be circumstances where a distant placement will be the most suitable for a child”.

Since then, there has been a clear trajectory in Government thinking that has raised the many concerns eloquently highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport. It is important that children receive the best care possible and, in certain circumstances, that may mean that an out-of-area placement is necessary to meet their needs. However, there is no conclusive evidence to support that strategy becoming wider practice. That is why the evidence that was used to come to the Government’s conclusion must be clarified.

Until out-of-area placements’ effectiveness is made clearer, it is important that they do not become the norm, yet when we see more and more children living more than 20 miles away from what they define as their home—their local area—it is not hard to believe that this is now becoming common practice. Recent Department for Education figures show that since 2010 we have seen an increase of over 20% in the number of children placed out of area, which now totals 17.9% of looked-after children. We need to unpick why that is happening, and I hope that the Minister will clarify what is going on in his response to this debate.

We know it is not the case that all local authorities have a children’s home within their boundaries. Many are based, as we have heard, in the west midlands, the south-east and north-west. This is an issue of infrastructure, and I hope that that will be addressed in Sir Martin Narey’s review.

One example of how care homes work, which I believe should be considered by the Government, is the Scandinavian and Germanic model of residential care, with smaller children’s homes with highly educated social pedagogues in charge. This idea of social pedagogy was backed by the “Care Matters” White Paper in 2007, which finally took it out of the confines of academic discourse and brought it into practical policy development. It included a recommendation to pilot a model in England to gather more evidence. A pilot was commissioned by the Social Education Trust and managed by the National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care, a specialist unit under the watchful eye of the National Children’s Bureau.

Reviews of the pilots found that residential care staff welcomed the holistic and child-centred approach that social pedagogy could have on real change to the lives of children in residential care. The idea was backed as a valuable way to work in our residential care homes by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families in its looked-after children report in 2009. However, we have unfortunately seen this important step forward put on the back burner since the Government came to office in 2010. I am therefore interested to hear what assessment the DFE has made of how much this would cost and
whether it is feasible for the UK. It is clear that the model is working in other countries, and it was welcomed here during the pilots, so an assurance by the Minister to look into this further, as the previous Labour Government had done, would be welcome.

For some children, residential care is the best option to meet their needs, but what is best for children is being in an environment that they know. To rip them away from some of the only constants in their life, including their school place and links to positive support from family—let us remember that not all family members of a looked-after child are irresponsible—can be damaging. In addition, reduced access to social workers and other support services that they have grown accustomed to can be damaging.

It is also concerning when the private sector gets involved and fails to market the services correctly. In a recent case, a looked-after child was moved from Oxfordshire to an expensive placement in Wales, and sadly committed suicide shortly after arriving. The serious case review investigation identified the fact that the quality of the provision on offer was not what had been marketed at all.

Although removing a child from influences such as gang violence or sexual exploitation is honourable and necessary, there is a need to support a child to manage risks and build personal resilience in their home area, especially when many of them return there once they have left a children’s home. Can we blame them? It is the place they know best, where friends and family are, and we all have that homing instinct within us, after all. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation recently came out strongly against out-of-area placements, and it has lobbied for more investment in local communities and areas. That included making the case for renting a home in a child’s local area and supplying staff for children on a one-to-one basis, which is not dissimilar to the Scandinavian model that I mentioned earlier.

Many serious questions about out-of-area placements arise, including the involvement of private companies in the system, which must be addressed urgently by the Government. There is no better time, especially with the review pending, for the Government to take the bull by the horns and make significant strides in reforming the provision on offer to looked-after children. I hope that the Government anticipate that all the issues I have mentioned will be addressed in Sir Martin’s review. However, I hope that another area, which has recently been brought into the public debate, will be considered: the criminalisation of children in residential care.

Recently, the Howard League for Penal Reform released data that showed there had been more than 10,000 police call-outs to residential settings. That is more than two for every child in residential care, and many of the call-outs concerned the most minor of incidents. An excellent report from the Standing Committee for Youth Justice, by Claire Sands, entitled “Growing Up, Moving On”, deals with the long-term effect of even minor offences becoming a criminal record that is never wiped clean. The criminalisation of children in residential care is deeply concerning for children who are negatively labelled in many ways before they reach adulthood. If we add “criminal” to that list, we are burdening them further with a label that will impede any life chances that may come their way as they move into adulthood. There are some pertinent examples in “Growing Up, Moving On”, which I encourage hon. Members and the Minister to refer to. I hope that the Government are considering that issue seriously and that they will provide strong guidance to residential care homes to prevent further damage to the lives of children and young people by the very system that is trying to help and care for them.

We all want children, no matter what their background, to have the best start in life. That belief should be central to any reforms that affect the lives of children, and I hope that the Government will not squander the opportunity presented by Sir Martin’s review to take significant steps towards achieving that. I look forward to reading the review when it is published, and will continue to press the Government to keep the improvement of looked-after children’s lives at the heart of everything they do, ensuring that they are protected and nurtured and live a happy childhood, just like their peers.

3.22 pm

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): It is a pleasure to have you overseeing proceedings today, Mrs Gillan. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) on securing this valuable debate. As she reminded us in her typically humble way she has pursued the issue with unstinting commitment and authority for many years. I know she shares my determination that we should do all we can to protect vulnerable children across England and beyond, whether they are in residential care or any other form of placement. Her commitment has been demonstrated in her work as chair of the all-party group on runaway and missing children and adults, and as a member of my Department’s quality expert group on children’s homes in 2012. She was an important contributor to that work.

Although we await the impending Narey review of residential care, the debate is a welcome opportunity to consider the action that has already been taken, and the further important work now under way to improve quality, transparency, oversight and decision making in children’s residential care. I acknowledge the speeches by the hon. Members for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). I always accept an invitation from SNP Members to look at what they are doing north of the border, and it is one that I would extend in the opposite direction, particularly because of the work that we are doing to try to inject greater innovation into children’s services.

Although I want to keep my remarks to the discrete and important issue of residential care in England, there is one issue that I cannot allow to pass without challenge, and that is the care population in England. It is important not to oversimplify the reasons why a care population may fall or rise, and why there may be variations across the country. It is not always right to say that a rising care population is bad and a falling one is good. What matters is whether the right decisions are being made for each individual child. For example, in a high-performing practice-based social work area, staff can spot where children may be in a situation of neglect, and take them into care. If they are not performing well
they may miss the opportunity, so that the child remains outside state care. That is not good for the child, but it would not necessarily be reflected in the statistics, if we look at them in a simplistic way.

Children's homes are a vital part of the care landscape, particularly for older children and children for whom a family setting might not be the right placement. In England the law is very clear: where a child cannot live with their birth parents, the first port of call should be to look at the immediate family and see whether there is anyone who can support them, as an individual or as a group of relations or friends. That happens for many children in this country. Three quarters of young people in children's homes are between 14 and 17 years old and two thirds are likely to have a significant mental health difficulty. There are some excellent examples of good practice in supporting them, with homes providing superb care. I know from personal experience, and from visiting children's homes around the country, that that excellent care makes a real and lasting difference to children's lives. Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the dedicated care staff who do all they can to help change lives for the better.

I am the first to acknowledge, however, that despite the concerted efforts of consecutive Governments not all children's homes deliver as they should. As the hon. Member for Stockport set out, challenges remain. That is why, as we have heard, the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education asked Sir Martin Narey to undertake an independent review of children's residential care. Sir Martin, as hon. Members know, worked in the Prison Service and was the chief executive of Barnardo's. He is much respected in the field, and we look forward to receiving his report, whose purpose is to set out the role of residential care in the wider care system, and to make recommendations about how outcomes for children can be improved. It is a complex undertaking, but I expect the review to look at some key issues such as commissioning and the geographical distribution of children's homes, which the hon. Member for Stockport rightly concentrated on in her speech.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West raised the issue of criminalisation, and I have seen the report by the Howard League for Penal Reform. Sir Martin Narey has also seen it, and I hope that he will be able to address the issue in his review. We will wait to see what he has to say. The review’s call for evidence has received a strong response and Sir Martin will report later this spring. Understandably, I do not want to pre-empt the independent review’s findings, but I am determined to use it as a catalyst to help to drive further improvements in residential care and I hope that all, including hon. Members present for the debate, will continue to lend their support and expertise to the process.

It is right to acknowledge, as the hon. Member for Stockport does, that we have made significant progress in improving the quality and safety of residential care. We have introduced an enhanced legislative framework and a new set of quality standards for children's homes. We brought those standards in to move away from the de minimis approach and to focus much more on outcomes and what is being achieved for those young people. The standards are backed up by rigorous Ofsted inspection and they challenge managers and staff to apply their skills and professional judgment—that, to me, is important—to ensure that there is properly tailored, high-quality care for each and every child in their home, and to make it possible for children to reach their potential in a safe and secure environment. There is a protection of children’s standard, which requires homes to have the skills to identify and take effective action on concerns about a child’s welfare.

A £500,000 programme of training and support has been made available to help homes to embed those new standards, and to make that crucial shift to a more aspirational and outcome-focused way of working. Although it is too early to assess the full impact of the changes through the quality standards, the independent small-scale research that has been carried out on implementing the standards indicates that they have resulted in a greater focus on evidencing outcomes for young people, which is exactly what we wanted to see, and on the need to consult young people about improvements, so that they feel that they are part of their journey through care, rather than feeling that it is being “done” to them.

To that end, it is positive that 12% of the children's homes in England inspected between 1 April 2015 and 30 September 2015 were rated outstanding for their overall effectiveness, which is an increase of five percentage points from the same period in the previous year. In addition, because 62% of those in residential care have clinically significant mental health difficulties, which is something we should never overlook, I am pleased that the Department of Health has commissioned its own expert group to develop new care pathways, so that children living in children's homes can better access mental healthcare.

The NHS England five-year forward view for mental health, which was recently published, and local transformation plans bring focus and resources to meet the mental health needs of children, including those in children's homes. I also welcome the forthcoming publication of the quality standard from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence on attachment difficulties in children and young people who are looked after, adopted from care, in special guardianship, or on the edge of care. If professionals and others working with and caring for children in care, including in residential care, really understand how to address the presentation of attachment problems, significant progress can be made.

I will address the specific point made by the hon. Member for Stockport and other hon. Members about out-of-area placements. As the hon. Lady mentioned, in order to address that issue we have sought to strengthen protection for children placed out of area by ensuring that it is now the directors of children’s services who have oversight of all decisions to place a child in a distant placement, and local authorities should now consult the authority where they intend to place a child to ensure that the placement meets the child’s needs.

We should be clear that for some children a placement at distance may be right, due to risks associated with their own home area or, as the hon. Member for Rochdale pointed out, because of the need for a very specialised placement but, as has been highlighted, we should ensure that Ofsted and local authorities make sure the right placement is made for the right reason. Therefore,
as the hon. Member for Stockport said, it is a concern that there are still instances where the supply of places distorts too many decisions.

That is why we have improved the transparency and quality of data regarding children missing from care, to ensure that Government and local authorities have much more reliable data when they try to tackle this issue. Local authorities are now required to tell us about all instances of children going missing from their placements, even those that last less than 24 hours, because those 24 hours could be crucial.

Turning specifically to children’s homes, in January 2014, we strengthened children’s home regulations regarding children going missing from a home. All children’s homes must have clear policies to prevent children from going missing and they must respond when children go missing. It is no good their simply acknowledging that fact on a piece of paper; there needs to be follow-up action. We have also beefed up arrangements for monthly independent monitoring visits to children’s homes, to make sure that such action happens. Those visits scrutinise standards of safeguarding and care, and reports on visits are now sent to Ofsted. Those reports are valuable to identify concerns, and also patterns, as Ofsted continues its inspection of every children’s home.

We have strengthened regulation to ensure that local agencies, including the police, are more aware of vulnerable children in their area and therefore are more able to protect them. Ofsted can now share information on the location of children’s homes with the police. That practice was established by the expert group and many of us were extremely surprised to find that it was not happening before. However, it is now in place. In addition, children’s homes must notify their local authority of all admissions and leavers.

In this debate, it is important to acknowledge that for a very small number of children a secure home is the best option to address the reasons why they go missing from care. That is why we are improving the availability of this specialised provision, in partnership with the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, the Local Government Association, the Youth Justice Board and the Secure Accommodation Network.

By the summer, we will have determined the best long-term commissioning arrangements for secure homes. In the interim, we have funded secure homes to raise their capacity and improve the skills of their staff. With Hampshire County Council we have established for the first time a central point of contact and source of support for all local authorities seeking secure placements. On top of that, a further £10 million-worth of funding, alongside action from NHS England, will strengthen the quality of the mental health support available to children in secure children’s homes. I know that is an area that the hon. Member for Stockport has a deep interest in, and I am happy to keep her informed of developments as they occur.

All of this work will help, but I share the hon. Lady’s interest in the uneven distribution of children’s homes. Local authorities remain responsible for ensuring a sufficient range of placements for looked-after children and for managing local markets, which includes managing children’s homes. However, as has been identified, in 2013-14, 60% of children’s homes were concentrated in just three regions, including what for many of us participating in this debate is the shared region of the north-west, which accounts for a quarter of all children’s homes.

I should add that before 2012 there was no comprehensive overview of the location, status, quality, ownership and track record of children’s homes in England. That is why, as the hon. Lady mentioned, we set about pulling together all that data for the first time ever in the children’s homes data pack, which is a hugely valuable resource that enables patterns, trends, gaps and the like to be more easily spotted and acted on. Those who are in the role of commissioning places should use that information to be much smarter and savvier about how they commission them, so that they are not always the ones who have to acquiesce; the providers should try to ensure that they shape their homes to meet the demand from every local authority.

In tackling the issue of uneven distribution, I agree very much with the hon. Lady about the value of joint work between local authorities in ensuring adequate provision of homes. Research commissioned by the Department for Education from the Institute of Public Care showed that in May 2015 most local authorities were taking part in a wide variety of commissioning consortia and partnership arrangements. For instance, there are 14 regional or sub-regional commissioning consortia for residential care, and typically authorities were able to achieve 4% to 5% in savings for placement costs as a result of those arrangements. However, I believe that they can go much further.

Ann Coffey: The Minister is quite right—in the north-west, Placements Northwest provides that information. The difficulty is getting local authorities into a more proactive commissioning role, so that their staff sit down together not only to exchange information but to say, “In five years’ time, we will need this number of children’s homes and this number of places.” Without support, it is very difficult for local authorities to work with each other to do that.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, just for the information of Members here in Westminster Hall I will point out that I have had a report that we may have a vote shortly in the main Chamber. I leave it to the Minister and Ann Coffey to decide how long they speak, but I thought that it would be helpful to bring that information to your attention. I call the Minister to speak.

Edward Timpson: That is extremely helpful. Mrs Gillan, and I will take heed of that information as I continue.

As ever, the hon. Member for Stockport is right, and that is why we need to establish a much more coherent way for every local authority to carry out forward planning, not only about their residential care population but about their whole care population, including where people need to be placed and in what type of arrangements. There has to be some flexibility in the system—no one can predict exactly what the system will look like—but we can certainly have a far better and more cohesive approach than the one that currently exists.
There are some models out there, including in the north-east, where regional arrangements are much more solidified, but there is a lot more that we need to do. Sir Martin Narey is looking very carefully at this issue as part of his independent review. That is because the research that I referred to showed that consortia are confident that working together brings non-cash savings, primarily through sharing commissioning costs, procurement costs and other elements of working with providers, such as monitoring.

The devolution deals, including in Greater Manchester, where children’s services form part of those new regional arrangements, provide a real opportunity to shift that relationship between the purchaser and the provider in a much smarter way when it comes to commissioning.

As we look through every devolution deal, I am keeping a close eye to ensure that there is serious thinking on how the new children’s services can benefit from the new organisations. However, the new arrangements continue to develop, and we look forward to Sir Martin Narey’s recommendations on what more might be done.

Where there is good and innovative practice, I want to be able to share it more widely across the system. The way it is set up at the moment means that pockets of excellence are the preserve of those people. We need to open up the system so that those who are in a position to make good, strong decisions on behalf of vulnerable children are at the forefront not only of great practice, but of cleverer commissioning. Where there are ways of putting the purchaser in a stronger position, we should explore them carefully.

I listened with interest to the remarks that the hon. Member for Stockport made on the need for innovation and new models in residential care, and I absolutely agree with her. I am pleased to say that as part of the Government’s children’s social care innovation programme, which is £310 million over phases 1 and 2, we are testing two new models of residential care for children who are at risk or are victims of sexual exploitation. “Step Down”, based in the Aycliffe secure children’s home, targets the trauma experienced by victims of sexual exploitation and includes an extensive step-down service for children preparing to leave secure care. In addition, “Safe Steps”, a high-supervision children’s home model run by St Christopher’s Fellowship, is designed to protect girls at risk of sexual exploitation.

The learning that the innovation programme continues to give us and the many other associated projects will help generate further evidence of impact in the next six to 12 months that we can take forward. The innovation programme learning network will share those key findings through a series of publications and resources and through the new What Works Centre focusing on children’s social care. It will include a focus on residential care and will be launched at the end of the year.

The innovation programme provides a fantastic opportunity for front-line services and practitioners to show creativity and collaboration, and to explore new models of practice, including in residential care, as has been demonstrated. I would warmly welcome a range of high-quality bids focused on residential care for the current round of the programme, which was launched earlier this month. In that endeavour, I encourage the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West to look at where a bid based on the Scandinavian model that champions social pedagogy may add to the innovative practice we want to unleash.

The work I have outlined is only a small part of the work being undertaken in my Department. In January this year, we published “Children’s social care reform: a vision for change”, which outlined our ambitious programme of work in the key areas of people and leadership; practice and systems; and governance and accountability. The programme aims to achieve our vision of every child in the country, whatever their age, background, ethnicity or gender being able to fulfil their potential. The Narey review will sit alongside those wider reforms once it is published.

I am enormously grateful for the support that the hon. Member for Stockport has given to this issue yet again today. She has expressed some important, well-argued concerns, which I will consider carefully in light of this debate and the work of Sir Martin Narey. I hope that this debate reassures her that the Government echo many of the concerns she has expressed. The steps we have taken underline the importance of ensuring that residential care provides the high-quality care that vulnerable children deserve. We cannot be satisfied until we have achieved a system that consistently delivers excellent care. We should expect nothing less for our most vulnerable children than the care we would want for our own children.

3.44 pm

Ann Coffey: I thank the Minister for his reply. He has demonstrated yet again his complete and continuing commitment to improving the lives of looked-after children. He is a very experienced Minister—I think he has been in the role for four years—and he reflects the value of having a Minister in place for that length of time. It is an idea that should be considered for other positions.

I thank all other Members for their contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) has also taken a long interest in this area, and he is right to remind everyone that residential children’s homes offer a very good-quality and much-needed provision. They are not a last resort; for some children, they should be a first resort. I thank the SNP Members for their observations on the situation in Scotland, which are always welcome. I also thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). She is also incredibly committed to this area, and has also been in post for quite a long time. It just shows the value of people being in post for a long time.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House has considered children’s homes.
Port of Liverpool: Road and Rail Access

[Mr Christopher Chope in the Chair]

4.1 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road and rail access to the Port of Liverpool.

It is a pleasure to participate in this debate under your stewardship, Mr Chope. The port of Liverpool, which is primarily situated in my constituency and falls within Bootle and Seaforth, has a long history of serving this country in times of peace and war. Many buildings around the port hinterland still bear the marks and shadows of the bombing of the port in the May blitz of 1941. As we approach the 75th anniversary of the bombing, I pay tribute to everyone who served on or near the port in those dark days and to the people who were killed or injured, of whom there were many.

The port became a lifeline to these islands during the war in general, and during the battle of the Atlantic in particular. Between 1 and 8 May 1941, over seven consecutive nights, German planes dropped 870 tonnes of high-explosive bombs and more than 112,000 incendiary bombs around the Bootle, Litherland and Seaforth environs. Lord Haw Haw addressed the people of Bootle with the words, "the kisses on your windows won’t help you", referring to the tape supposed to prevent flying glass. Unbelievably, only 10% to 15% of the properties in the town were left unscathed.

Thankfully, those days are gone, and we have much better, friendlier and more peaceful relationships with our European neighbours. During the dim recessory days of the 1980s and for most of the 1990s, our connection with the European Union was a lifeline when the Government turned their back on us and talked of the managed decline of the city. I am pleased that those days are over, and I look forward to devolution gaining pace, which will enable us to run many of our own affairs rather than be run from this place.

That sets the context for what I want to say about rail and road access to the port of Liverpool. I am afraid that the degree of synergy, co-operation and collaboration among the various agencies responsible for transport has been woeful. I believe that the devolution process will help to address that lacuna. While Highways England pushes on with its assessment of the road links—new constructions or reconstructions—Network Rail appears to be taking a "mañana" approach to the need for significant investment in the rail links to the port. It seems to have put the rail freight connection in the "too difficult to do" box. Highways England is talking of anything between £120 million for a new road and £300 million for a realigned road being needed. Meanwhile, back on the west coast, Network Rail has decided that £10 million in total over three financial years will do the trick. That is the sum of investment in the port rail infrastructure. To use a phrase much used in Merseyside, are they having a laugh?

Highways England has not covered itself in glory. It has shown a pretty grim attitude over many years to the people who have to live along the Dunnings Bridge corridor. The local authority and my councillor colleagues have had to fight tooth and nail, through their contractors, to keep the Dunnings Bridge corridor cleaned, to get its street lights sorted out, to get its gullies unblocked, to have the grass cut and to enforce standards on lorry drivers who feel free to use the lay-bys as toilets, among other things.

Highways England seems incapable of providing soundproofing to just half a dozen semi-detached houses that have no acoustic protection from the thousands of cars and lorries that pass through night and day. It spent huge sums on glossy leaflets and several million pounds on decommissioning a traffic island on the route to the docks, but it seems incapable of sorting out triple glazing or some other acoustic amelioration. I am afraid that the Government's recent response to me on that matter does not instil confidence that this long-standing issue will be sorted any time soon.

For those and other reasons, many people in my constituency and beyond have little confidence in Highways England’s ability to get the road link from the M57 and M58 right. Will it listen to calls for significant tunnelling along either route—in the Rimrose Valley country park or the Dunings Bridge-Church Road corridor? What other more or less radical plans will it consider? Have the decisions already been made? The devil is in the detail. The agency's history of dealing with local concerns sets the scene for local communities' levels of confidence in future plans and proposals.

At the mention of the building or reconstruction of major highways, Highways England's lethargy dissipates and its energy levels grow, because they are sexy, big projects. Why would it bother with the routine things that affect people's daily lives when it can pore over road plans and spend hundreds of millions of pounds to boot?

Many people in the area surrounding the port—or the docks, as it is better known—are suspicious of the local benefits that the expansion will bring. That will not come as a big surprise to most people in the area. People understand the regional, national and even international benefits, but they ask themselves what the local benefits for jobs and growth will be. They are sceptical. I do not share that level of scepticism. I believe that the port expansion will bring benefits to our community.

I have discussed the issue with many of my local councillor colleagues, including Councillor Gordon Friel, who is a councillor in that area. However, it is difficult to break through the scepticism when people believe the vast majority of port-related traffic will simply move in and out of the port along one or other road, and when the rail option, which most believe to be the most appropriate, languishes on a shelf somewhere, if indeed it has even been produced. The rail line I refer to is the Bootle branch line. It is about 7 miles long and runs from the west coast main line to the port. I use word "runs" loosely, because it is in a dreadful state. I will not take up Members' time by setting out how dreadful it actually is—suffice it to say that it is.

We can compare that with the activity of professional rail aficionados, civil servants and the Government on High Speed 2 or Crossrail 1 and 2. We can compare the £16 billion spent on Crossrail’s 73 miles of track and 26 miles of tunnels, and the £30 billion projected for Crossrail 2, with the £10 million over three years that is to be spent on the Bootle branch line, which serves a
port that is one of the largest in the country and expanding. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced £80 million just to start the planning for Crossrail 2—a staggering eight times the amount that will be spent on the actual works on the Bootle branch line. Crossrail 1 cost £210 million per mile of track, so recent announcements of £340 million for rail services across my region equate to only 1.5 miles of Crossrail 1 track. The figure for Crossrail 2 will be double that for Crossrail 1.

Before anyone suggests that Liverpool city region should be grateful, don’t bother. The Government need to reprioritise capital spending, of which the south-east, and London, in particular get the lion’s share, to other areas—then we might be grateful. I agree with Mayor Joe Anderson of Liverpool and my colleague Councillor Ian Maher of Sefton Council that we now need transformational funding. I have a cunning plan: to rename the Bootle branch Crossrail 3. By that measure we would get money thrown at it, and the Minister would be falling over himself to accommodate us—but perhaps the plan is not cunning enough.

All stakeholders agree that a multi-modal solution is required. The requirement to reprioritise rail access has been talked about for decades. The last study before the recent Highways England assessment was in 2011. It concluded that there was spare rail capacity, but that the port facilities were a major barrier. Five years later, that issue has still not been addressed. In 2011, it was estimated that a modal shift to rail could increase the amount of freight carried by rail from 2% to 11%. In the 2015 study, it was considered too “ambitious” to use a 15% rail share, due to funding constraints and the ability to persuade freight hauliers of the advantages of rail. The study concluded:

“It is clear that any increase in rail freight beyond 24 trains per day will most likely require a new rail line to be constructed to the port and there are expected to be a number of significant issues associated with this”.

By the way, Crossrail 1 will have 24 trains per hour each way. I accept that we are not comparing like with like, but the point is well made for illustrative purposes. So there is a surprise: evidence of a mentality that, as I suggested earlier, wants to put the issue in the “too difficult” box, because no one will care, and in any event it is not London.

Network Rail therefore has no such plans in its programme. If the Government were serious about rail freight, other than getting to grips with Network Rail, they would increase the investment in rail network in and out of the port of Liverpool to ensure the maximum modal shift to rail, and provide incentives for freight hauliers to shift to rail and so avoid overly congested roads.

The Government gave the port operators a significant regional growth fund grant to expand the port, even though a feasible strategy to ensure that goods could be moved in a variety of ways was not in place. I am afraid that the chaotic, unplanned, uncosted, piecemeal approach to the port’s transport needs is creating tension and irritation in local communities and uncertainty across the board, with a perception, at the very least, that Governments—not just this one—have not simply taken their eye off the ball but never had it on the ball in the first place.

I am sure the Minister can see that the Government have a responsibility to ensure that economic development and growth is seen as being just as important in the Liverpool city region as anywhere else. Given that, a crumbs-from-the-table approach to the infrastructure needs of the port of Liverpool is just not good enough. It is disrespectful to social, economic and business communities alike. I therefore exhort the Minister to take a fresh look at the plans, or rather the lack of plans, that Network Rail has for non-road port traffic ingress and egress. He should also ensure that Highways England stops acting like a robber baron and treats my community with the respect that it deserves.

If you detect an air of irritation in my voice, Mr Chope, you would be correct. The Luftwaffe could not push Bootle, Litherland or Seaforth around, so Highways England and Network Rail have little chance, and they would be well advised to take that into account in their deliberations.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this debate on road and rail access to the port of Liverpool. However, I am a little more optimistic and excited about the prospects for the city region. Recent times have seen an acceleration in the growth of the local economy and the creation of private sector jobs and business start-ups.

Liverpool is an historic maritime city and much of its growth came from its port, which is still a key economic asset for the city region, the north and our whole country. The local enterprise partnership’s Superport strategy is focused on growing the port, enabling the creation of a further 21,000 jobs by 2020. Peel Ports, the port’s owners, shares that vision and has invested significantly, including in Liverpool2, which is due to open later this year and has a new biomass handling facility. The port of Liverpool can handle vessels that carry between 3,000 and 4,000 20-foot-long containers. In order not to become marginalised on important trade routes, Liverpool needs to be able to handle larger vessels, and the new Liverpool2 facility at Seaforth will enable it to do so.

As hon. Members know, the Government do not directly invest in UK ports; the hundreds of millions of pounds invested by Peel Ports is private sector investment. That investment and the economic benefits that it brings will be stymied if it is difficult to move the goods around the UK after they have arrived in Liverpool. That is where the role of Government in ensuring that our road and rail networks meet the needs of people and businesses comes to the fore.

Improving multi-modal access to the port is a key priority for the Government and the Liverpool City Region combined authority. With the full support of the port, Highways England, Network Rail and my Department, the city region is leading on the delivery of a strategy to improve access to the port involving all modes of transport.

On roads, the A5036 is vital to the Liverpool city region, its businesses and, in particular, the port of Liverpool. The road is the principal link between the port and the motorway network. At current levels of port activity, the mix of local and port traffic is...
already causing difficulties, constraining the economic opportunities for the city region. As part of our £15 billion road investment strategy, therefore, we committed to a comprehensive upgrade to improve traffic conditions on that link.

Highways England is taking forward the development of the scheme. Consideration is currently being given to options, including an online one and an offline one, the latter being through the Rimrose valley. Both options present difficulties, which is why I recognise the local sensitivities, and that is why I welcome Highways England’s clear commitment to work with local stakeholders throughout the development and delivery of the scheme.

A recent programme of public information sessions has been held. I understand that they provided useful feedback for the project team. In addition, two newsletters have been produced, and local MPs have been kept informed and involved. The hon. Gentleman was highlighting how involved, and sceptical, the local community are. I make the commitment that public involvement in development of the plans will continue.

The next stage is for Highways England to move from option identification to option selection, with the aim of identifying those options that are to be taken forward to public consultation before the preferred route is announced. The current timetable has the public consultation happening this autumn, leading to a preferred route announcement in spring next year; the forecast for the start of works is spring 2020.

The A5036 scheme is only one element in a comprehensive access strategy being led locally by the combined authority. Measures to improve rail access have been considered. The Government recognise the importance of rail freight in delivering reduced congestion and lower carbon emissions. The investment that we are making through the strategic freight network fund includes a number of projects that improve access to the port of Liverpool, three of which are: the doubling of the single line link from the Bootle branch line into the port estate; increasing line speed on the Bootle branch; and improved signalling at the Earlestown West junction. All those schemes are scheduled to be completed by 2018-19 and will double the number of freight paths to the port to 48.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the biomass required to support more environmentally friendly power generation is already carried by rail from the port of Liverpool to its destination. The four trains per day that currently run are forecast to rise to 10, so rail is vital to the port’s current and future plans and we are investing to support its future growth. In addition, both Network Rail and Transport for the North have been studying the strategic requirements of freight movements across the north of England, and their work will inform future investment planning processes.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the investment going into HS2. The key reason why that project needs to be taken forward is that it will inject capacity into the rail network. The west coast main line, on which £9 billion has been spent in recent years, is nevertheless forecast to be full very soon. That means not that every train will be full but that we will not be able to put more train parts on to the track. The injection of capacity that HS2 will provide will free up capacity for freight.

There are of course other modes of transport. I want to highlight coastal shipping. Peel is investing in facilities on the Manchester ship canal so that more freight can be moved inland by water, and it is also promoting greater use of coastal shipping, which should help to reduce the growth in road traffic.

I should mention the wider investments we are making across the Liverpool city region. I understand why there is a degree of scepticism about transport investment in our country, because we have had a stop-start approach to rail and road investment for many years. Arguably, there has been more stop than start, but I do not think that accusation can be levelled fairly at this Government. We are looking at a record level of rail investment—the highest since the Victorian era. Our first road investment strategy features £15 billion of investment, which is the highest in the road industry since the 1970s. All parts of the country are benefiting from that.

Between now and 2019, there will be £340 million to provide a bigger, better, more reliable railway for passengers. More than £179 million from the local growth fund has been provided to the local enterprise partnership and combined authority to deliver a number of transport schemes that are essential to local growth. There are provisions in the devolution deal to support Merseytravel to make progress with the locally funded procurement of new trains for the Merseyrail network. We have also supported the new Mersey Gateway crossing in Halton, one of the largest local transport schemes in the country, which is now under construction.

The north of England rail infrastructure upgrade programme has already delivered a significant benefit. The electrification of the routes from Liverpool to Manchester and Wigan has taken 15 minutes of the fastest journey between Liverpool and Manchester. On 1 April we saw the start of the Northern and TransPennine franchises, both of which will see significant investment—particularly in new rolling stock—that will benefit everybody in the area and provide an enormous boost for the rail sector.

Another important change that has not been mentioned is putting Transport for the North on a statutory basis. The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, under which it was established, received Royal Assent only in January. It has brought together the 29 transport authorities throughout the north. I believe that we will plan transport like this much more in future. It is from the north, for the north. Transport for the North will be working alongside Highways England and Network Rail to plan investment in the area. Of course, it is already involved not only in planning but in the running of the rail franchises, which are being run jointly by the Department for Transport and Rail North. Again, that is run in the north, for the north. This is the first time that has happened.

We are seeing significant devolution in the world of transport that will bring benefits not only to the hon. Gentleman’s area but throughout the north. We are working with Transport for the North on northern powerhouse rail, which is sometimes called HS3. It will provide a fast link from Liverpool across to Hull, linking Manchester and Leeds, as well as Manchester airport and Sheffield. It is all about creating new fast links between northern cities and will, of course, release more capacity for freight. We agree that moving freight
on to our railways is part of the answer to improving
the freight sector’s environmental performance. As northern
powerhouse rail develops, Liverpool’s aspiration for a
direct connection to HS2—the mayor has personally
told me about that—will be considered.

I hope that I have provided assurance to the hon.
Gentleman that we fully recognise that it is most important
that we improve access to the port—access to ports and
airports has been underestimated in this country’s transport
planning for too long—and that we are working
constructively with local partners on implementing their
multimodal strategy by investing in both road and rail
schemes, through which we are playing our part in
meeting the ambitions of the port, the city region and
the north of England. What is happening at the port is a
huge boost for the economies of all the affected areas,
and it is therefore critical that we maximise the opportunities
that this private investment brings by making corresponding
public investment in connectivity to ensure that we
capitalise on it for the benefit of everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm
Sitting suspended.

4.30 pm
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered regional variations in the rate
of teenage pregnancy.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Chope. I am pleased to have been able to secure this
afternoon’s debate; it is timely, because data published
by the Office for National Statistics in March showed a
steady decline in the average rates of teenage pregnancy
in England and Wales. Those data have been widely
celebrated, and rightly so. Teenage pregnancy is a huge
barrier to opportunity; it creates lifelong and entrenched
disadvantage. The causes and consequences so often
overlap—deprivation, family breakdown, low aspiration,
intergenerational worklessness, mental health difficulties,
poor educational attainment and poor school attendance.

Despite the welcome fall in average rates, England
and Wales still has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy
in western Europe, so we must guard against complacency.
An average is just an average and often masks extremes
and regional variations. It is not really enough to say,
“We are going in the right direction.”

Although high rates of teen pregnancy are closely
correlated with deprivation, teen pregnancy should never
be accepted as inevitable in any area, because that
would fail the young people affected, many of whose
lives are already profoundly insecure and who may see
motherhood as a positive way out. Those are the young
people most in need of help and support.

Hon. Members will share my commitment to improving
the life chances of young people in our constituencies,
so I would like briefly to talk about the situation in
Telford. Back in 1998, Telford had a teen conception
rate of 64 per thousand. It is no doubt good news that it
has fallen to approximately 32 per thousand—it has
halved, so the situation in Telford is much better than it
was. However, in 1998 the rate of teen pregnancy in
Telford was 36% higher than the national average, but
today it is 42% higher, so rather than getting better, the
gap between Telford’s teen pregnancy rates and the
national average is getting worse.

I would argue that high rates of teen conception are
not inevitable. My constituency lies in the heart of
Shropshire. Although Telford is in the worst-performing
decile of local authority areas, more affluent rural
Shropshire, which surrounds Telford, is in the best-
performing decile, with some of the lowest teen pregnancy
rates in the country. Based on that fact alone, it would
be too easy to argue that deprivation, poverty, health
inequality and all that causes those difficulties cannot
be improved. Naturally, many demographic and social
factors play a part, and I fully accept that it is difficult
to find a like-for-like comparison, which is why an
average does not tell us that much. Equally, it is too
often assumed in the most deprived areas that nothing
much can be done. Good things get better and bad
things get worse if they are not tackled actively.

There are some individual success stories in local
authorities, which other local authority areas could
learn from, and I will mention a couple. In 1998,
Leicester had a teen pregnancy rate of 64 per thousand.
That fell to 25 per thousand in 2014, which is close to
the national average. Similarly, Caerphilly had a rate of
70 per thousand in 1998, which has also fallen to about the 25 per thousand mark. In Hammersmith and Fulham, a similar decline has been experienced, with the rate falling from 70 per thousand to 22 per thousand, which is just above the average.

There are plenty of examples of how high teenage pregnancy rates can be tackled over time, but I want specifically to draw attention to the model in the London borough of Wandsworth, which has been a success story that other local authorities would do well to look at closely. In 1998, the rate of teenage pregnancy there was 71 per thousand. Wandsworth is now outperforming the national average, with a rate of 19 per thousand. That has been achieved through a true commitment to focusing on teenage pregnancy. It was not just a statement in the joint strategic needs assessment. Teenage pregnancy was treated as the No. 1 indicator of how the local authority was performing, and all partner agencies took that view. There was a clearly defined plan, with achievable goals, a teen pregnancy unit, outreach work and early intervention to identify the young people most at risk and provide support to address multiple causes and raise self-esteem. There was a genuine commitment and a belief in improving the life chances of those least able to help themselves. Young people's aspirations were built up and their resilience was strengthened to help them to make informed decisions and fulfil their potential.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, not least because Torbay, my constituency, has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the whole of the south-west region. Does she agree that the statistics show the importance of having leadership at local level, given the wide variation between local authorities, let alone regions? For example, the rate in my constituency is very similar to that in the north-east, yet only a few miles away West Devon has one of the lowest rates in the entire country.

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend eloquently makes the point that I hope to have made by the end of my speech. Torbay does indeed stand out as a stark example of the significant regional variation across the country. He rightly says that one would not necessarily expect that, given the demographic and age profile of his constituency.

The way the success was achieved in Wandsworth was that resources were targeted at the young people aged 15 to 17 who were most likely to become pregnant, such as young people in care and care leavers, those with disrupted family relationships and the children of teen parents. We had a debate earlier about young people in care and care leavers. We have also excluded young people not in education, employment or training, or who does not like school and has been excluded. Young people not in education, employment or training are another group who are among the most likely to be affected by teenage pregnancy. We have also touched on the role of a disrupted childhood and difficult relationships within families.

I pay particular tribute to the Government for their life chances strategy. I want to see a continued focus on championing stronger families, and addressing teenage pregnancy in the areas and groups where the rates are highest.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My heart swells to hear my hon. Friend speaking so warmly about the Government's priorities. Placing families at the heart of policy and decision making is our stated aim, recognising that strong family relationships are fundamental to any and every outcome, be it prosperity or health outcomes. I think she would agree that it is not just the young girl, her extended family and the father of the child who are affected by teenage pregnancy; the child coming into that situation will suffer the same potential social inequalities. This is a generational issue that we must champion.

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The rates of teenage pregnancy among children of teenage parents are extremely high, so we should take the opportunity to target the groups that we know are more likely to be affected. By any measure, teenage pregnancy rates are a primary indicator of an unhealthy society, and it is right that local authorities are charged with addressing the issue. I say to all local authorities, "Please don't take your eye off the ball." Whatever challenges a particular area may face, let us not accept it as some sort of immutable fact that can never be turned around. Some local authority areas with the highest rates of teenage pregnancy have been successful in bringing the rate down to below the national average, whereas many
other local authority areas have not. It is essential that local authorities look closely at what they are doing and whether it is good enough. It simply is not acceptable to say that teen pregnancy is an inevitable consequence of deprivation and that there is nothing more to be done.

There are local authorities that have brought about real change, and there are others where local politicians have sometimes parked this sensitive issue. I ask the Minister to do everything he can to encourage local authorities that are performing less well to learn from the outstanding examples that I have mentioned. Does he agree that some local authorities should explain publicly why they are not making better progress? The life chances of young people depend on how their local authority addresses the issue, and I urge all local authorities where teen pregnancy rates have not come down closer to the national average in recent years to reassess why they are not doing what they should be doing and how they could do things better. We all owe it to all our children to ensure that they have strong life chances and the potential for a better future. Addressing high rates of teenage pregnancy in places where they are at the extreme end of the spectrum is essential to achieving that.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was expecting a few more hon. and right hon. Members to participate in this debate, which is important to me as the Member for Strangford and for a great number of Members who would probably wish to participate but for whom there are many other distractions in the House today, with votes and other commitments. I am sure that those who are not here wish that they were and will read Hansard tomorrow.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this debate. I have some comments on the Northern Ireland perspective, and it is disappointing that the research on regional variations in the rate of teenage pregnancy has nothing on Northern Ireland. Perhaps that will change when we have other debates on similar issues. Teenage pregnancy is a public health concern in both the developed and the developing world.

Hopefully most of us in the Chamber have had the joy of holding our own babies in our hands when they were first born. The birth of a new baby in the world is a joy. Today we have had the chance to see the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) with her new baby boy, and not a person passed by without a smile on their face and without congratulating her on the birth of her firstborn. Seeing a new life in the world, loved by their mother and by everyone, is a joy.

When we talk about teenage pregnancies, we must recognise that many of those who become pregnant have a strong, loving relationship to their babies, the new additions to their family. In my constituency office, I have the privilege as the Member for Strangford to engage with many of those young mothers, helping them get the housing benefits, care, nurseries and other support that they need. Those are some of the things that we do. This debate is not meant to be about judging teenage pregnancies in any way; it is about what we can do to help and assist. My contribution will be along those lines, and will focus on how we can assist those young ladies who are teenage mothers.

The United Kingdom has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the whole of Europe. The most recent data show that teenage pregnancy rates in Northern Ireland continue to fall, including— I will qualify this later on—in my own constituency, where they have been relatively high in the past. Ours is still the third highest of all the constituencies in the Province, so my constituency still has a health issue to address. Health is devolved, so the Minister does not have responsibility for replying on that, but hopefully he can take note of my contribution.

Northern Ireland’s teenage pregnancy rates are now at a record low, according to the most recent figures released by the Department of Health in the Province, with a fall in teenage pregnancy rates of 37% in the last 10 years. That is a significant decrease, and I believe that it is caused by some of the policies that we have adopted. In December 2008, when I was in the old Northern Ireland Assembly and made some inside contribution to the relevant debates there, the regional sexual health promotion strategy and action plan was launched and set a target to reduce the rate of births to teenage mothers under 17 by 25% by 2013. We have exceeded that, and the target has been well beaten. The figures have gone the way that the NI Executive and Assembly desired, and the strategy undoubtedly played a large part in that.

I will mention a bit about that, if I can. Better sexual education and availability of contraception have helped drive down the rate of teenage pregnancy in the Province, and although the overall fertility rate in Northern Ireland has been falling, it is most welcome to see it falling more significantly where we want it to do so. Regional variations in teenage pregnancy rates are apparent, but within those, there are also key socioeconomic variations. The hon. Member for Telford referred to some of the reasons for teenage pregnancies, and I am sure that other Members who speak will comment on them.

As we have heard, there are many explanations for the variations in teenage pregnancy. As the rate falls nationwide, we need to take note of those indicators and of similar research to develop a strategy that can work nationally. I have always said that it is important to do so. I bring a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) will bring a Scottish perspective. We bring our perspectives to add to the debate and show that where what we are doing can be replicated in other parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we should do so. If we see something being done in England, Wales or Scotland that can help us, we in Northern Ireland will look towards that as well. That is why I am commenting about how we can work together.

The factors involved in teenage pregnancy can affect anyone, regardless of where they are in the country, so they should be at the core of identifying how to reduce teenage pregnancy rates further and support teenage mothers. We want to support them. We want them to have the support that we as Members of Parliament can give, and that the Government, society and families can give as well. The hon. Member for Telford mentioned the effect on families, and we need to look at that as well.

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points. He referred to the potential to learn from other areas and he gave examples of the progress
that has been made on the strategy in Ulster. Can he give a couple of examples of specific actions that have made a difference?

Jim Shannon: I am coming to that if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me. He always makes a valuable contribution in his interventions. He and I seem to always attend these debates. Whatever they are, we are here together to make our contributions. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I will come on to the issues.

Within the main council area that dominates my parliamentary constituency, teenage pregnancy rates are the third highest—unfortunately—in Northern Ireland. Although there has been a decrease of 37%, I represent the area with the third highest teenage pregnancy rates in Northern Ireland. It is important for me to learn from other Members—to learn from their experience and understand their knowledge can add to the research that I have done so that I can take that back to Northern Ireland and to my constituency of Strangford.

Progress has undoubtedly been made through personal education. Families and those who are close such as brothers and sisters—probably more sisters to sisters or mothers to daughters—is something that we perhaps should focus on more. Sometimes relationships break down between parents. Young girls can find themselves at a loose end and sometimes things happen. Things happen for many reasons. They can happen because of what has happened at home or because of what is happening in society. They can happen because of peer pressure as well. Those are issues that Government cannot legislate for, but which we as parents need to do something about. We need to encourage the people who have influence to do likewise. When it comes to some of the things that we have done, I can point to the education plan, setting a target for reduction, and the availability of contraception. We have to address those issues. Sometimes we have to be aware that young people will want to do their own thing, but sometimes we have to be aware of what we can do as a society.

Caroline Ansell: I note the hon. Gentleman’s points on the availability of contraception and appropriate advice. We tend to assume that we are talking in the main about unplanned teenage pregnancies, and that is not always the case. Does the hon. Gentleman think that we should do more to show that the role of parenting is a hugely challenging one? It is very rewarding, but challenging and costly—emotionally, financially and socially. Do we do enough in that regard?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her wise words. We in this Chamber will say yes, we have done our bit, but many of us here could perhaps do that wee bit more. People could be more conscious of where their children are at night; what they are doing; who they are with and what their peers are doing. I see this in my advice centre all the time; I see some of the issues. I am not here to criticise or to point the finger. That is not what this is about. This is about saying how we and Government can help and assist young people. We should aim to try and enable people to see how we can reduce teenage pregnancies, which we have done in Northern Ireland in significant numbers, but we need to do more. When it comes to whether people can do more, yes, they can. I have three boys—three young men. One is married and one is about to be engaged. If the third boy leaves it until the age of his dad, he has 10 years to go before he gets married, as I was married at 32.

We have to look at the issues individually. Society itself, but particularly the role of parents, is important. The hon. Lady is right. The role is critical and necessary. The Prime Minister has often said that families are at the core of society. I believe that as well, and that is where we need to start.

Although progress has undoubtedly been made, we cannot take our eye off the ball. With research ongoing, the Government need to keep on top of the issue of teenage pregnancies and work with the various bodies—private, voluntary and public sector—to continue the good work that has been done in Northern Ireland and elsewhere and to adapt to the ever-changing goals in the effort to address teenage pregnancies.

For me, the issue is knowing how we can do things better. The hon. Member for Telford referred to some of the reasons for teenage pregnancy. When we consider those reasons, we cannot ignore the variations and variables in the regions of the whole of the United Kingdom. The Department of Health has made clear what it has done to drive down the overall rate of teenage pregnancies and recognised socioeconomic variations. In June 2014, the Department amended the 2008 strategy to include the aim of reducing “the gap in births to teenage mothers living in deprived areas.”

Identifying and targeting the population most at risk of an unplanned and possibly unwanted pregnancy is vital to both prevention and improving the accessibility and uptake of post-natal medical care. That is another issue that we have addressed. I hope that these comments are helpful and specific. Regardless of their background, all sexually active teenage girls are at risk of becoming pregnant. That fact cannot be denied. Teenage mothers are more likely to be in what are known as routine or semi-routine occupations—for example, sales and services operatives or low-grade administration. I am not doing those jobs down, but that is what the statistics say.

Research evidence from the Family Planning Association in Northern Ireland suggests that risk factors include low self-esteem; poverty; low educational attainment; declining educational achievement; alienation and non-attendance at school; children being looked after by health and social care trusts; children of teenage mothers; a history of sexual abuse; mental health problems; and a history of offending behaviour. Those are all explanations for the variations in the rate of teenage pregnancy. When we look at these issues as we did in Northern Ireland, we can come up with a strategy. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) asked what we did. That is what we did, and it has made a significant contribution to where we are.

I again thank the hon. Member for Telford for giving us the opportunity to participate in this debate. When the shadow Minister speaks and the Minister responds, I hope that we will hear how we can address teenage pregnancy to an even greater degree, because there are many ways we can do that.
4.57 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing this debate and for her very interesting speech.

When we are discussing teenage pregnancy, it is critical that we do not seek to stigmatise or hurt young women. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, every baby born should be celebrated and every mother supported. Having a baby at any age has its challenges, and we should always seek first to offer assistance rather than dole out judgment.

Since the SNP Scottish Government were elected in 2007, the rate of teenage pregnancies in Scotland has fallen every single year, and it has dropped by about 35% in six years. All the NHS board areas in Scotland have seen reductions in their rates of teenage pregnancies. In the under-20 age group, it has decreased by 34.7%; in the under-18 age group, it has decreased by 41.5%; and in the under-16 age group, it has decreased by 39.8%. All that has not happened by accident. The SNP seeks to give every young person in the country a good start in life, regardless of their circumstances. The Scottish Government and the Minister for Children and Young People, Aileen Campbell MSP, have been working to achieve the goal of making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up, and they are leading policy in early years intervention.

The hon. Member for Telford mentioned looked-after children in particular. I draw attention to the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland—CELCIS—which does great work. The Scottish Government have also worked in a number of different ways to support care leavers by giving them an entitlement to university and further training. There are lots of measures to build their self-esteem and make them feel like the valued part of society that they are.

At the weekend, the SNP pledged to give every newborn baby born in Scotland a Finnish-style baby box to ensure that families have all the things they need to start in life. That programme has been hugely successful in Finland in reducing infant mortality from one of the highest rates in the world to one of the lowest. Interestingly, infant mortality is 60% higher among babies born to teenage mothers, so the baby box has the potential to become an important intervention for this vulnerable group.

It takes time and effort to change the causes and history of teenage pregnancy, as the hon. Member for Strangford indicated. I recently visited the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in Glasgow. It is doing interesting and worthwhile work to support young mums. It is piloting an intervention that was started by Yale University called “Minding the Baby”. A health visitor and a social worker work with teenage mums from around seven months into pregnancy until the child is two. That very intensive model has resulted in benefits in improved attachment and better parenting skills. It has raised the self-esteem of the young women involved and had a wider effect on their families. Some have younger brothers and sisters who have seen a benefit in their family after teenage mums went through the programme, so there is a wider benefit to society. I was also delighted to hear that through the programme, a number of young women have been supported to breastfeed. That demographic has a low uptake of breastfeeding, but the babies gain a huge and significant benefit.

There is an undeniable correlation between deprivation and teenage pregnancy. Dundee is often mentioned very negatively in that light, but there has been significant progress. Over the past decade, Dundee has seen a 58% drop in teenage conception rates. That is credited to the close working of schools and the local health board and the valuable work of family-nurse partnerships. It is also credited to education. Dundee has a young mums’ unit, which keeps young women in full-time education, meaning that they do not lose out on their education—that vital piece of the jigsaw in moving out of deprivation.

The hon. Members for Telford and for Strangford mentioned the impact of sexual health and relationships education. The House of Commons Library research mentions in relation to England that it is unclear what obligation there will be for schools in England to provide sexual health and relationships education should the Government’s full academisation plans go through. The SNP sees the value in that education and urges the Government to clarify whether new academies will have an obligation to provide sex education in schools. It would be utterly unacceptable for schools to offer no sex education whatever.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned prevention and young men, who have an important role. It is not just up to young women; young men have a serious role in teenage pregnancy.

Jim Shannon: A significant role.

Alison Thewliss: A very significant role. If young men and young women together are not educated about sexual health and relationship more widely, we are missing an opportunity to impart important lessons about consent and respect. Leaving it to chance is hugely damaging, as we can see with the ongoing investigations in Parliament into harassment in schools and the higher education sector.

Sexual health and relationships education is very much part of the curriculum in Scotland. My son is five. His primary 1 class has just been learning about human bodies. We should not be daunted by these issues as parents or politicians, because serious issues such as consent can be taught at a young age. It can be as simple as stopping tickling a child when they say no. That is consent, and we need to think about these things more widely.

In Scotland, we updated our national guidance on relationships, sexual health and parenthood education in December 2014. That guidance puts into practice the commitment made in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 that the Scottish Government would actively promote the rights and wellbeing of children and young people. Education in schools should equip children and young people with information to help them keep themselves safe. Giving children and young people the knowledge and understanding of healthy, respectful and loving relationships and the opportunity to explore issues in a safe environment protects them from harm and promotes tolerance. Young people have the right to comprehensive, accurate and evidence-based information to help them make positive, healthy and responsible choices in their relationships.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope.

I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing this debate and for her very interesting speech.

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Dr Alasdair Allan, our Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland’s Languages, said at the end of 2014:

“The issues covered by RSHP can be seen as the building blocks to how pupils look after themselves and engage with people for the rest of their lives. These classes allow pupils to think about their development and the importance of healthy living surrounded by their peers who will have similar experiences to them…The guidance recognises the professionalism of teachers, the expertise they bring to making lessons age appropriate and an invaluable addition to discussions that parents are likely already having with their children at home.”

Finally, I come back to my point about poverty and deprivation and the correlation with teenage pregnancy. In its most recent statistics, which are from 2013, the Information Services Division notes:

“There is a strong correlation between deprivation and teenage pregnancy. In the under 20 age group, a teenage female living in the most deprived area is 4.8 times as likely to experience a pregnancy as someone living in the least deprived area and nearly 12 times as likely to deliver their baby.”

The UK Government’s welfare cuts and sanctions are increasing poverty—that is the context in which this debate exists—and will not help the teen pregnancy rate. In particular, I draw Members’ attention to how young people aged 18 to 21 will lose access to housing benefits from next year. Centrepoint and Shelter have expressed concerns about the impact that will have on young people. One exception to that policy is where the Government begin to make policies that take age and particular things into account and certain groups lose out, that will have a consequence. My concern is that by excluding that group from housing benefit, the Government perhaps encourage young people in particularly desperate circumstances to make huge life decisions for the wrong reasons, and that would be a seriously retrograde step.

5.5 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.28 pm

On resuming—

Alison Thewliss: I would like to end my speech as I began. In our deliberations about teenage pregnancy we should not stigmatise, and in responding to the debate on behalf of the SNP I hope I have not done so. It has certainly not been my intention. We must do all we can to support young people, teenage mums and dads and their babies, and to invest in their future.

5.29 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this debate, which allows us to acknowledge the achievements made in addressing teenage pregnancy rates and to recognise that there is still a lot more to do, as she did so eloquently in her speech. I also want to acknowledge the excellent contributions of the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who brought important perspectives from Northern Ireland and Scotland respectively.

Research shows that 61% of children born to teenage mothers are at a higher risk of infant mortality and that, by the age of 30, teenage mothers are 22% more likely to be living in poverty than those who gave birth at the age of 24 or over. I know that that is not universal, but those are the statistics. The fact that 21% of women aged between 16 and 18 who are not in education, employment or training are teenage mothers shows that teenage pregnancy is not only a cause but a consequence of the educational and health inequalities in our society. That is why we cannot sit by and ignore this situation, especially given that we still lag behind western Europe on our teenage pregnancy rate. Although it was welcome news that England last month achieved the long-held target of a 50% reduction—it actually achieved 51%—in the under-18 conception rate between 1998 and 2014, this is no time to be complacent. We must ensure that the positive work that has been done does not go to waste and that the trends do not flatten or worsen.

Although the overall rate has gone down for England, there are still wide-ranging variations—not just between regions but within them. For example, my own local authority, Sunderland City Council, has seen a 45% drop in the conception rate. However, just down the road, Stockton-on-Tees, in the same region, has seen only a 29% decrease between 1998 and 2014. That trend is replicated in all regions, with varying gaps and differences in the conception rate. A lot of that can be put down to local variations and the way in which the 10-year strategy, which was introduced by the previous Labour Government in 1999, was implemented by local authorities.

The strategy was informed by international evidence. A 30-point plan was launched to halve the under-18 conception rate and to improve the life chances not only of the teenagers who fall pregnant but of their children. The plan laid solid foundations for reducing teenage pregnancy by ensuring effective multi-agency work. In 2005, the plan was reviewed when it became apparent that the initial measures were not being implemented across the board. Instead, more prescriptive guidance was introduced. That review of the strategy’s actions was best described by Alison Hadley in a recent article in the Journal of Family Health. She said that the review was an understanding “that high rates were not inevitable—even in deprived areas—if the right actions were put in place.”

That is the crux of the way that we should and must approach the issue of teenage pregnancy. It is not an inevitability of modern society, but it can be down to the inaction of those with the levers of power and their failure to implement the right interventions.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this debate. I do not know how many in the House have the experience that I had, but I was a mum at the age of 16. I come from a deprived background. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important things we can do is to ensure that people have the opportunity to break that cycle and enable them to go back to education or to bring their child up? That is one of the things that I found really depressing when I watched the ITV programme “Long Lost Family”. It is one of the heartfelt things that made me burst into tears. My son is with me;
I was able to raise him as a teenage mum because of the intervention and support that I got as a mum. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vitally important that we do that?

Mrs Hodgson: I do, and I commend my hon. Friend for raising that matter. She talked about it in her maiden speech so movingly for those who were in the Chamber or who listened to it afterwards. It brings important insight into this House in debates such as this to hear someone speak from experience. She is right that we need to support teenage mums. This is not about stigmatising them. Obviously, sometimes it is about helping them to make different choices if they do not want to make a particular choice. We must support them and ensure that the statistics I just mentioned, which we are all aware of, do not become the reality for young mums and their children. My hon. Friend has obviously broken that cycle: she is here as a Member of Parliament. The cycle of deprivation does not have to be inevitable. As I said, it is not universal, but the statistics are not where we would like them to be. There are obviously exceptions that prove the rule.

In 2010, the Department for Education set out a bonfire of policies that saw specific budgets directed at local councils, such as for addressing teenage pregnancy, rolled into the early intervention grant, which has sadly been repeatedly cut year on year and is a shell of what it used to be. The Government have failed to build on the work set out by the last Labour Government, thereby threatening the success seen to date with their short-sighted strategy on early intervention.

Instead of the Government seeing local authorities as a problem, rather than a solution, we need a renewal of the thinking that we had between 1997 and 2010, which harnessed the co-operative relationship between local and central Government to address issues such as teenage pregnancy effectively. For instance, one of the key measures that followed through in both the initial strategy and the updated version, as the hon. Member for Telford discussed in her opening speech, was the necessity to improve sex and relationship education in our schools.

No one will be surprised to hear that I am a passionate advocate of age-appropriate sex and relationship education. I understand the real benefits that equipping children with the right knowledge and tools will have on their futures as they become adults. However, it is not just me who believes that; it is the young people themselves. As the Sex Education Forum found in a survey of more than 2,000 young people earlier this year on the sex and relationship education that they receive, one in five was reported as saying that it was bad or very bad, which is deeply concerning when young people still say that they need advice on sex and relationships. Some of them are children in care, about whom hon. Members spoke in the earlier debate. It is for that very reason that I and other Labour Members support the introduction of age-appropriate SRE as part of statutory personal, social, health and economic education, and many Government Members are slowly coming round to that idea, too. The lack of sex and relationship education in our schools is a ticking time bomb that the Government must address, especially with their impending forced academisation of all schools, which will bring into question the survival of SRE in any form in our schools.

Kevin Foster: I am interested to hear some of the points that the hon. Lady has made so far. Does she agree that it is important that schools buy into any duties? It is important that we have SRE and that its delivery does not become like the requirement to hold an act of religious worship in the morning. It is nice that that is statutory, but it is far more honoured in its breach than in its observance.

Mrs Hodgson: That is a very good point, because where sex and relationship education is compulsory in maintained schools, unlike in academies and free schools, there tend to be two elements: the biology and HIV/AIDS awareness, and then the relationship side. That is exactly the hon. Gentleman’s point. It has to be good-quality sex and relationship education, rather than just ticking some boxes.

The ticking time bomb is paired with the increasing sexualisation of young people, with recent freedom of information requests to local police forces showing that reported incidents of children sexting has skyrocketed by more than 1,200% in the past two years due to increased access to social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and even to dating apps such as Tinder, which is why it is welcome that the Women and Equalities Committee has announced today an investigation into sexting as part of its inquiry on sexual harassment among pupils in schools. I look forward to seeing what comes out of that inquiry.

It is high time that the Government took action and issued an update of the sex and relationship education guidance, which was published before the smartphone generation was even born. I hope the Minister can update Members on the DFE’s plans. I will not hold my breath, however, as when the opportunity came for the Government to take bold steps in introducing statutory PSHE and age-appropriate SRE following the most recent report of the Select Committee on Education on this area, it was blocked by no less than the Prime Minister. That was despite it being reported that many women Cabinet Ministers, including the Education Secretary herself, were strongly in favour of introducing this measure and were dismayed at the Prime Minister’s inaction.

Not only disgruntled Cabinet Ministers but the Children’s Commissioner, the Chief Medical Officer, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 88% of teachers, 90% of parents and 92% of young people themselves are in favour of introducing both subjects to the curriculum as statutory subjects. Yet again, the Prime Minister is putting himself on the wrong side of the issue when it comes to teaching our young people about life and the resilience to deal with what is thrown at them.
In conclusion, it is undeniable that we have made great strides forward on teenage pregnancy and those achievements must be celebrated, but there is still a long way to go. The Government must make clear their vision about how they will build on the important multi-agency, co-operative intervention work of the last Labour Government, and about how they will finally bring forward plans for PSHE and SRE that will make them effective tools in the young person’s arsenal and enable them to make informed choices in their lives.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I should point out that this debate has to finish at 5.52 pm.

5.41 pm

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): As ever, Mr Chope, it is a delight to serve under your chairmanship.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) both on securing this debate and on her extremely well-judged contribution to it. Her contribution had at its heart something that I believe all Members could feel comfortable signing up to, which is the need to make sure that all children and young people, irrespective of their background, get a real and enduring chance to be the best that they can be, for themselves and—in the future—for their own families. I welcome the other contributions to the debate, by my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), and by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

To underline the genuine importance of this agenda, my hon. Friend the Member for Telford reminded us that it was the Prime Minister who set out in a significant and perceptive speech in January his intention for the Government to make improving the life chances of the most disadvantaged children and families in Britain a central tenet of our work over the next four years. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Telford, I welcome that commitment to cross-Government work to tackle some of the deep-rooted social problems that exist, and, in doing so, to help to transform children’s lives so that they can meet their full potential.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, although teenagers might still have the highest rates of unplanned pregnancies, we have seen a steady and impressive decline in that rate, to the extent that there are now 50% fewer teenage pregnancies than in 1998. In fact, teenage pregnancies are at their lowest since records began in 1969. That is important progress, which has a significant impact on young people’s lives and improves their life chances, whether in Telford, Crewe or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We heard about similar progress in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

However, although the rates are coming down, and doing so at a faster rate than elsewhere in Europe, they remain higher than in comparable western European countries. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, we simply cannot afford to take our eye off the ball, and as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, there is certainly no room for us to be complacent. Reducing the level of teenage pregnancy must remain a high priority, not only at national but at local level. My colleagues in the Department of Health have recognised that by including teenage pregnancy rates as a key indicator in the public health outcomes framework.

How will that outcomes framework be supported to deliver what is required? As we know, since 2013 local authorities have had responsibility for commissioning sexual health services. To support local commissioners, Public Health England has a teenage pregnancy expert adviser, whose role is to provide support to national teams by integrating teenage pregnancy data, evidence and best practice into relevant work programmes. It is good to hear about areas such as Leicester, Caerphilly and Wandsworth—in particular, Wandsworth sounds hugely impressive—that are helping to add to that best practice. The expert adviser also provides Public Health England with a teenage pregnancy link to the Local Government Association and relevant Department of Health policy teams.

The Government also provide support by facilitating the sharing of information and learning with local areas about what works in reducing teenage pregnancy. We have heard contributions this afternoon that touched on exactly that point. Most recently, in March this year, Public Health England and the Local Government Association produced an updated briefing for councils—I have even come to this debate armed with a copy. It is entitled “Good progress but more to do,” which probably sums up the message that has come out of this debate. Having been around for only a few weeks, it has already been downloaded more than 5,000 times, which suggests both a high degree of interest in the subject and a welcome continued commitment at local level to actively do something about it rather than just look at figures on a page.

As I am a Minister in the Department for Education, it would be remiss of me not to set out what the Government are doing to improve education standards for all children. As we have heard, education has a key role to play in keeping children on a positive path in life. I know from having visited Holmer Lake Primary School in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Telford that she believes strongly in the power of education in a good or outstanding school. To support other schools, from 250 in 2010 to more than 1,000 last year; and providing schools with significant extra funding to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils through the pupil premium, which is worth £2.5 billion this year. We have protected that funding at per-pupil rates for the duration of this Parliament.
We must of course build on that, so that all children and young people receive the same standards of education enjoyed by those in the best schools. We acknowledge that some parts of the country suffer from acute problems and will need additional support for all children to achieve their potential. The White Paper identified areas of the country where low school standards are exacerbated by low capacity to deliver improvement. To support improvement in those parts of the country, we will designate achieving excellence areas, where we will work with local leaders to diagnose the underlying problems and then target our national programmes to help them secure sufficient high-quality teachers, leaders, system leaders, sponsors and governors. We will trial that approach from September this year and roll it out more widely from September 2017, with the aim of delivering lasting improvement to standards in those areas.

I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that in order to ensure that all children can benefit, we must keep absences from school to an absolute minimum. Overall absence rates have followed a general downward trend from 6.5% in 2006-07 to 4.6% in 2014-15. Although we have made progress, with almost 200,000 fewer pupils regularly missing school than in 2010, we must keep our foot on the gas.

Why is that important in the context of this debate? With regard to educational underperformance and teenage pregnancy, my hon. Friend rightly pointed out that there is a correlation between teenage conception, deprivation and low educational attainment. In 2013, the Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions, funded by the Department for Education, published a research report on teenage pregnancy in England. The report set out the evidence on the relationship between deprivation, low prior attainment and likelihood of teenage conception and maternity.

The research found that girls who are eligible for free school meals and girls who are persistently absent from school are more likely to become teenage mothers, both because they are more likely to conceive and because they are more likely to continue with their pregnancy. Researchers also found that girls who attend higher-performing schools are less likely to conceive, and that deterioration in academic performance between key stages 2 and 3 is associated with teenage pregnancy. Girls who make slower than expected progress during the early years of secondary school are significantly more likely to conceive, and to continue with the pregnancy after conception, than those who progress as expected.

Free school meals eligibility, persistent absenteeism and slower than expected academic progress during early secondary school can therefore be thought of as key individual risk factors associated with conceiving as a teenager and continuing with that pregnancy. That is exactly the sort of evidence-based research that we need to proliferate around the system so that those at local level can gain a much better understanding of what works.

As such research demonstrates, various risk factors are associated with increased teenage pregnancy rates, including educational underachievement. Schools can help all children to make better decisions in their personal life through high-quality teaching of personal, social, health and economic education. Unfortunately, time precludes me from rehearsing the many arguments of the past few weeks and months on the role of PSHE in equipping pupils with the knowledge and skills to make safe and informed decisions and in preparing them for adult life.

I think we can all agree that we want to equip young people and children with such skills. To achieve that, we need to ensure that PSHE is of the highest quality possible. That is why, with the support of the PSHE Association and after consultation with a wide variety of agencies and PSHE practitioners, we have produced a suggested programme of study, based on the needs of today’s pupils and schools. We have said that we will keep the issue under review, as we set out in our response to the report of the Select Committee on Education. We will do that in all seriousness, to ensure that as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West rightly said, we provide children with the arsenal that they require to meet many of the harder challenges that life throws at them when compared with our own childhoods, and at a much younger age.

Much is going on in government, including the provision of support for children in care and care leavers so that they are ready and prepared for adult life. The number of mothers who were previously looked-after children has declined over the years between 2011 and 2015, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford reminded us, about 20% of female care leavers become teenage parents, so we need to do even more. That is why we have committed to deliver real reform of social care services. We have our £200 million social care funding programme, so we need to do even more. That is why we have committed to deliver real reform of social care services. We have our £200 million social care funding programme, as well as the Pause programme, with funding from the innovation fund, which I urge hon. Members to look at carefully. Pause breaks the cycle for the many young mothers who have repeated pregnancies only to have the child removed from their care, which we need to stop in future.

5.52 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 April 2016

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

Aircraft Noise

9.30 am

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. The revolution in air travel has been one of the great liberations of the British people. Since the birth of Her Majesty 90 years ago tomorrow, the Wright brothers’ miracle has become the norm. Everyone, from families heading for a week in the sun to businesspeople trading across our globe, flies across our skies. That freedom to travel is one that I and many people whom I have the privilege to represent have used many times. It is a blessing to many but, as so often in the Kentish sky, behind the silver lining there is a cloud, because although airlines carry passengers away to other places, they condemn the citizens beneath these aerial motorways to lives of misery and the oppression of noise.

The balance between the needs of settled communities and travelling folk is as old as the Bible. The novelty here is that the two communities are often one and the same. The very people who are disturbed often use aircraft themselves, so the question for this debate is not whether we should ground all aircraft or close all airports, which would be absurd, but how we manage our airspace as a precious resource for the benefit of everyone.

Today, I will not address the questions of second or third runways at Gatwick or Heathrow because, although I can see the merits of increasing our connections with our region and the world,resting Britain’s position at the heart of a series of networks and at the heart of a global community, I am waiting for the decision to come out in the best interests of our economy, so I will not argue for the merits of one or the other. I will also not be praising any particular carrier, airport or agency because, again, this is not the time to engage in what some would call the “politics of condemnation.”

This debate is about getting change, getting understanding and, most importantly, getting to a stage where our nation can invest for the long term in our air infrastructure on the same basis as we would our ground connections, which means openly, after due consideration and taking into account the needs of our whole community. That is why I am particularly pleased to see many of my parliamentary neighbours here this morning. My right hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), and my hon. Friend the Members for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), are all here, and we have been fighting together on many of these campaigns.

I will begin by setting out what I hope to achieve. I thank the Minister, who has been incredibly helpful on the question of aviation noise, but today I would like him to do a few things. First, I would like him to clarify the position of Her Majesty’s Government on the term “significantly affected.” That vague term has caused difficulty for airports and agencies in designing flightpaths that cause the least disturbance. Secondly, I would like the outdated Environmental Protection Act 1990 to be refreshed so that aircraft noise is regulated in the same way as other disturbances, taking into account ambient noise so that the relative difference, as well as the absolute decibel level, is taken into consideration.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I offer my support on the issue of ambient noise, because in rural communities where noise levels are low the concentration of flights that often happens as a result of the new digital navigation technology means that the disruption now being caused from Gatwick can be great. Does that not need to be taken into account when considering flightpaths over areas that already have a high level of ambient noise and would therefore be disrupted less by such concentration?

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, to which I will return. Technology is now evolving that allows us to calculate the difference between background or ambient noise and the relative change.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to demand that the Civil Aviation Authority takes noise disturbance into account and includes communities not just 10 nautical miles but 18 nautical miles from airports so that due consideration is given to local communities that are affected, not just those that neighbour the airport, when planning airspace.

Fourthly, and the Minister will be pleased to hear, lastly, I would like the angle of approach to be reviewed. Modern aircraft are able to approach runways more steeply than the current 3°. London City airport, which I have used many times, has an approach angle of 5.5° to protect the buildings of our great capital. Could the same not apply to protect heritage sites and communities in the glorious county of Kent? This is not about aircraft or runways but about using airspace in everyone’s best interest. In my community, near Gatwick airport, the air corridor was changed in 2013. Since then, complaints have increased ninefold, and it is the failure to manage the airspace properly, not the raw numbers, that has caused the problem, but it is worth considering some of the numbers that do affect us.

More than 1 million people in the United Kingdom are exposed to aircraft noise above healthy levels. In the short term, that leads to loss of sleep and annoyance, and it makes it harder for children to learn, but the long-term effects can be worse still. High blood pressure, heart disease, heart attacks, strokes and dementia have all been associated with exposure to excessive noise. Indeed, the World Health Organisation recommends that such noise levels at school playgrounds should not exceed 55 dB. In my area, and in the area around Gatwick, 15 schools are already exposed to such levels, and nine are overflown more than 20 times a day. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the ability to assess noise is one that we must take seriously if we are to move on from the 1990 Act. The National Physical Laboratory suggests that monitors costing only £100 could be fitted to tell regulators the exact pressure being put on residents,
which is a game-changing moment for all. For the first time, we can have accurate monitoring not just of the peak noise but of the relative change, because by monitoring the ambient noise we can see that not all are equally affected.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and I share his views. When I first became a Member of Parliament representing Crawley 33 years ago, British Caledonian flew the BAC 111, which was one of the noisiest aeroplanes—it was just appalling. One of aviation's arguments is that the quality of noise is now very different, but the point that he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) make about ambient noise is terribly important because, although the technologies are infinitely improved, the noise is still immensely disruptive. It is no good saying that that is just the way it is.

This debate is not just about enjoying lazy summer afternoons in the garden of England, although that is a treasured blessing, and I intend to do as much of it as I can, parliamentary duties permitting; it is about the health of our nation. That does not tell the whole story. Noise, as measured today, does not take into account the full impact. The Civil Aviation Authority's aircraft noise contour model—a model with which you are no doubt incredibly familiar, Mr Howarth—measures only average noise for the 10 noisiest seconds. This is perhaps not always recognised, but it is a secret that I am willing to share with the House: aircraft move. That means that the average is significantly below the peak level, which is counted only 2.5 km from the rolling point of the aircraft. Many people in Kent, particularly in my communities and in the communities of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, are badly affected and are simply not counted. That is not sensible. When a road is planned or a railway is considered, all those affected have a voice. It seems that communities are only ignored when it comes to overhead infrastructure.

The lack of guidance has allowed the Civil Aviation Authority and National Air Traffic Services to narrow the flightpaths, as they have done in the past few years over Gatwick, and increase the intensity of aircraft movements for those beneath. Some would say that they were using modern technology to demonstrate that they could increase capacity and perhaps even expand their operations; far be it from me to predict such things.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I would very much like to second that point; in fact, I have made it myself in previous debates in the main Chamber. However, does my hon. Friend agree that at the heart of this problem, particularly in Bracknell, is the fact that there has been a breakdown in trust in the organisations responsible for the management of air traffic, including over my constituency? In my part of the world, the situation has totally changed in recent years and there is a new type of aircraft and a new type of noise. It is where airports are put that brings great relief? It is where airports are put that we forwent the opportunity in the mid-1970s to proceed with an estuarial airport, which would have brought great relief? It is where airports are put that creates the problems with which he is grappling.

Dr Phillip Lee: It is where airports are put that creates the problems with which he is grappling.

This is an area where we could and indeed should change things. That is why I ask for clarity from the Government on what reducing the numbers who are “significantly affected” means. Does it mean sharing the burden so that the fewest people are affected, but those who are affected will be severely impacted and their lives transformed? That guidance should be given to our planners. It would be given if they were planners on the ground, and it should be given to planners in the air.
was no prior warning of it; indeed, it has taken a great deal of time and persistence to get NATS to admit that it has changed things.

My hon. Friend began his speech by talking about the need for change, and we all accept that there will be an increase in flight traffic over the south-east of England. However, it is not important that all the people involved—the Government and indeed the agencies that are responsible—begin telling the truth in advance, so that we can take the public with us?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and indeed the reason I got involved in this fight was because of the sudden change that I saw in the skies over Kent because of what Gatwick had done.

I admit that this is a slight diversion, but the first thing that people did in relation to Gatwick was to deny that they had done anything; they denied that aircraft were changing their flight approaches in any way or that the airspace was being shaped any differently. I would argue that it was that deception that did the most damage. If they had been able to admit early on that there had indeed been a change, that NATS had indeed changed the approach and that Gatwick was indeed trying different things, we could at least have had a conversation. However, when they did it overnight in 2013 and then denied that they had done so, the breakdown in trust was such that even though Gatwick is now leading with the Redeborn and Lake review, which I will come on to, and, I would argue, leading best practice on how an airport should communicate with its neighbours, it will be a good number of years before many of us will have confidence that Gatwick can be a good neighbour. I am saddened to hear that there are other airports in the country that have behaved similarly.

That is why, as many people know, I have welcomed many times the review that was carried out by Bo Ro Redeborn and Graham Lake, because they have introduced a change in policy; indeed, their 23 proposals have been put forward in a policy vacuum. It would be wrong to say that those proposals have all been implemented; they certainly have not been, although we hope that 20 of them will be implemented by the end of the year and that we will begin to see the change that we absolutely need in the skies above south-east England. However, it is only through that dialogue, which Redeborn and Lake both strongly recommend, that we will see that change not only embedded but recognised and appreciated. Sadly, if we keep getting the dishonesty—or at least the dissembling—that we have seen, we will not have the level of trust required to build a better community.

I again urge NATS to take forward the Gatwick review and take the opportunity to use it as an example for the rest of the country, because what Gatwick has done is truly ground-breaking. We are waiting for NATS to implement the review: at the moment, NATS is slightly struggling with it, but I urge it to stop that struggle and get on with it.

Airports are not alone and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex has mentioned, aircraft have changed. The infamous whine generated by the Airbus A320 demonstrates that airlines also have a responsibility. EasyJet has finally decided that the minor modifications that are required will all be in place very shortly, and Gatwick has decided that no aircraft without those modifications will be able to land after 2017. While it is welcome that both the airline and the airport are making those changes, I am somewhat disappointed that the Government have not applied that to the whole of the United Kingdom. It seems wrong that only we should benefit, and those changes could be made today.

There are further changes that could be made and I have touched on one of them, which is the angle of approach. It is worth noting that Frankfurt airport has now increased the approach angle from 3° to 3.2°. That may sound like a minor change, but anything that keeps aircraft higher for longer makes a huge difference to communities beneath. If we can get to the 5.5° of London City airport, we will start to get somewhere.

None of this, I should emphasise, is anything like the hairy approaches that one used to take to get into Baghdad or Kabul, corkscrewing down through the skies to avoid incoming missiles; the approaches that I am proposing are rather more gentle. Modern aircraft can handle them and the communities beneath would benefit greatly.

I thank Members who have come to the Chamber to support the motion, because communities affected, including those significantly affected in my own area—in Cowden, Hever, Edenbridge, Chiddingstone, Penshurst, Leigh and Tonbridge—deserve clarity. Those communities, and a few others, have been left to shoulder this burden alone.

As I have said, this debate is not about whether another runway should go to Heathrow or Gatwick, or whether we need extra capacity. I make a simple request that Her Majesty’s Government should recognise that when motorways are built, they are debated, and when railways are built, they are considered and assessed, so when motorways in the sky are placed over people’s homes, the planning requirements should be no different.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for setting out the case. I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate. We have three airports in Northern Ireland: Belfast City, Belfast International, or Aldergrove, and Londonderry City. I want to focus specifically on Belfast City, Belfast International, or Aldergrove, and a few others, have been left to shoulder this burden alone.

As I have said, this debate is not about whether another runway should go to Heathrow or Gatwick, or whether we need extra capacity. I make a simple request that Her Majesty’s Government should recognise that when motorways are built, they are debated, and when railways are built, they are considered and assessed, so when motorways in the sky are placed over people’s homes, the planning requirements should be no different.

Through the Assembly and elected representatives, we in Northern Ireland are very conscious of the issue of airport noise. It was useful that the hon. Gentleman set the scene for us, because we need to hear from other Members and compare the approach taken by central Government with the one taken in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the most notable case of aircraft noise having an impact on local communities is that of George Best Belfast City airport. That is the one I use to go to Heathrow and then to London and the House of Commons every week. The airport has transformed from a secondary and relatively small regional airport into a hub of Greater Belfast offering flights once unhithoughly of. With its renovation, it is competing with Belfast International for certain routes. As my party’s transport spokesperson, I have always said that we are keen to see connectivity being achieved from Belfast
City to Heathrow and then to wherever else that can lead to in the world. That is so important for us, and I know the Minister is industrious and considers how important Belfast City is for us.

Although the expansion and success of the airport have brought clear benefits, not least to the local economy and regeneration of the area, there has been conflict. Despite tight restrictions on the times flights are permitted in and out of the airport, local residents are undoubtedly affected. With further expansion planned—it has been discussed; as I have said, nothing is agreed yet—and amendments to the current noise procedures, concerns have surfaced once again.

Hypertension and insomnia are the most established conditions associated with night-time flying. Although there are time restrictions, night-time flying has the potential to affect those who work shifts or have young children. These stats are ones that the airport agrees with. It says that up to 46,000 people and 21 schools could be affected by the changes proposed for the expansion of Belfast City, and that obviously needs to be taken into account. It is always a difficult one—we do not want to stand in the way of progress, but at the same time we do not want the lives of people who have lived in a certain area their whole lives turned upside down. Those are clear issues, and I am duty-bound to come here today and make those clear comments on behalf of those people.

In 2014, the number of people affected by Belfast City airport’s operations at the level considered by the UK Government to cause serious community annoyance was 4,107. To give Members some idea of what that means, that was greater than Gatwick airport at 3,550 and Stansted airport at 1,400. If the proposals for Belfast City airport go ahead and noise levels rise to their permitted maximum, it will become the fourth noisiest airport in the UK in terms of population impact. Only Heathrow, Manchester and Birmingham would affect more people at or above the Government’s “significant annoyance” threshold. We in Northern Ireland, where the matter is devolved, have the responsibility to look after that threshold. When we are moving forward, we have to remember that things do not have to have a health impact to have adverse effects on the community. People who live in a certain area and have put down roots and invested their income in their home may, through no choice of their own, be directly affected.

Having said that, I read with interest the Airports Commission’s July 2013 aviation noise discussion paper, which found that 4.2 million people are exposed to road traffic noise of 65 dB or more. Let us get some perspective into the debate. The paper found that the corresponding figures for railways and aviation are 0.2 million people and 0.07 million people respectively. So in relative terms, aircraft noise itself has very little impact, but it is still important that those impacted and their viewpoints are respected. It is not just the health issues I have mentioned that are important.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): With all the figures and statistics that my hon. Friend has outlined in relation to health problems, difficulties, the built-up area and the number of people, is the bottom line that Belfast will not be able to expand because of its location?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The serious question for us all—I am trying to get a balance in my contribution—is whether we have the airport expansion. Should it happen? Can it happen in such a way that is not detrimental to the 46,000 people and 21 schools around the airport that are potentially directly impacted? He is right. The issue he raises is the kernel of this debate.

George Best Belfast City airport could become one of the UK’s five noisiest airports if the controversial expansion plans get the go-ahead. That is a key point. Residents want an independent aircraft noise regulator for Northern Ireland to be appointed and robust noise fines for airlines. If that is what residents want, who could argue with that? Such a proposal seems well-intended, but we have to be careful about unintended consequences. We do not want hard-won business to be put off from continuing to do business in our airports by feeling overregulated. It is about striking a balance. The Minister needs the wisdom of Solomon in relation to this one. If he had the wisdom of Solomon he would be a very wise man and he would have more than just a ministerial role in the Department he is looking after at the moment.

The Planning Appeals Commission report on the Belfast City expansion recommended that the removal of the seats for sale restriction should be accompanied by additional noise controls. That is one of the things that the commission is looking at. The process is ongoing, but it has shown that comprehensive consultation that includes all stakeholders can help to facilitate the right balance being struck between supporting enterprise and business and supporting local residents and ensuring that they are taken care of. In Northern Ireland, we are looking at an airports strategy for the Province to provide the right balance between the commercial interests of airports—that is important for jobs, money and the economy—and the health and quality of life of local residents, but we are still in the midst of consultation and the saga at Belfast City airport goes on.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing from other Members who will bring their own contributions to this debate and their experiences in their regions.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Just before my hon. Friend finishes, does he agree that, on the issue of noise reduction, the Government generally could do much to assist the development of the C Series by Bombardier, which is an exceptionally quiet aircraft? If that were rolled out and developed more systematically, that would go some way to alleviating the noise concerns for residents, particularly those under the flight path.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and his wise words. His contributions are always worth listening to. Can the Minister say what discussions have taken place with aircraft companies on noise reduction? I know that Bombardier is working on that with the C Series, but other companies are probably doing so, too. We need to see the contributions of the aircraft companies and manufacturers.

I once more thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling for giving us a chance to participate in this debate and to offer a Belfast and Northern Ireland perspective. I hope the wise words of other Members will add to the debate, too.
Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I intend to start calling the three Front Benchers at 10.30. The normal convention is to say a few words at the end. I have five Back Benchers who have indicated that they want to speak. I am hoping not to need to impose a formal time limit, but informally, if people do the maths, it works out at about six minutes for each speaker, which should be ample.

9.59 am

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. It is unfortunate that we are here again discussing an issue that is important to our constituents.

Aircraft noise is incredibly damaging, disturbing and stressful for various communities in the northern part of my constituency. Constituents regularly email me, and this week I had an email that is like many others:

“We have been woken on many nights in the early hours at 1.30 or 2.30 am, as well as suffering the usual stream of planes from before 6 am.”

It continues throughout.

“As a result, despite sleeping with ear plugs, neither of us is now a good sleeper and this has definitely affected our health.”

Constituents in Groombridge wrote in to describe how they “absolutely dread being at home. We cannot sleep. We live constantly stressed and strained lives. It is so bad, we are seriously considering giving up jobs, schools and closeness to family to move away.”

This can no longer be dismissed as a minor issue. It is a very serious issue that needs to be taken seriously by airports and air traffic authorities.

Over the past few months, I have been grateful for the opportunity to contribute to Gatwick’s review of westerly arrivals. Last year, I held a packed community meeting where constituents were able to vent their frustration about noise pollution to the authors of the review. Earlier this month, I was pleased to join colleagues in welcoming Gatwick’s plan to act on the review’s recommendations and 23 proposals. Those must be implemented quickly, and I and neighbouring MPs will do all that we can to make sure that the process is sped up as fast as possible. I hope the Minister will offer support and assistance so that we can turn the recommendations into reality.

One thing to note is that the whole review and the changes that we expect to result from it will have been a massive waste of time if Gatwick is allowed to expand with a second runway. We will go from 270,000 flights a year to 560,000, with an increase from 325 to around 850 flights a day over Wealden, which means more noise. The areas of outstanding natural beauty that we are all proud of will be even more compromised. The quality of our lives will be further disrupted by noise pollution.

Despite such effects, Gatwick has not committed to any mitigation measures or compensation for Wealden residents in the event of expansion. The compensation package on offer extends only to areas immediately surrounding the airport. Wealden residents, as well as the 20 Wealden schools that would be overflown, will suffer far greater disruption without receiving a single penny in return. Will the Minister outline what operational mitigation measures have been proposed by Gatwick airport to reduce the effect of aviation noise in the event of expansion, and how does that compare with the measures proposed by Heathrow?

The proposed changes to arrival routes at Gatwick are very welcome and we will do all we can to make them a reality as quickly as possible. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture and the appalling consequences that expansion at Gatwick would have for our constituents because of aircraft noise.

10.3 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. I agree with him that we should not turn this into a debate about where the additional runway in the south-east should go, and I agree that aircraft noise is a problem for every individual and every family affected by it. Those of us whose constituents are affected will understand that.

I will mention a statistic that bears repetition whenever we debate airport expansion, and particularly the issue of noise. It is a problem for every individual who suffers from it, but one has to also look at the quantum of the damage that is done. Some 725,000 people are affected by aircraft noise around Heathrow—it accounts for 28.5% of all those affected by aircraft noise in Europe. That one statistic should have settled the debate about airport expansion in the south-east many years ago. By comparison, 0.5% of people around Gatwick are affected by aircraft noise. I do not diminish that, and I understand that, although there are queries over the figures, the number of people affected around Gatwick would go up from roughly 12,000 to roughly 35,000 or 36,000 if there were expansion there. I have seen various figures for Heathrow, but Transport for London says that the number of people affected would go up to about 1 million if there were expansion there. Others say the number will go up by about 320,000. In other words, the increase would be 10 to 20 times that suffered by people around Gatwick. The reason for that is fairly obvious: Heathrow is in the wrong place and is directly adjacent to some of the most densely populated urban areas in this country.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I hope the hon. Gentleman accepts that the impact of ambient noise has a profound impact on one’s experience of aircraft noise.

Andy Slaughter: It does, but I took slight umbrage at the point that was made in an earlier contribution about those living in rural areas suffering more because they have a quieter environment. Urban areas that are not affected by aircraft noise at the moment, but will be affected for the first time, will also suffer greatly, particularly outside peak hours in the early morning and later at night. Some urban areas, including parts of my constituency, are extremely quiet and will be affected by noise for the first time.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an ambient noise of, say, 30 dB will lead to an endocrine autonomic effect, which will only be compounded by a level of 55 dB or even
83dB, as is the case with some flights? He probably has the same flights over Hammersmith that I have over Twickenham. Does he also agree that, medically, it is the children who suffer most?

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Her technical knowledge exceeds mine, but she is absolutely right. Friends of the Earth, for example, contends that it is misleading to talk about the noise energy emitted by planes being reduced, which is what Heathrow says will happen. According to Heathrow, fewer people will be affected by noise when the third runway is built, when 250,000 additional flights are going over west London and there will be an increase in activity of just under 50%. I do not know anybody who actually believes that apart from the people who spin for Heathrow, but, as Friends of the Earth says, even if there is a decrease in noise energy emitted by planes, that is only loosely linked to human perception of noise, and a 50% reduction in noise energy is only just detectable by the human ear.

Even if there are quieter aircraft and noise is reduced generally, it will still disproportionately affect those who live around Heathrow, because of the massive number of people affected. Any benefit will be gained by people around other airports.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making interesting points, but does he recognise that the problem affects the whole United Kingdom? We have heard comments from Belfast and will no doubt hear comments from Scotland. We should work together to create a level playing field of understanding, so that the planning for another runway in Perthshire or in Penzance is the same as it would be for Gatwick or Heathrow. At least we would then have some common understanding of the impact on the community beneath, and decisions could be taken in a fair and equitable manner and not just on the basis of who shouts loudest and longest.

Andy Slaughter: I agree with that. One still has to bear in mind that if a third runway is built—I declare an interest, because the Airports Commission’s preferred option will run directly over central Hammersmith—whole new communities, and populous communities, will be affected for the first time. As a report published earlier this year shows, 460 schools around Heathrow are exposed to aircraft noise levels that may impair learning and memory. The health consequences include higher risk of strokes, heart disease and cardiovascular problems. Hundreds of thousands of people could be affected by those serious problems.

I particularly want to hear from the Minister about the review of night flights. The existing regulations end in 2017, so when are we going to have a consultation? Will the Minister condemn Heathrow for not even saying, as the Airports Commission recommended, that there should be a ban on night flights and that a fourth runway should be ruled out? Those are the concerns going forward.

Those of us who have battled Heathrow expansion for 30 years—the current expansion is always the last one—will never believe any promises the airport makes. We want to see the decision made in such a way that the Government are accountable to Members from all parties. Above all, whatever the effects of airport expansion, we want to see them mitigated, not only by improved technology but by reducing the number of people affected.

10.11 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this incredibly important debate. I agree with him that there is an absolute need for change, but where I disagree is that I do think that a lot of condemnation is due. That is where I agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). As he said, 725,000 people are affected by Heathrow, which means that, of all the people in Europe who are affected by noise pollution, 28% live under a Heathrow flight path.

I hope the Minister will take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) said, because there is no trust in the information that communities are being given and in the action the airports are taking to alleviate such a serious medical issue. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). I, too, have to wear earplugs, which I did not have to do a few years ago. Things have changed and we are being woken up at 4 in the morning. There is noise late at night and at all kinds of hours. There is no mitigation for night flights—none is possible.

I mentioned condemnation because Heathrow affects more people than the airports of Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Madrid combined. That is why it is such an urgent problem, both environmentally and medically. I hope that the Minister will take that on board. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, we do have medical evidence. We know that there is a direct correlation between noise pollution and cardiovascular events. We also know from the World Health Organisation that seven categories of medical problems are associated with noise pollution, so it is a very serious problem. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Hammersmith, ambient noise does not make people less sensitive to noise. Ambient noise is a problem in itself; it provides no mitigation.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling for mentioning the National Physical Laboratory, which is a world leader in noise measurement. I hope that the Minister will look into citizen scientists, because we need the community to be able to measure noise pollution. I believe that the NPL is close to giving us ways of measuring that are accessible for the community. The L\(^\text{Aeq}\) measurement is an average; it does not take night flights into account. The other decibel measurement, Lden, is an average over 24 hours. The medical problem relates to when the noise happens, its peak and its irregularity, so the existing measurements are not meaningful for the communities that are disrupted by aircraft noise. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith and I have said, 725,000 people are currently affected by Heathrow; goodness knows, that number will be more than 1 million if there is expansion at the airport.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Members for Bracknell and for Tonbridge and Malling that there is no trust and that there is dissemblance in the information provided. I notice that my local community group, Teddington Action Group, has reported that there is now a serious
problem with planes flying at lower angles over longer distances, earlier in the morning and later at night. It is a serious trend. I am grateful to the action group for working out, with the publicly available data, that Heathrow is only just meeting its legal requirements, which are not adequate anyway. I agree with the action group that, rather than aircraft having 6.5 km to reach 1,000 feet, they should be at 2,500 feet at that point. The minimum climb rate of 4% to an altitude of 4,000 feet should be increased to a rate of 4% up to 6,000 feet.

I humbly request that the Minister meets me to discuss the review that is needed of the noise notice around Heathrow airport. I would be very grateful if he did so, given the incredible work that my community has done and what our Twickenham expertise can do with the NPL. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling that noise should be considered a statutory nuisance. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 should be changed to reflect that.

I absolutely condemn what is going on right now, and I also condemn the disembarking. Change is needed, because no mitigation is possible for the levels of noise pollution that are affecting my idyll of Twickenham.

10.16 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

My constituency lies under the final approach path for Heathrow for the 70% of the time that the airport is on westerly operations. The area is fully built up beneath those flight paths, as passengers sitting by the aircraft windows will be well aware. My constituency is the second most overflown constituency in London. Most of the 94,000 residents of Brentford and Isleworth are affected by aircraft noise, with a plane taking off or landing every 60 to 90 seconds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, according to figures from the European Commission, 725,000 people across London and the south-east are significantly affected by noise from aircraft using Heathrow.

I have some quotes from some of my constituents.

Carol Petersen said:

“Although I live in Chiswick and therefore not in the immediate vicinity of the airport, I should like to record the effect of night noise in this area. This morning several came past at 5 am and we could not get back to sleep. The impact is significant. We can tolerate this during the day, but when sleep patterns are ruined it is very difficult.”

Basia Filzec lives a lot closer to the airport and said:

“Heathrow has always been a very poor neighbour. Apart from the noise and the smell, first flights are around 4.30 am and there are some night flights. When I was working it was very distressing to have to go to work not having had enough sleep. It made the job even more stressful.”

My constituent Diane wrote:

“We have endured weeks of flights past 11 pm and before 6 am (sometimes at 3.40 am). To be a reasonable neighbour Heathrow needs to ensure that we get 9 hours per night free of this noise so we stand a chance of getting 8 hours sleep. On two nights last week we only had 5 hours’ break—impossible to live or work effectively when sleep deprived. I am sure that those areas closer to the landing site suffer even more.”

More than 90% of children educated in the London Borough of Hounslow’s schools, nurseries and colleges are directly affected by aircraft noise. A school in Hounslow will be overflown at least every 90 seconds. Noise level is significantly related to children’s mathematical performance. As noise increases by contour band, performance drops by 0.73 of a mark. Schools exposed to high levels of aircraft noise near Heathrow have more than the average number of children with English as a second language. In addition, there is increasing evidence of the impact of noise on health—including on cardiovascular health, strokes and mental health—which will lead to a massive cost to the public purse and the economy.

I agree with the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling about the need for a public debate about flight routes and approach methods, but in my constituency the planes are on their final approach, so their routes cannot be varied. Steeper glide paths might actually increase the noise levels for those closest to the airport as the planes throttle back.

We have some mitigations, but they are frequently not met. There are not supposed to be night flights before 4 am, and the approach paths to Heathrow on the westerly approach should be alternated for half of the day, but those measures are often breached. The airport contributes to the cost of insulation and ventilation in some existing school buildings, but only those in the very noisiest areas. It covers nothing like all those affected, and no new school buildings have been insulated or improved by the Heathrow scheme.

My constituents look forward to the promised quieter planes, to full alternation, to decent insulation and to a ban on night flights so they can have some semblance of normal life and can sleep through the night more often and wake up fresher the next day. They do not want the 46% increase in flights that a third runway would mean.

10.21 am

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. He, like me, has many constituents who live in rural communities, where the lower ambient noise makes the experience of aircraft hugely oppressive.

Gatwick is surrounded on three sides by areas of outstanding natural beauty. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the impact of Gatwick on the otherwise tranquil environment of large swathes of both of our constituencies is immense. In such conditions, noise can be experienced over a wide field—some 3.5 to 5 miles either side of the aircraft. The concentration of noise in quiet environments is not properly recognised by the existing standard industry metrics, which measure noise over 24 hours. In some parts of my constituency, the rate of ‘take-offs has resulted in a relentless wall of noise, which is a pressing problem for my constituents.

I wish to focus on the issues that are being experienced right now, but, with great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, no debate on aircraft noise would be complete without a reference to runway expansion. If the Government were to go against the clear recommendation of the Davies commission and make what to my mind is the wrong decision on runway expansion, the number of flights over my constituency would double to up to 560,000 per year. Aircraft movements would become more concentrated...
on existing flightpaths, and two new flightpaths would be created over Copthorne and Crawley Down. The villages of Rusper and Copthorne would be taken within the standard noise contours for Gatwick. Rusper would be overflown by more than 300 easterly arrivals a day to the southern runway and more than 300 westerly departures using two routes from the same runway. Warnham and Slinfold would experience 150-plus concentrated departures per day, and Billingshurst would be affected by the massive increase in aircraft approaching both runways. The list goes on. I will not mention every single village in my constituency that would be adversely affected, because they all would be.

As the Davies commission pointed out,

“Knowing that aviation noise will be limited to certain times of the day is very important to many people.”

That is something on which I have common cause with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias). With that in mind, I am horrified that Gatwick’s post-expansion proposal is to operate both runways for take-offs and landings throughout the day, offering not even a period for respite—not even during the night. Night flights are incentivised by Gatwick’s charging structure. That is a nightmarish vision of the future.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) so eloquently set out, the present has its own severe problems. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, I welcome the independent arrivals review that was established by Gatwick. That shows its awareness of the very real concerns of many residents. I hope that the proposed noise management board will maintain that focus and be given real teeth so that it not only brings together stakeholders but makes a genuine impact.

As Gatwick considers its response, I ask that it addresses certain key issues. I have sought and received assurances from the airport that the impact of departures on communities will be taken into account when it determines its position on arrivals. Although the review focused on the latter, rather than the former, it would be wholly unfair and incongruous if attempts to mitigate the impact of aircraft noise were made without a proper appreciation of both arrivals and departures on residents.

The proposed wider swathe for arrivals from the west should result in a fairer distribution of aircraft impact. However, that will not be the case if air traffic control simply allows pilots to come in consistently by the shortest possible route. That will result in a heavy concentration of flights over a small area of my constituency, which is already severely adversely affected by departures. I understand that negotiations on that point are ongoing between Gatwick and NATS. It is an issue on which my constituents want cast-iron guarantees.

I am disappointed that night flights, which hon. Members have already spoken about, were excluded from the Gatwick review. Like the hon. Member for Hammersmith, I look to the Minister for reassurance that the consultation on night flights will be forthcoming this year. On technical innovations, I again look to the Minister to support the principle that noise modifications should be made on time and be effective. As mentioned earlier, Gatwick has a sunset date of the end of 2017 for A320s to be fitted with noise modification. The success of that depends on defaulters being subjected to severe penalties for non-compliance.

Finally—I again look to the Minister on this point—I am saddened that a more innovative approach has not been taken to stacking. As the Minister also has responsibility for shipping, he is more aware than most that we are an island. Could not a way be found to stack aircraft out to sea, rather than, as at present, over residential areas, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I call Caroline Spelman. I ask you to bear in mind that I intend to call the Front Benchers at 10.30 am.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am extremely grateful to you for allowing me to stand in under the wire, Mr Howarth, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

Birmingham airport is in my constituency. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it has one of the highest numbers of people affected by aircraft noise, as it is close to the conurbation. Its recent expansion and the lengthening of its runway brought aircraft lower and closer to the populations underneath it. Unfortunately, that coincided with the proposed national flightpath changes. The trials caused a significant increase in noise pollution for the community underneath. The fact that the aircraft could not fly the new routes accurately also caused confusion and dismay. The airport apologised for that, but the community suffered a breach of trust, and good will has been damaged.

The Civil Aviation Authority has now approved the airport’s preferred option, but three further mitigations are to be tried: the angle of descent and ascent will be increased, and different types of aircraft will fly slightly different routes. I suspect that we have some more challenges ahead. The concentration of sound has increased the impact on certain households. The removal of manoeuvres to deflect sound away from communities was disappointing.

Looking ahead, I hope the Minister will recognise the blight that is caused by uncertainty about the proposals to expand airports. Birmingham once proposed a second runway, but has now extended its single runway. It now has the same capacity as Gatwick, but only one third of its passengers. I hope that will put paid to the threat of another runway being proposed in that densely populated location, and I hope the Minister will strongly oppose any suggestion of reopening a second runway proposal at Birmingham.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I commend and congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this important and timely debate on a very important issue for his constituency. He has voiced concern about aircraft noise around Gatwick for some time. Although he was pleased that the Airports
Commission recommended Heathrow, he vowed to continue to campaign on the matter. I understand that it is close to his heart.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of airspace, which has been a problem in the UK for many decades. We have had a glaring lack of an airspace strategy, so it is about time to deal with the issue in the round, along with noise and air quality. As a side issue, he reflected on the dodging of incoming elements when landing at Helmand and Basra, and of course we have the current issue of drones near aircraft, which needs to be addressed in an air strategy. I hope that the Minister will do something about that before there is a critical problem.

Returning to the main point, I am the MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and the House will understand that we do not have the same issues as Heathrow or Gatwick. Indeed, we are keen to get more routes, because we have been left behind for many years, and we are delighted that British Airways is introducing a new route between Inverness and Heathrow. However, that does not mean that we have no understanding of the Gatwick and Heathrow situation. Personally, I lived under the Heathrow flight path for many years, enduring night flights and Concorde, which was exceptionally noisy when it flew over my house. We understand the issue, but it is also important to understand that 90% of international visitors to Scotland—a big driver for the tourism economy—travel by air, with more than a third coming through Heathrow, which is therefore clearly of interest to us.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the need for the end of uncertainty about airport expansion. We heard the same from the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) and a number of hon. Members, all of whom said that they did not particularly want to talk about airport expansion, although they all mentioned it. I will come back to that subject in a moment.

The hon. Member for Strangford also talked about the need to look at the strategy of other Governments and Administrations. The Scottish Government are committed to understanding and managing the environmental impacts of air travel. They have acknowledged that noise can be distressing, affects quality of life and can have an impact on our health and environment. The existing legislation and controls are for vehicle noise and provide limited solutions to the problems of transportation noise. The Scottish Government are therefore making use of the European Union environmental noise directive, commonly known as END, to manage noise pollution, particularly from transportation sources.

The directive was transposed into Scots law in 2006. As per END, noise maps and noise action plans have been published for all major airport areas in Scotland. Delivery of the END objectives in Scotland has been achieved through extensive partnership working. The Scottish Government assumed responsibility for the co-ordination of noise mapping and action planning exercises; they were heavily supported by individual working groups dealing with each of the major airports and other transportation systems.

Two rounds of noise mapping have been carried out by consultants AECOM. The consultants also host an interactive website on behalf of the Scottish Government, which displays all the Scottish noise mapping, action plans and statistics, allowing anyone to provide feedback or to raise an issue. The Scottish Government have received many positive comments and much feedback on their approach from others in the UK and throughout Europe. All that work has been informed by research at EU, UK and Scottish levels.

I want to discuss airport expansion, which is the issue that Members have been dancing around. The Scottish Government remain impartial on the Airports Commission’s report. The Prime Minister, however, has put political convenience before UK connectivity by delaying his decision. The concern of local communities is understandable, given the stress and problems that can be caused by noise pollution, not to mention the potential disruption to everyday life, so the longer the Government delay their decision, the further the lives of people living around airports in the south-east will be plunged into uncertainty. That is all the more important given that the Airports Commission stated that aircraft were responsible for some negative effects on health, concentration and wellbeing, as we have heard from hon. Members today. That makes the conclusion of a decision even more important for those negatively affected.

The Prime Minister seems to have wriggled out of his commitment because he wants to help his party to win the mayoral election in London. He is not making a decision, at any scale, based on commercial activity or the direct impact on the economies of the nations of the UK, nor is he considering the uncertainty for local communities. Yet the UK Government constantly promote a new runway as a national infrastructure project with huge ramifications for air connectivity to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England.

Any decision on the runway will have a massive impact on travel, exports, growth and jobs throughout the nations of our islands—not only London and the south-east of England but the rest of us. A further delay in taking a firm decision will mean that the UK continues to be an international laughing stock, as other nations yet again steal a march on investment and business and as people are stuck in the Government’s departure lounge to nowhere. As I said, I believe the delay in the decision is because the Prime Minister wants to allow his party to win the mayoral election in London. The decision, however, should be made not for party political reasons but based on the right outcomes. Freezing a decision is wrong—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the debate is about aircraft noise. Although he is not out of order, he is straying into a slightly wider argument.

Drew Hendry: Thank you for your advice, Mr Howarth. I had hoped to have made it clear why I was discussing those things—the effect on noise and air pollution, as well as the economics. They have been mentioned by all Members who have spoken today. However, I will conclude my remarks now.

Freezing the decision is wrong. The delay is not about noise or air quality. That is just a cold myth; this is about a Goldsmith.

10.37 am

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.
I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate and, indeed, on how he introduced it. The matter is clearly of concern to many right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. If I got my calculations right, 15 right hon. and hon. Members from the Back Benches have spoken today in interventions or speeches, which underlines that point.

Noise from aircraft operations is a real source of tension between airports, authorities, airlines and local communities. It is not only the annoyance or disruption, important though such things are, but the genuine public health concerns about ongoing exposure to aircraft noise. A report published in January this year by the Aviation Environment Federation drew on evidence accumulated over the past 20 years to highlight noise exposure and the way in which it can impact on someone’s quality of life. Some studies go further and draw links to the possibility of many serious long-term health problems, to which many hon. Members referred: my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) and for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). All that shows that we need more research to understand in more detail the many variables at play.

Addressing the question of noise is part of a much wider aviation puzzle, the pieces of which we need to join together. Challenges are coming to a head: noise challenges; modernising outdated airspace regulation; improving service access; promoting cleaner and greener aviation; and meeting various environmental challenges. The elephant in the room, relevant to all those things, is the question of airport capacity—the point made by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

Last year, the Prime Minister promised a response on the airport capacity question before Christmas. The hon. Gentleman speaking for the SNP made the point that the reasons for the delay might have been political—heaven forbid that any of us have thought that! The point is that when the delay was announced the Government at the time said they wanted time to consider the recommendations and the report of the Environmental Audit Committee. They are valid questions, and I wonder why the Government were not already asking them, relevant to all those things, is the question of airport capacity—the point made by the spokesperson of the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

The Government have commissioned Ipsos MORI research on public attitudes to aviation noise. If that is to inform the public debate, it needs to be published. My question to the Minister, again, is when it will be published.

I also want to ask the Minister about airspace redesign, a theme that has come up several times in the debate. Future approaches to the best use of airspace, bearing in mind changes and advances in technology, should inform issues of where to put new runways, and how they should be used. However, even without any airport expansion, the UK needs to modernise its outdated airspace management, in line with the EU single European sky programme. The benefits of doing that are obviously big, but the question is how we are to find a balance between dispersing routes between a number of corridors or concentrating on a number of routes. Either option has pros and cons for communities, and those that are negatively affected must be fairly compensated. However, whatever is done, a decision must be made. We have seen that trust can drain away when trials come out and people do not know what is going on. NATS, the Civil Aviation Authority, airports and communities need clear signals as to what will happen about airspace operations.

Mrs Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is a fellow Birmingham-based MP. Does he acknowledge that there was no compensation for people following the airspace changes—nor, indeed, following the runway extension?

Richard Burden: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. The point I am making is that going forward we need a more comprehensive approach to such things. In appearances before the Transport Committee in February the Secretary of State and Department for Transport officials promised to publish a consultation on future airspace “soon”. What they would not say was whether the delay—and possibly further delays—in looking at expansion would lead to further delay in looking at airspace management. How soon is soon? What timetable is the Minister working on?
Whatever the Minister’s answers to the other questions that I have put to him both today and in writing, I must put it to him and the Government that delays, and the fact that there are difficult questions ahead, mean there is nothing we can do now. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith made the point correctly that an independent aviation noise authority could be established now, to act as an impartial mediator between airports and communities and help to restore trust and deliver the future of airspace operation. Nothing more is needed before that can be done. Sir Howard Davies and the Environmental Audit Committee endorsed the idea, and if the Minister endorsed it today it would certainly have the Opposition’s full backing, so let us get on with it. Will he do that?

Making use of existing capacity would also alleviate pressure on airspace. A key to utilising capacity is improving road and rail access to different international gateways in the UK. It is the Airport Operators Association’s top priority for 2016 and would bring about environmental and noise improvements around airports. Will the Minister back our calls for the National Infrastructure Commission to look at surface access to the UK’s international gateways?

Finally, I want to put it to the Minister that it is important to work with industry on the issue of noise. The Sustainable Aviation group has produced an aviation noise road map showing how aviation can manage noise from aircraft operations between now and 2050. It emphasises the importance of improving airspace structures and operational procedures, but also points out, importantly, that a key is future aircraft and engine technology. The noise road map shows that, unless that new technology comes on stream and is used, noise output could double, even without expansion, in the coming years. What are the Government doing to encourage innovation, as well as the take-up of lighter, smaller aircraft such as the Boeing 787 and A350? Retrofitting noise-reducing devices to older fleets is also critical, and I think that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling mentioned that. How are the Government promoting that? Does the Minister know what proportion of aircraft at each UK airport have not yet had such devices installed? If he does not know, when will he find out, and what will he do to put such measures in place?

I look forward to the Minister addressing those points. Vital questions have been raised today. At some point down the line the decision on expansion will come. It would be very useful to know when, but, irrespective of that, when will decisions be made on the various questions that I and other hon. Members have raised today? Members have raised today?

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested that we might need the wisdom of Solomon. I cannot claim to have that, but I am wise enough not to stray into the area that the Scottish National party spokesmen, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), encouraged us to stray into. I shall focus on the issue of noise, if I may.

I want to assure the House that the Government are acutely aware that noise is a major environmental concern around airports. We know that communities feel strongly about the issue. I remind the House that, as set out in the aviation policy framework published in 2013, our overall policy is “to limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise”.

How we define the word “significantly” is important, and I well understand the points that have been made about background ambient noise in more rural areas. In accordance with the aviation policy framework, we will continue to treat 57 dB as the average level of daytime aircraft noise that marks the approximate onset of significant community annoyance. That does not, however, mean that all people within that contour will experience significant adverse affects. Nor does it mean that no one outside the contour will consider themselves annoyed by aircraft noise. We are looking at the matter, and our consultation later in the year will consider policy in that area and particularly what it means for airspace change. Our overarching policy on the issue of noise remains as I have set out, and I think that the House will agree that it is the right approach to take.

We have a strong aviation sector here in the United Kingdom, and we should be proud of it, but we want to ensure that it does all it can to reduce the effect of noise on communities. I know that airports and other stakeholders, such as airlines, the CAA and NATS, all realise the importance of tackling noise if the industry is to continue to grow. The Government, too, have a role to play, which is why we set noise controls at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted to balance the benefits of aviation with the burdens they place on communities.

Aircraft noise is a difficult issue, as we have heard, and when changes take place, they can lead to less noise for some but a worsening for others. It can be particularly difficult for people who experience a noticeable change in noise, and it presents formidable challenges for those responsible for decisions. I am aware that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, and in others, people will have experienced changes in noise in recent years because of changes to where aircraft fly.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, a recent change to the joining point for aircraft approaching Gatwick from the east has created concerns for some residents. That change affected the point at which aircraft join the instrument landing system that leads down to the runway. Although that will have meant that some people have experienced fewer aircraft, for others it will have led to an increase in noise as a result of a narrower and more concentrated swathe on the final approach. As he will be aware, the Government believe that it is usually better to concentrate aircraft over as few routes as possible in order to minimise the number of people affected. That has been Government policy for many years and works well for many airports across the country.

Our current policy makes it clear, however, that there may be instances in which multiple routes, such as those that can offer respite for communities, can be better. The Government believe that those decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, with local communities informing the process where possible. I understand that in this instance, as the change was not to published airspace routes, communities were neither informed nor...
consulted before it occurred. For aircraft arriving in the UK, there are no set routes leading to the final approach. That is because arriving aircraft approach UK airspace in a random pattern and then have to be sequenced for safe operation by air traffic controllers. The change that took place in 2013 was to the procedures that air traffic controllers followed. It was therefore not subject to the Civil Aviation Authority’s airspace change process, which needs to be followed when changes to airspace routes are proposed and requires consultation. Although there is no suggestion that NATS, Gatwick or the CAA acted improperly when making the change, as I have said, I believe that communities should be engaged when such changes are made.

I turn to one or two points that were made in the debate. My hon. Friend talked about changing the angle of approach. At the end of March, Heathrow airport trialled a 3.2° descent, but of course that requires significant pilot training and safety tests. As some airports trial that, more can follow. We need to look at pilot training and plane technology, and the report following that trial is expected over the summer. Having flown the 747 simulator into Heathrow at various descent angles, I can well understand some of the issues involved—in particular, the kinetic energy in a plane when it arrives on a steeper descent. That requires training, and there are noise issues when planes get nearer to the airport as greater braking power is needed. However, the descents are certainly not the same as I experienced when being taken into Kandahar airport some time ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) both referred to the lack of a night flight ban at Gatwick. The Government recognise the impact of noise disturbance at night and, for that reason, set night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick. The current restrictions end in October 2017, and we will consult on future arrangements later this year to ensure that the cost and benefits of night flights continue to be balanced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham asked why stacking could not be done out at sea. The Gatwick arrivals review has recommended that holding areas should be enabled over the sea. Gatwick has accepted that, but it will take some years, as it will require widespread airspace and procedural change. Gatwick will be conferring with the CAA and NATS on that particular issue.

A number of Members raised the issue of the health effects on people on the ground. I have visited schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and experienced the noise at first hand. I had a briefing earlier this week from the Aviation Environment Federation, which presented some very important research—not least from Imperial College, a well respected institution—on the effects on cardiovascular disease and other diseases.

The basic structure of UK airspace was developed more than 40 years ago and since then there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for flights. The future airspace strategy, which is being led by the CAA, is crucial to ensuring that the industry is efficient and can minimise its overall environmental impacts. The plan is to modernise UK airspace and deliver our contribution to the European Commission’s single European sky by 2030—the date by which we feel we should be able to do that. It is an ambitious plan designed around the use of modern technology, including more precise navigation.

Performance-based navigation can vastly improve the accuracy with which aircraft can fly a designated route, and airspace systematisation will mean that they follow a more predictable route, reducing the need for interference from air traffic controllers. That will not only make air travel safer but reduce emissions and journey times. It will also offer the chance to reduce noise for communities around airports by allowing routes that can accurately avoid built-up areas and maximising the rate at which aircraft can climb or descend. For those benefits to be realised, however, we need to ensure that when those essential changes take place, they work for communities as much as possible.

My officials are constantly reviewing Government policies on airspace and aviation noise. One thing I have asked them to consider is whether we can ensure that communities are informed and, when appropriate, consulted when such changes are to be made. They have also been working to deliver the right policies by engaging with all stakeholders, including representatives of local communities. I know that they have found that engagement valuable in ensuring that communities’ interests are represented, and we will continue that dialogue when refining our policies.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for his promise to consult communities. Should the Government be inclined to go ahead with runway 3 at Heathrow, will they consult the 300,000 residents of west London and beyond who would be affected? Those people are not currently affected by aircraft noise to the same extent as they would be in that situation.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to bear in mind that he needs to leave some time for the mover of the motion to sum up?

Mr Goodwill: Thank you, Mr Howarth.

Of course we will consult in that case. The Government want to maximise the benefits from a strong aviation sector; it is good for the economy, bringing investment and employment to the UK and wider benefits to society and individuals. However, the Government recognise that that needs to be balanced against the costs to the local environment that more flights bring, with noise being a prime example. I thank the Members who have taken part in this debate; it has been useful to inform the Government of people’s views, and I look forward to hearing the summing-up by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling.

10.57 am

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the Minister for his words. I am grateful for the support that I have received from throughout the House today, and particularly for the many comments from Scottish National party and Labour Members. They have shown that this issue covers every party in every part of our great kingdom.

If I am honest, I am little disappointed that we have not yet had a better answer on what the words “significantly affected” mean, and that we have not had what I hoped
we would have—a promise that the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS will take into account the communities on the ground when they are looking at the future airspace strategy. I think that is absolutely essential for all communities across our country.

In the closing few moments, I would like to pay a small tribute to Gatwick Obviously Not, a campaign group in my constituency that has worked tirelessly and fought very hard not only for communities in our area, but—as I hope this debate has recognised—for communities across our country that are suffering. Aviation noise recognises no boundaries of constituency, or indeed of town, borough or county.

Sadly, this issue will come back again and again, because although some have felt the need to argue against one project or another—it will come as no surprise that I would always argue against Gatwick’s expansion—this is not about Gatwick or Heathrow. It is about the rights of citizens in our great country to be treated fairly and with justice when some of the planning decisions that are most important to them are taken. Were a motorway to be bulldozed through their back garden or a railway to be bulldozed under their land, they would have a right to be consulted. When the same is done in the air—when a motorway is put over their homes, their lives are disrupted, their sleep is interrupted and their children fail to get to school on time because they are tired—they get no say. That is surely wrong. I welcome the Minister beginning to answer that, and I know that this is a fight we will take forward.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

Cardiff Coal Exchange

11 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Cardiff Coal Exchange.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I welcome the new Wales Office Minister to his post. We have both served on the Welsh Affairs Committee and I was pleased to hear that he would respond to this debate.

The subject of the recent ownership and the future of the Cardiff Coal Exchange is extremely complex. It cuts across devolved and reserved matters and the responsibilities of several UK Departments, including the Wales Office, and the Welsh Government. Let me make it clear at the outset that I do not expect the Minister to have all the answers today, but I hope he will listen carefully to my concerns. I am interested in his views on them and ask him to make representations to the Departments involved and the incoming Welsh Government, and to take a personal interest in the future of what is arguably one of the most important buildings of the Welsh national heritage and indeed our industrial heritage from the 19th and 20th centuries.

I do not want to detain the House too long on the remarkable history, architectural merits and the importance of the coal exchange to Cardiff and the Butetown community, as I want to focus on current matters, but I would be remiss not to remind the Chamber of some crucial issues.

Cardiff became the largest coal port in the world at the end of the 19th century and the coal exchange was constructed in the 1880s by Edwin Seward as a base from which to conduct trade negotiations regarding the coal mines of the south Wales valleys, with Cardiff being the key coal port in the world at the time. Following its opening, ship owners, their agents and many others interested in the coal trade met daily on the floor of the remarkable trading hall, where agreements were made by word of mouth and telephone. It has been estimated that 10,000 people would pass in and out of the building each day. At one time, the price of the world’s coal was determined in the Cardiff Coal Exchange in Butetown.

It is famously claimed that the first £1 million business deal took place and the first £1 million cheque was signed at the coal exchange during a transaction in 1901.

With the decline of the coal industry and of the export of coal from Cardiff and the Bute docks during the 20th century, the coal exchange eventually closed in 1958 and coal exports from Cardiff dock came to an end in the 1960s.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his extensive work on the issue. He mentioned the proud history of the building, which is iconic for Wales. Does he agree that the Labour council that currently runs Cardiff should consider all those matters?
Stephen Doughty: I have some concerns about Cardiff Council’s involvement, which are focused on the officers of the council, and I will make that clear.

The building became grade II* listed in 1975 and there were discussions about the use of the building, which is so important that it was considered as the future home of the proposed Welsh Assembly during the devolution referendum in the 1970s. It was also considered as the headquarters for S4C, the Welsh language television channel. Eventually, it was refurbished and reopened as a major venue hosting acts such as the Manic Street Preachers, Ocean Colour Scene and the Stereophonics. There has been support from across the music and entertainment spectrum and people who have enjoyed gigs and events there. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) here and I know he has been there for many gigs, as has my hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), as have I. There was even support recently from Sir Tom Jones, no less.

However, the coal exchange closed indefinitely in August 2013 as a result of claimed building safety issues and the imposition of prohibition orders by Cardiff Council, which were themselves a matter of controversy. There has been an issue about the council’s regulatory functions potentially being used unsympathetically to frustrate access to the building over a number of years. We then saw the liquidation of Macob, the company that owned the exchange, and in 2014, ownership of the coal exchange was disclaimed by the liquidators and passed to the Crown Estate. That was an unusual legal situation and led to a great deal of uncertainty.

At that point, I became aware of a lot of local concern about the future of the building. My office is nearby in Mount Stuart Square in one of the other historic buildings of Cardiff Bay. The coal exchange is a building I have long felt a great attachment and passion for. Many people in the community came forward and, with the opportunity presented by its being disclaimed to the Crown Estate, I decided to make a public call for all the parties interested in its future to come together for the benefit of the community and to save the building.

I was contacted by many hundreds of people: existing tenants, experts, former workers in the building and people from the diverse Butetown community and those associated with the building in the past, as well as an extensive number of interested developers. We held a first major public meeting in Butetown in October 2014, which was followed by a smaller working group coming together to form what was to become the Save The Coal Exchange campaign. My office was a central point of discussion.

A number of formal claims persisted against the building from Cardiff Council, Julian Hodge bank, Barclays bank and Coal Exchange Ltd, the company that had previously hosted events at the venue and had effectively been forced out of it by the council-imposed prohibitions, but there was great optimism that a solution involving the local community, the council, the Welsh Government, Cadw, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Victorian Society and others would be found. I have sat on their hands when it comes to helping Cardiff Council out with this problem, and that a large amount of money could fall on taxpayers?

Stephen Doughty: I have concerns about the liability for taxpayers, but the Welsh Government have engaged proactively and positively. I hope that the new Government will look carefully at these issues.

As I said, on no fewer than seven occasions, I met council officials and was provided with repeated assurances of partnership. I spoke to Julian Hodge bank and Barclays bank, which assured me they would act in the interests of all those with a stake and the local community, and not sign off any deal that they did not think met those concerns. I also spoke to the Crown Estate, the Heritage Lottery Fund and many others. However, sadly, our hopes and optimism for a collaborative and transparent process seem to have been misplaced and I am sorry to say that over the last six months we have seen some deeply untransparent manoeuvres by a small group of council officers to cut a backroom deal, first with a Liverpool company, Harcourt Developments, and then with another Liverpool company, Signature Living, and its owner Lawrence Kenwright.

Despite my misgivings, I have tried at all times to maintain an open mind to various developers and proposals that have come forward. Indeed, I was happy to put them in touch with relevant parties and the Save The Coal Exchange campaign. That includes Signature Living. I met its representatives on a number of occasions, including Lawrence Kenwright on three occasions, to listen to their plans and to ask detailed questions, not least because one of the positive aspects of its proposal was, on the face of it, to maintain the core heritage
fabric. However, as time went on and more matters came to my attention, I became increasingly concerned about its suitability as a developer and the nature of its assurances, which seemed to vary at every meeting. I raised those directly with Cardiff Council and many of the other parties but I was assured that they would be fully examined again and again.

So we come to the present day. The Minister will be aware that in the last two weeks there has been a sudden announcement that a deal has been facilitated by Cardiff Council to transfer ownership of the coal exchange to Signature Living, followed by a barrage of heavy corporate PR from Mr Kenwright and subsequent controversy in the media and local community, with nearly 800 local individuals now having signed a petition criticising the deal.

Let me be clear. I am not opposed to a private developer being involved in a solution to save the coal exchange. Indeed, since day one, I have been clear about the level of finance needed. I am also perfectly happy to put my personal concerns about Mr Kenwright to one side in the interests of any deal about the building and the local community. It is easy to provide a fait accompli in these situations—to present oneself as the only alternative, threaten dire consequences, respond to any criticism or reasonable questions as a “slur” and warn of the jobs that might be lost. But we owe it to the building and the local community in Butetown, Cardiff and, indeed, the rest of Wales to secure the right solution for the coal exchange.

I want to detail a few specific concerns that I hope the Minister will listen to carefully. First, on the process, previous dealings with Macob and other potential developers reveal a concerning record. Freedom of information requests have revealed a complex web of negotiations over a number of years, including that the council was contemplating a development that would have seen a significant proportion of the building demolished and the building of a multi-storey block of flats. That is hardly reassuring.

There has been no tender or public process in this instance. The council was fully aware of the concerns during the process, and I do not understand why it did not go forward in a fully transparent and open way to secure the right bid. In fact, one developer came to see me to tell me of his concerns—that bid was supported by officials at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, at UK level—and told me that in effect he had been scared away by the council: it was not interested and he should go away.

In recent days the council appears to have exercised its right of sale to seize and transfer the building to Signature Living. How it did that is unclear and has been questioned by independent legal practitioners. That largely centres on a claim that the council has made, but never fully substantiated, of “costs” that it incurred and then attempted to formalise by pinning a notice to the building some months ago. It appears to have done a deal with other claimants to relinquish their charges.

Lawrence Kenwright has claimed in the press this week that he beat dozens of competitors. On 8 April I had an email from the council’s director of economic development, Neil Hanratty, that made the point that the “condition of the building has been widely publicised”.

He went on to confirm that rather than dozens, only “four parties were interviewed by a panel of officers including the Listed Building... Officer and a representative of Julian Hodge Bank.” I find it very odd, given the UK and international interest in the building, let alone that in Wales, that the council appears to have engaged in negotiations in the past 18 months with only two companies, both of which happen to be from Liverpool. It is a shame that the council did not get together with other key stakeholders to put together a public bid process, working with all those other people who could have played a part in finding the best solution.

I also have concerns that this matter has not received the proper democratic scrutiny. It does not appear to have gone to the cabinet or the leader of the council, or, to my knowledge, to the council’s economic development committee.

I want to turn now to Mr Kenwright’s financial background. I am afraid that Mr Kenwright has been less than transparent about his financial history, and I think it is in the public interest to raise these matters so that others can draw their own conclusions. Mr Kenwright did not proactively disclose these to Cardiff Council or to anybody else who met him. Indeed, the council claimed that it was unaware of them when I raised them with it. He has blamed his past difficulties on the credit crunch and said that they have made him “a better businessman”. He has attempted to downplay them in the Welsh press this week. He told WalesOnline:

“I had an apartment block in Liverpool which went over budget. I was one of the first ones to go bust. The only difference between liquidation and bankruptcy is giving the personal guarantee.”

However, Mr Kenwright confirmed to me personally in a meeting in the House on 9 March that he was made bankrupt as recently as 2010, in Liverpool Crown court on 22 June in that year. The credit crunch of course started in 2008. And, crucially, he was a director, as reported in the north Wales Daily Post on 28 April 2004, of a clothing company called Yes & Co. Distribution Ltd, which in 2002 went into liquidation, with an estimated £1.9 million owing to creditors. The newspaper reported at the time that a Patricia Kenwright—believed to be his former wife—was disqualified from being a director for four years and that her husband Lawrence Kenwright accepted a similar undertaking for eight years, and a Frederick Greenwood for five years. That of course suggests that Mr Kenwright could have been disqualified until as recently as 2012, although admittedly that is not clear.

It is not clear why the directors were disqualified, but the newspaper reported that Mrs Kenwright “allowed the company to fail to deal properly with its taxation affairs.”

For the record, the Insolvency Service lists a range of reasons for being disqualified. Of course, there could have been another Lawrence Kenwright, so I wanted to ask him directly, and he confirmed that he was a former director of Yes & Co. and that he had indeed been disqualified. It is interesting to note that until recently he was not even listed as a director of the company that he set up to facilitate the purchase of the coal exchange.

As of yesterday, Signature Living Coal Exchange Ltd listed only one director, his current wife Katie Kenwright, although Mr Kenwright is listed as a director of Signature Living Coal Exchange Ops Ltd.

I want to turn briefly to the financial model—
Stephen Doughty: If I may, I will not. We have limited time and I have already taken one intervention, but I might take another later if we have enough time.

The financial model that Mr Kenwright proposes to use for the building is the BPRA—business premises renovation allowance—scheme. That was introduced in the Finance Act 2005 and was intended to bring derelict or unused properties back into use. The scheme gives an initial allowance of 100% for expenditure on converting or renovating unused business premises in a disadvantaged area. However, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced the end of the scheme from the end of this financial year, after a raft of concerns, and investigations by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

The council has claimed to me that Signature Living has told it that it has secured an “approved £12 million” and up to a further £30 million. However, Lawrence Kenwright told me that only one of his previous schemes had received full approval from HMRC. I am deeply concerned. Given the investigations into these schemes in the past and the risk of their not being approved, where does the liability lie? We also ought to ask, given the current climate and concerns about tax avoidance and transparency: is this the right scheme to be funding this sort of building? Should we be assisting wealthy individuals and shadowy funds to avoid tax in this way?

The Treasury has decided that it will end the scheme, and a year later added them to its public ‘Spotlights’ list of arrangements it said taxpayers should avoid.”

Financial Times reported on 14 July 2015: “HM Revenue & Customs indicated it saw problems with arrangements involving BPRA, drawing parallels with abusive avoidance schemes, and a year later added them to its public ‘Spotlights’ list of arrangements it said taxpayers should avoid.”

A range of concerns were raised. The FT continues: “Where tax relief was not granted to taxpayers before 2013, the Revenue has in most cases withheld it, said Mr Avient”—he comes from UHY Hacker Young—“The Revenue clearly saw a situation where certain structures were stretching the rules too far…it has issued a raft of accelerated payment demands to repay disputed tax to BPRA scheme investors. These tax bills cannot be appealed.”

Interestingly, on 21 April 2014 the Liverpool Echo revealed the problems with the Stanley Dock regeneration scheme, funded in the same way. Builders were left unpaid; the council was left having to provide a significant amount of grant—multi-million pounds—and there was a complete lack of transparency. That involved another Liverpool company called Harcourt, which incidentally, as I said, was the previous preferred partner of Cardiff Council. The Liverpool Echo reported that it was “surprisingly difficult to pin down the developers and owners”, which I think exposes the difficulties and concerns about the transparency of these schemes and their solidity.

I also have concerns about what the building will be—what is the proposal on the table? We have heard about it being proposed as a hotel. It is clear that Signature Living is a hotel developer. I am not opposed to a hotel development and I am sure that many other people in the community are not, but it is still, as of this date, unclear what parts of the building will be used for what. At various times, in various meetings, we have been told of residential, part-hotel and normal hotel usage. In fact, Mr Kenwright suggested to me that it might be a third, a third, a third—or, as he put it, “as much as the council let me get away with”.

We need to be very clear—we need to know—before accepting or agreeing that this scheme is a good thing what the building will be used for. Tenants and businesses in the area and residents in the square—it is already a significant residential area—need to understand what will be there. Will there be lots of big parties coming there? Mr Kenwright has a hen and stag business in his hotels in Liverpool. Will lots of people be living there and will there be parking issues and all the other things associated with that? None of those schemes is necessarily wrong, but the public have a right to know what the building will be.

I come now to community benefits and issues. First, the Save The Coal Exchange campaign has listed a whole series of issues that it would want to be included in a section 106 agreement. It would want to see those outlined and agreed to. We have had promises of jobs and apprenticeships, although Lawrence Kenwright told me that the company would “bring their own people in”. Where are the clear assurances on jobs and apprenticeships?

Secondly, there are existing tenants—nearly 40 tenants—in the building. What assurances have they been given? They are deeply fearful that the council may step in, given its history, issue prohibition notices and see them evicted once building work starts. Where are the assurances for them?

We also have concerns about engagement with the local community in the square. There has not been serious consultation with local residents or businesses. Signature Living has been advertising major changes to Baltic House, home of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action. Is it aware of those; has it been consulted?

I have had an exchange of letters with the council about this matter and have had some assurances, but the letter from Neil Hanratty on 8 April confirms only that “commitment to the above will be secured formally through the planning process” and merely that Signature Living has “agreed in principle”. We should be having cast-iron guarantees for a building of this nature, with this kind of expenditure and the potential impact. These are really serious issues and we want to ensure that there is that community benefit, quite apart from all the other issues about access to the building.

Finally, heritage was one of the most positive aspects of the Signature Living proposal but, even so, there are concerns. In March 2016, the Victorian Society wrote to City of Cardiff Council officer Pat Thompson, copying in Neil Hanratty, saying that it had heard nothing from the council for 20 months and that “the lack of communication from Cardiff Council is both disappointing and concerning…we are concerned that without close scrutiny, and clear direction from the local authority, aided and informed by a proper assessment…an acceptably sympathetic scheme, might…prove difficult to achieve. In 2013 and 2014 the Society was involved in consultations with Signature Living on its proposed hotel conversion, of Albion House, Liverpool, a Grade 2* Listed Building by Richard Norman Shaw.”

That building will, of course, be of interest to those of us in this Parliament. The letter continued:

Craig Williams: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Doughty: If I may, I will not. We have limited time and I have already taken one intervention, but I might take another later if we have enough time.

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Finally, heritage was one of the most positive aspects of the Signature Living proposal but, even so, there are concerns. In March 2016, the Victorian Society wrote to City of Cardiff Council officer Pat Thompson, copying in Neil Hanratty, saying that it had heard nothing from the council for 20 months and that “the lack of communication from Cardiff Council is both disappointing and concerning…we are concerned that without close scrutiny, and clear direction from the local authority, aided and informed by a proper assessment…an acceptably sympathetic scheme, might…prove difficult to achieve. In 2013 and 2014 the Society was involved in consultations with Signature Living on its proposed hotel conversion, of Albion House, Liverpool, a Grade 2* Listed Building by Richard Norman Shaw.”

That building will, of course, be of interest to those of us in this Parliament. The letter continued:
"From our point of view the process was far from ideal. Plans were drawn up hurriedly and without any evidence of the sort of high quality, detailed heritage assessment a Grade 2* Listed Building demands. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, the conversion involved some alterations and additions that we as well as Historic England advised were unsympathetic and harmful. These were undertaken regardless, some seemingly prior to receiving the necessary consents... None of this is to suggest that Signature Living is incapable or indisposed to deliver a high quality sensitive conversion scheme, rather it is to demonstrate that without proper guidance... in the form of a Conservation Management Plan and a structural survey, a less sympathetic and unnecessarily damaging conversion is the likely outcome."

I conclude by identifying a few key areas. First, the questions about the financial background are deeply concerning. What does the Minister think? I want Cardiff Council to be clear about its due diligence process in that regard, particularly on the sureties around the BPRA scheme, given the concerns that have been raised. What happens if that goes wrong? Who will bail this out? Who will deal with the financial consequences?

Secondly, on heritage and planning, there is a clear need for strict oversight from Cadw, the Victorian Society and others, for conservation management plans and for surveys, whatever developer comes in. Thirdly, we need guarantees in writing, not assurances that mean nothing, on the community issues and on access to the building. We need guarantees for the tenants of the building as it is, and we need an inquiry into the overall process over a number of years. The process has been deeply unsatisfactory and has involved the use of health and safety powers and the spending of public money in a deeply non-transparent way. We should put a halt to the proposal, re-engage with the community and other stakeholders and act in the national interest to save the coal exchange.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I put it on the record that I had no foreknowledge of what the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth was going to raise. I raised some issues about one of the developments he mentioned on behalf of some constituents many years ago, and I would not want it to be thought that I had any prior knowledge that he would mention it, otherwise it might not have been appropriate for me to take the Chair today.

11.22 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on his speech and on securing this debate. It is important that Westminster is still relevant to the communities that we represent in Wales, and highlighting such issues in Westminster Hall debates is appropriate and correct. He said that he does not expect me to have all the answers, and indeed it would be inappropriate for me to respond to some of the points that have been raised because many of them are issues for the Welsh Government and for City of Cardiff Council, which as part of local government in Wales is answerable to the Welsh Government. I will have to restrain myself from commenting on devolved areas. It is important to place this debate in context and to respond to the undeveloped issues, and I will particularly respond to the questions on the tax allowance system. Additionally, it is important to touch on the Crown Estate's position in the sales process to try to allay some of the fears he raised.

On the background to the debate, I fully subscribe to the hon. Gentleman's comments on the coal exchange, which is an iconic Welsh building. We should be proud that Wales was able to dictate the price of coal throughout the world, and we should trumpet that the first £1 million business transaction—the sale of coal to France—happened at the coal exchange. We should talk about that when we discuss the history of Cardiff but, in the context of Cardiff bay, this debate is also an opportunity to highlight the way in which Wales has developed. We should proudly boast of the revitalisation of Cardiff bay and highlight the economic impact of the changes in Cardiff that have been secured through the work of successive Governments here in Westminster, in co-operation with Governments in Cardiff bay—it is an example of the two Governments working together and of the local authority being proactive in redeveloping an area that was ripe for redevelopment. This is a success story, and there is no doubt that the coal exchange is an iconic building at the centre of the proposed redevelopment of Cardiff bay.

When we talk about redevelopment and business opportunities in Cardiff, it is no bad thing to trumpet, for example, the Cardiff city deal. I represent a north Wales constituency, and I often hear the accusation that all the investment in Wales goes to Cardiff, but it is important to point out that the scale of the Cardiff city deal is not confined to the city of Cardiff: it will have a huge impact on all the areas surrounding Cardiff. Indeed, a significant proportion of the Welsh population will be affected by the Cardiff city deal, which has secured a £1.2 billion investment on a cross-governmental level. I am sure that every hon. Member in this Chamber would welcome that.

Cardiff is a city that is going places and performing extremely well in attracting inward investment. There is no doubt that the Cardiff bay area has been crucial to the refocusing of Cardiff in the mind of inward investors as a city with a “can do” attitude, which has made a difference to job creation throughout the area and south Wales.

Craig Williams: There is a direct comparison between the scale of regeneration in Cardiff under the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, which was formed under the previous Conservative Government, and the city deal in partnership with the Wales Government. It is a national disgrace that we are debating the future of the coal exchange and that it has been left to fall down through the inaction of the Labour Welsh Government. The impression has been given that the officers run City of Cardiff Council, which has a Labour cabinet.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Speech!

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. That is very lengthy for an intervention.

Guto Bebb: Concerns have been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) and by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on the inactivity, or otherwise, of the Welsh Government. It is not for me to comment on that, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth will be making his views known in due course.
Two specific issues have been raised to which I can respond. First, I cannot respond to the sales process adopted by City of Cardiff Council, but it is only right and proper that I address the involvement of the Crown Estate, about which the hon. Gentleman expressed concern. It is clear that the whole process was subject to the escheat process, which means that the building was never owned by the Crown Estate. As such, the Crown Estate was neither consulted nor involved in the process by which the property’s ownership is being transferred. That is not unique; it is a pattern that can be seen in many circumstances involving the Crown Estate. The actual decision-making process will be for City of Cardiff Council and the Welsh Government. Although the Crown Estate is technically involved, it is not odd that it was not consulted and did not provide any input in the process.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the tax allowance scheme, and it is fair to say that the business premises renovation allowance is central to the redevelopment plan. He is right to highlight the fact that the scheme will be coming to an end at the end of this financial year, at the end of March 2017. He is also correct that concerns have been raised about the way in which the scheme has been utilised in the past. Those concerns, which were raised, I think, back in 2011-12, have been addressed by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and it was stated in summer Budget 2015 that the scheme would be coming to an end. That is still the case. It is important to highlight the fact that the BPRA is a capital allowance scheme, and my understanding is that under such schemes any claim for the allowance would have to be made retrospectively, after the expenditure is made. It is also important to highlight the fact that any claim for a capital allowance under such a scheme would have to refer to expenditure incurred during the 2016-17 financial year. Any expenditure incurred after that point would obviously be outside the scope of the allowance scheme, which is a fairly important point.

Stephen Doughty rose—

Guto Bebb: I apologise, but I am afraid that I have only one minute.

The hon. Gentleman’s concerns have been heard, if nothing else. By raising this issue in Westminster, he has ensured that the concerns of tenants, the local community and elected representatives have been heard. The concerns raised in relation to the tenants of the coal exchange are valid and should be addressed, and everyone would agree that the redevelopment of such an iconic business should be open and transparent and should have the support of the local community. However, on the issues relating to the involvement of the Westminster Government, I restate that the Crown Estate process has been par for the course. In the same way, the concerns raised about the tax allowance scheme are valid if this redevelopment does not happen before the end of March 2017 but, as it currently stands, the scheme is still in existence.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
there is simply no farmer in this country who could survive for long by selling milk as cheaply as 10p a litre. Many farmers are already struggling and living on the edge financially. Yes, Government action on averaging out tax payments over three years for farmers is incredibly helpful, but it does not address many of the challenges they face.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): One issue that farmers in my constituency of Eddisbury raise with me is the fact that the processors are not subject to the Groceries Code Adjudicator and that there is a huge gap between those on aligned contracts and those on non-aligned contracts, and it is those on non-aligned contracts who are really suffering at the moment.

Mr Williams: I completely concur with the hon. Lady, who has experience of the farming industry both in England and in Wales. I will address the Groceries Code Adjudicator later, but I agree with her sentiments.

In Wales, the dairy sector continues to suffer from months of continuing low prices and poor profitability, and many of the farming unions are not convinced that there is likely to be a recovery any time soon. According to AHDB Dairy, for the 12 months to December 2015 total full costs of production ranged from 25.7p to 34.4p a litre. In short, there is huge disparity between the costs of production and the price that producers receive, which is a huge concern. The figures over the past decade show the loss of 5,500 dairy producers in England and Wales, and that downward trajectory will continue if nothing is done to help support dairy farmers. That means a change in the ethos of some of our farmers, but it also means positive action from the different Governments, whether it is the Government here in Westminster or the devolved Administrations. If we do not do that, it will have a terrible impact on the rural communities that many of us represent.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Williams: I give way to a neighbour of Wales.

Daniel Kawczynski: One thing that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned is the fact that this debate is almost as repetitive as the changing seasons. I must have been to more than 12 such debates over the past decade, and we always get platitudes from Ministers, who say that everything is being done. I hope he agrees that, when the Minister stands up on this occasion, we will hear about concrete steps that the Government are taking to support our dairy farmers.

Mr Williams: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I refer him and the Minister to the report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The hon. Gentleman has a fine pedigree in championing such issues. He set up the all-party dairy group in the last Parliament, and he initiated many of the 12 debates that I mentioned. I thank him for his contribution.

I mentioned rural communities. I reflect on the words of the farmer whom I spoke to on the streets of Aberystwyth last weekend, who told me that price fluctuations over the past five years have cost his business something like £100,000. That is a huge loss to the local economy, local businesses and the wider agricultural economy.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I must register a slight interest, as my husband runs an agricultural auctioneering business; he runs the Sedgemoor market, which many Welsh farmers come to. He has reported to me that there is a knock-on effect. It is not only the farmers selling milk who are affected; it is the whole industry. The cost of a cow now is less than £1,000. People who rear cows to sell them to dairy farmers can hardly cover the costs of their business. The whole chain is affected, not just the end of it, and we absolutely must do something to address this situation.

Mr Williams: The hon. Lady is quite right, and she represents a rural area, as I do. For people who do not live in a rural area, it can sometimes be very hard to understand the extent to which the agricultural community and the agricultural economy are engrained in rural areas and every aspect of life in those areas. We have had a big debate in our area about the closure of village schools. If families working on dairy farms move away, that has a direct impact on the capacity of small schools to function. If young families leave a community, public services dwindle as a consequence, as well as the auctioneers and others involved in the supply chain for the agricultural industry, as she said.

The nature of my remarks so far has been negative, but I do not want this to be a wholly negative debate, because we have some immensely innovative farmers who want to stay in the industry and want the industry to thrive and prosper. However, my farmers tell me that they want us to speak out about the reality on the ground as they experience it.

Of course, not all the problems are home-made. There are serious global challenges for British agriculture that are not under our control. The farmers I have spoken to recognise the significant impact of global supply and demand on their businesses, and the difficulties for Government in changing that. There has been a fall in the global commodity price which, along with other factors such as the Russian ban and the reduced demand for milk from China and the middle east, has played a part in the current difficulties we face in Wales and in the UK as a whole.

For those farmers who have stayed in business and continued producing dairy, production has increased, but so has production around the world and it seems unlikely to slow down in the near future. There have been warnings. I will not dwell on them too much, but the Welsh Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, warned about the impact of the end of quota and the impact of the increase in Irish production, which the Farmers Union of Wales has been talking about since 2009; but we are where we are.

While there are positive signs that the global market for milk will continue to grow, the growth in production is higher than the growth in demand, which has a huge impact on the commodity price of milk. We live in a globalised world and at times that unfortunately means that small changes somewhere else in the world have a huge impact at home. There is action that can and must be taken to improve British dairy producers’ opportunities...
on the global market, such as having a strong and long-term dairy exports strategy; I emphasise that it should be strong and long-term. However, these global factors cannot always be predicted.

The domestic market remains important. Over half the milk produced in the UK is sold directly as fresh liquid milk through retailers and consumed here in the UK. This milk is mostly sold as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, with much of the remaining milk being processed into products such as cheese, yoghurt, milk powders and butter. There are some very good companies using that milk. I think of Rachel’s in Aberystwyth in my constituency; its products can be bought in Portcullis House. They are excellent products that are made using local milk.

While many dairy products are in a very competitive global market, there has been huge criticism about the relationship between supermarkets and their suppliers, especially when it comes to the price that supermarkets pay for the milk that goes on their shelves. Milk, as a staple in many people’s shopping baskets, has for too long been at the forefront of the UK retail price war. However, rather than affecting the profits of the supermarkets, it seems that much of this cost-cutting has instead affected the price paid to dairy suppliers. Much of the milk that is produced was bought at a price lower than it cost to produce. That situation is simply not sustainable for my constituents who are farmers—or for any constituents in the farming communities represented in Westminster Hall today. The FUW said in 2015:

“It is not, and never has been, the job of the producer to fund supermarket price cuts or to enhance a retailer’s market share. Sacrificing producers to a retailer price war can only function to enhance a retailer's market share. Sacrificing producers to a retailer price war can only function to enhance a retailer's market share.

That is why I return to the point about the Groceries Code Adjudicator made by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and it is why many of us in this House supported the creation of the adjudicator.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) rose—

Mr Williams: I know that the hon. Gentleman has done a lot of work on this issue, so I give way to him.

Julian Sturdy: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate and on making a powerful argument. Regarding the Groceries Code Adjudicator, he will be aware that there is an upcoming review of the adjudicator, two years after the office was created. Is that not the perfect opportunity to strengthen the adjudicator and its remit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) touched on? This is an area where Government can act.

Mr Williams: Again, I completely concur with that comment. I think the hon. Gentleman secured a debate on the Groceries Code Adjudicator in this Chamber a few weeks or months ago, and he made that point very strongly then. He is quite right; we need the opportunity that this review presents. I supported the creation of the adjudicator, as did my party, and I commend the cross-party efforts to create the adjudicator. Andrew George, the former Member for St Ives, and others, including the hon. Member for Ynys Môn—in fact, all parties in the House pioneered and put forward the case for the adjudicator, the creation of which was long in coming.

Like the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), farmers tell me that, yes, the adjudicator has the power to name and shame, and, yes, the adjudicator has the power to levy fines, but those powers are insufficient. The adjudicator needs to have the power to examine the whole of the supply chain from gate to plate, even if that requires legislative change. That would instil great confidence in many farmers who do not have a direct relationship with supermarkets through one of the admirable dedicated supply contracts.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) rose—

Mr Williams: I give way to my neighbour from Carmarthen East and Dinefwr.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, for securing this debate and for the passionate remarks he has made. Based on what he has just said, and based on the previous intervention, unless the Government act during that review and give the adjudicator some teeth, there will be a huge Government failure on the dairy industry.

Mr Williams: I totally concur with that. I think there is an emerging consensus. It took some time to give the adjudicator the capacity to levy fines. I think this is the next step, but it cannot come quickly enough for many of the farmers in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and elsewhere.

We are told that more dairy farmers are supplying supermarkets on a dedicated contract, which is true, and that many of those farmers receive more favourable milk prices, which is good, but only 4% of Welsh dairy farmers have a direct link with the supermarkets. I believe that 4%—I congratulate those farmers and those supermarkets on having better arrangements—but it is only 4% of Welsh farmers who can potentially be assisted by the Groceries Code Adjudicator if there are contractual breaches. The rest of them are on their own and there is a huge sense of vulnerability.

I will proceed as quickly as I can now; if the House will excuse me, I will not take any more interventions. I will talk about efficiency in the dairy sector. Of course, efficiency can help to reduce the cost of milk production, but to do so farmers need to have the money to invest, and that needs to be recognised in the price paid to farmers for their milk. The FUW says,

“Whilst... some retailers have made small in-roads in this area, it remains imperative that the prices paid to producers not only cover the cost of production, but also provide room for investment in order to allow the sector to innovate and remain competitive.”

I am yet to find a farmer who does not have an eye on the future and who is not prepared to plan or innovate. The issue for almost all those producers, and many of the larger ones, is that the financial constraints on them—some of those constraints are sometimes imposed by the banks, which are not always helpful; many of them are, but many of them are not—make it impossible for them to invest in the way that we want them to. If we expect farmers to invest, say, £100,000 to extend a milking parlour at a time of gravely low prices, that is a huge challenge and for many farmers it is not feasible.
Despite that, the industry has achieved many of the efficiencies expected of it. It is predicted that between 2015 and 2016 the industry will reduce the cost of production by 4.56 pence per litre. However, to go back to the international dimension to this situation, at the same time prices fell by 20%.

We need to look at processing capacity. In Wales, the fact is that we have had no substantive investment in processing facilities for 10 years, although the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) may tell us a little good news if she catches your eye, Ms Ryan. There has been a loss of milk and cheese processing at a time of increasing supply. That needs to be addressed.

Briefly, I will endorse what the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said in the recommendations of its excellent report, “Farmgate prices”. One of the recommendations stated:

“Claims from national retailers that there are ‘sustainable economic reasons’”—
sustainable for whom, we ask—
“justifying price differentials have not been fully accepted by many farmers and retailers must”—
I emphasise, “must”—
“do more to explain their reasoning and to ensure their prices adequately reflect the costs of production.”

The report talks about producer power in the marketplace. What is being done at the UK level—I would ask the same question to Ministers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—to encourage producer organisations? In Wales, there has been concern that the Assembly Government have not been forthcoming with the resources promised to the farming community to develop producer organisations.

The report highlighted that opportunities exist for imports to be displaced and for new products to appeal to UK and global consumers. The whole supply chain needs to invest in continued improvement and productivity. If that is an aspiration, it is a laudable one, and I know many farmers are attempting to respond to it.

The report also questioned the
“assurance from the retail sector that there is no link between the price at which supermarkets sell to their customers and the price supermarkets pay to farmers.”

The report said that “Progress is uneven”. I would say that the Committee is being rather generous in saying that it is “uneven”.

DEFRA and Agriculture Ministers in the devolved Governments need to encourage the use of more long-term contracts. That will help to provide predictable levels of income and ensure secure financial planning and investment decisions, regardless of the price in the supermarket. There needs to be clearer guidance from DEFRA so that customers know that they are buying British goods or—I would say this, wouldn’t I?—Welsh produce.

Through the European school milk scheme, children over the age of five receive a subsidised portion of milk. Revisions to the scheme—I believe the UK Government abstained—were passed this month, which means that the UK will receive just under £10 million in aid per school year, which is the fourth highest allocation of any country in the EU. DEFRA is responsible for implementing that allocation. Will the Minister clarify whether the Government will continue to participate in the revised European school milk scheme? What plans do they have for consultation? Critically for this debate, what discussions has the Minister had with the dairy industry about how it can benefit from the scheme?

My final substantive point is on the voluntary dairy code of practice, which often gets ignored. There is concern over its brevity and the number of people it covers. My farmers tell me that the code has had little impact on the farm-gate price received by producers and is largely ineffective in the midst of a market surplus. When the former Minister, Sir James Paice—Jim Paice—came to the Royal Welsh show in Builth Wells and announced the code, there was great excitement among the farming community. We were told at the time that, if there were concerns that the dairy code was not working effectively, the Government would leave open the potential for a statutory code of practice. How is the voluntary code being monitored? What consideration is being given to putting it on a statutory basis? For a long time, the FUW has called for the inclusion of market-related pricing formulas within dairy contracts, and I fully support that.

I could go on; it is a hugely wide subject. The remit of the debate was deliberately made as wide as possible to encourage contributions from Members from all parts of the UK and with different experiences, but there will be a commonality to many of the messages that we present to the Minister. There are two great industries left in Wales—steel and agriculture—and a growing small business sector, which we nurture. The steel industry is concentrated. We hope that the proposals for a management buy-out in Port Talbot yield results, because the impact of many thousands of people losing their jobs overnight would be catastrophic for Wales and the United Kingdom. However, a more sublime, devious decline of an industry is happening in Wales, and that is agriculture. The Committee report gives us some of the answers that need to be pursued. It is very important that the thousands of jobs in rural communities are sustained and protected. I do not dwell on the negatives, because I am reminded by the young farmers who come to my surgeries—I go to their meetings, and they want to stay in the industry—that they are the people we need to support and on whom our rural communities depend.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I say to right hon. and hon. Members that we have 10 people seeking to contribute, so I am placing a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. If everyone is helpful, everyone should get in on that basis. I will be seeking to start calling the three Front Benchers at 3.30. With the Minister’s co-operation, I ask that we allow the mover of the motion two minutes at the end, bearing in mind that we have a few minutes past the hour as we started late.

2.55 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak early in this debate. To some extent, I had been hoping to hear all the other speeches and use them to contribute to mine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) not only on raising such an important debate, but on doing so in an excellent way. There was hardly a single comment
that I disagreed with. He has raised most of the issues that I would have raised, so I will concentrate on two points only; I realise that many Members want to speak.

My first point relates to the public announcements in the past couple of weeks about an increase in the price that Arla pays farmers. It seems to have been accepted as an increase by DEFRA in publicity saying, “Well done, Arla”, but it was not an increase. Arla’s press release worked a treat, but the increase did not reach the farmers. We need to be pretty clear about that simply as a point of information.

The second issue I want to raise is hugely important. Cross-border single farm payments are a massive problem, particularly in Wales. The agriculture industry is structured such that the single farm payment from Brussels is crucial to the economy of farms. The cross-border farms in Wales have been deeply let down. They are not getting any money at all, but I am raising this issue with the Minister because the problem in Wales—this is what the Welsh Minister is saying to all those farmers—is that the information is not available to the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government therefore cannot calculate the payments for the cross-border farms, and they are getting nothing.

The farmers are in a desperate position. We read today about a supplier who has gone bankrupt. Some 300 cross-border farms in Wales are suffering. We have to have a proper working relationship between the Rural Payments Agency and Rural Payments Wales. We are told that they are not talking to each other, and people are losing out because of a bureaucratic failure. I do not know where the failure lies, but it needs to be gripped by DEFRA so that the problem can be sorted out for the sake of those cross-border farmers who are heading towards bankruptcy, purely because of inefficiency and bureaucratic failings.

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Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing this incredibly important and hugely topical debate on our dairy sector. The dairy sector has a long and proud history in Britain and in Ireland, both north and south. In Northern Ireland, the dairy industry stretches back many generations. Members will agree that dairy products are so much a part of our everyday diet that it is easy to forget the huge skill and effort it takes for farmers to produce such world-class produce. In fact, the all-party group on dairy—I am one of its vice-chairs—recently produced a helpful document on the need for Government, schools and the wider industry to promote dairy as an essential part of our diet.

We have already heard about the challenges faced by the dairy sector in Britain. Unfortunately, the issues are even greater in Northern Ireland, where they are amplified by our reliance on the export market. Northern Ireland’s small population and proportionally larger dairy sector mean that farmers must compete on world markets if they are to sell their produce, either in the south of Ireland, in Britain or further afield. That means that our farmers are the first to feel the impact of falls in the global dairy price or currency shocks. The situation is made worse by the lower prices Northern Irish farmers tend to get for their produce.

Despite producing dairy products that are as good as or better than products produced here in Britain—forgive me for being slightly parochial—Northern Irish farmers consistently suffer from lower average prices paid by national processors and retailers. In 2014, the average price for milk in Northern Ireland was 4.42p per litre less than the average price in Britain. In 2015, the price difference was even greater, reaching 5.34p per litre. Farmers are having to sell their milk for less than what it costs to produce. Anyone can see that that is unsustainable.

This is not just a matter for us Northern Ireland MPs or the Northern Ireland Executive in Belfast; regional dairy price inequality should concern every MP and Minister in Northern Ireland and Britain. Although we would say that Northern Ireland is the worst affected, there are many areas of England, Scotland and Wales where farmers are paid less than the cost of production. There is no doubt that that has dire implications for the long-term future of the industry. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee produced a very good report on farm-gate prices and made recommendations that I hope the Government will be able to implement.

Rebecca Pow: Perhaps a leaf might be taken out of the Northern Irish book, because I believe that the dairy companies of Northern Ireland successfully bid for an EU grant to help to promote the export of dairy products. Northern Ireland is obviously very successful at that, which is perhaps a good reason for remaining in Europe.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for making that helpful point. She is on the same page as me in terms of retaining membership of the European Union.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Hear, hear!

Daniel Kawczynski: Shame! Shame!

Ms Ritchie: Perhaps it would help if I moved on.

We must look at solutions. The Government must seek to bring to Britain and Northern Ireland a scheme that the European Investment Bank has already trialled in the south of Ireland. Under the scheme, the bank would allow DEFRA and the devolved Administrations to act as guarantors for loans made to dairy farmers. That added level of security would allow banks to make loans on much more favourable terms. For instance, in Northern Ireland, a bank loan made to a dairy farm typically has a pay-back period of 15 years, which is well below the average in Britain because of the difficulties to which I have referred. The Ulster Farmers Union believes that with the Government acting as a creditor, banks could offer loans with pay-back periods of 30 years, doubbling the time farmers typically now have. Will the Minister and his colleagues in the Department give some consideration to that scheme? Will he give us his opinion, or at least go away and have a think about it before coming back to us MPs with a particular interest in the matter?
Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady should draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Ritchie: Like the all-party group on dairy, I believe that dairy should be put back on the daily menu. That means encouraging parents, schools and others. I urge the Minister to take heed of this debate.

3.4 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I must correct the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie): the best dairy products are from Shropshire. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing this debate.

When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament in 2005—11 years ago—we set up the all-party group on dairy farmers because at that time Shropshire farmers were on their knees. We heard a lot of anecdotal evidence about the terrible financial difficulties they were suffering. Eleven years on and we are in almost the same place as then—indeed, we are probably even worse off. It is rather frustrating to have repeated debates in Westminster Hall while the situation continues to worsen, so I am really looking forward to the Minister giving us some heart-warming news of specific Government action on this issue.

I am delighted that tomorrow I will be attending the Shropshire business awards 2016 at RAF Cosford to support my friend, Daniel Morris, a cattle farmer, in the farming section. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will wish my constituent every success.

When we set up the all-party group on dairy farmers, more than 200 MPs joined—it was one of the largest all-party groups in the House of Commons. We produced a report, and during the process interviewed a lot of people, even going to Brussels to take evidence. We came up with two recommendations: first, a grocery adjudicator, and secondly, a limited cull of badgers. We took those recommendations to the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, David Miliband, who basically laughed us out of his office saying that both were completely impossible and would never happen. I am extremely pleased that the Government have introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator but, as has been said already, we want to hear what teeth the adjudicator is going to be given and about the roll-out of limited badger culls.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I represent an area that has had a cull, and the data I have seen are certainly encouraging. Nevertheless, we should not simply lay the blame with the Labour Secretary of State at that time, because later the then Lib Dem Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), put the brakes on the rolling out of the cull in Dorset. A Conservative Secretary of State took those brakes off.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

I want the Minister to remember what I am about to say and to have these figures indelibly imprinted on his mind, in perpetuity. In Shropshire in 1997, we slaughtered 47 cows because of bovine tuberculosis; last year, the figure was more than 2,000. It has gone from 47 a year to 2,000 a year. We have a bovine tuberculosis crisis in Shropshire. I have said this in previous debates and I do not mind saying it again. I have sat round a kitchen table with one of my dairy farmers, Chris Bulmer from Snailbeach, after his entire herd had been taken away. We sat together crying, such is the emotional drain on farmers and their families.

The biggest organisation in my constituency is the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. What is its symbol? A badger. If a farmer asks about it, she is told that unless they got a higher lamp post, they would need an extra-high lamp post. There has been fury and blood on the carpet at the meetings I have had with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. It has to understand that nobody wants the needless slaughter of animals, but when our fellow human beings—our fellow citizens—are going through such appalling financial misery, the time has come for the Government to act boldly and roll out the cull to other parts of the country.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently announced in his Budget an extremely controversial measure on fizzy drinks. It is not universally popular, but he took a really bold move that is shaking the industry. Something of a similar nature must now take place to protect our dairy farmers. We cannot allow this vital industry to be decimated.

3.9 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I also want to thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate, which is important. I want to say a few words about the situation in Cumbria, where local farmers tell me it is the worst they have ever known it to be. We have heard about the price paid for milk not covering the cost of production, but in Cumbria we have the added costs of transportation to the processors. One farmer told me that in the past financial year he made £26,000 from selling his milk. This year he estimates £12,000. That reduction in income is simply unsustainable. I have a friend who has decided to sell his herd because he cannot even make enough money to pay for the renting of the milking machines.

I have been told that at Carlisle market 11,000 dairy cows have been sold since January this year. That has a knock-on effect on the wider rural economy. Feed merchants, fertiliser merchants, machinery sellers and vets all feel the impact of the pressures on our dairy industry. A major issue for the farmers who have contacted me—I am sure nobody here will be surprised—is the fact that they have not yet received their basic payment scheme money, which should have been paid in December. In my area, where many of the farms have been flooded, the situation is desperate. The Rural Payments Agency said it would prioritise farms that had suffered from flooding, but that has simply not happened. One farmer, Susan Tyson, has contacted me. She farms at Understikkadaw near Keswick and she has had nothing, although her application went in last May. She said that every time she asks about it, she is told that “there is nothing wrong with your claim but we don’t know when you will be paid”.

Neil Parish: Unless they got a higher lamp post.

Daniel Kawczynski: They would need an extra-high lamp post. There has been fury and blood on the carpet at the meetings I have had with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. It has to understand that nobody wants the Needless slaughter of animals, but when our fellow human beings—our fellow citizens—are going through such appalling financial misery, the time has come for the Government to act boldly and roll out the cull to other parts of the country.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently announced in his Budget an extremely controversial measure on fizzy drinks. It is not universally popular, but he took a really bold move that is shaking the industry. Something of a similar nature must now take place to protect our dairy farmers. We cannot allow this vital industry to be decimated.
How on earth are farmers supposed to manage? They have taken out loans and have paid their tax bills. The situation is simply not acceptable.

Farmers need to know what is happening with their money. How else can they budget, invest and plan for the future of their farms? This is made particularly difficult in an industry where the cost of what is being sold is dictated by the consumer. We have talked about the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and I am really pleased that we have that. Members who have said that now that that is up for review, we need to make sure that it is strengthened and extended and that the adjudicator has real teeth to be able to help particularly the small farmers who fall out of the system.

Farmers are asking me what else they are supposed to do. Farmers whose families have farmed the land for generations now face the prospect not just of selling their herds, but of selling their land, which is absolutely heart-breaking. I also want to draw Members’ attention to the fact that members of the farming industry are three times more likely to take their own lives than people in any other industry. A farmer in my constituency recently collapsed and died at a sale. How much of that was down to stress? He was only in his 40s. The stress that people are under is unacceptable.

I am sure the Minister, who represents Penrith and The Border, is aware of the situations I am talking about in Cumbria, so I urge him to get the Government to work with farmers, processors and supermarkets to find a solution, but we also need advice and support to help farmers cope in these difficult times. Finally, just get the RPA to make the payments.

3.13 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Ryan. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate and keeping a spotlight on dairy prices. May I offer him a little solace? I think a previous Minister, David Heath, from his party, was a very good agriculture Minister. I want to put that on the record.

Food and farming is a £100 billion industry. One in eight jobs are in food and farming, so it really needs to be taken seriously. Dairy farming is the backbone of most livestock agriculture. It has a knock-on effect on the beef industry because most of the beef industry comes from dairy. When a lot of cull cows come on to the market because of the poor price of milk, the price of beef is depressed as well, so the whole thing has a knock-on effect.

The situation is not simple. We have had a large over-supply of milk throughout the world, but New Zealand has now dropped production by 5%, which must be good news. We can see a knock-on effect across the world of an approximately 2% increase in dairy trade year on year, so if we can start to reduce production and increase the volume, we will get better prices internationally. In the meantime, we must concentrate on two fronts in particular. One is making sure that this country can get the best market possible for milk. We need to work with the retailers and say to them, “Not only offer a good price on liquid milk, but a good price on processed milk.”

Tesco and others are stepping up to the plate. As I have said before, I used to want to be able indiscriminately to shoot a retailer a day and feel much better, but I cannot actually do that because there are some good retailers out there. When supermarkets put in milk as a loss leader for perhaps 89p, we must make sure that they fund that themselves and are not funded by the processor and the farmer. I do not like milk as a loss leader because it downgrades the value of milk. All of us in this room would stand up and say that our produce from our county is the very best in the country—there is no doubt Devon’s is the best—but I say to the Minister that we have to get country of origin labelling. We have to make sure that it is not only country of origin but regional labelling so that we can compete with one another on cheese, on yoghurt and on dairy products in total. That is absolutely key to the argument, so let us make sure that Government procures everything that is British as well, and let us make sure that the health service and the schools that provide school milk serve up things that are British. I know the Government have done a lot of work on that, but we need to do even more.

On the single farm payment, let us ensure we do not have the debacle that we have had this past year where we still have 10% of farmers waiting to receive their payments. I welcome the fact that the Rural Payments Agency has, perhaps slightly belatedly, said that the last 10% will get at least 50% of their payment by the end of the month. This is very important. This is money the Government can actually produce and they can make sure that it gets through.

We have to make sure that we get export markets right. China wants more milk powder. China has decided to allow the country to produce more children and that is why there is a big market for baby milk powder. That is key. We have to make sure we have the processors and everything in place to take that up so that we have either Chinese money or European investment money. Let us get this industry moving so that we are able to get the best price for our farmers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): To accommodate all those who wish to speak, I am now going to reduce the time limit to three minutes per speaker.

3.18 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Gadeirydd. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing this debate. Both he and I know that whether it is iathef or ieltrith, Welsh milk is best.

The efficient method of food production—namely, the conversion of grass into dairy produce—is particularly well suited to the Welsh climate. It would be irresponsible to stand back and do nothing when the industry is in crisis. As has been mentioned already, there are many reasons for the latest drop in milk prices, and we have
mentioned Russia. As an aside, it is worth noting that Russia is subsidising its home dairy producers to the tune of $400 million as we speak.

We have heard about the role of supermarkets. Today is an opportunity to say that supermarkets should be encouraged—I use the word with emphasis—to ensure that discount retail price strategies are funded from their own profits, rather than dumped on farmers. The fact that the profit motive of retailers is allowed to trump the sustainability of UK farming is in the long-term interests of neither the UK consumer nor the UK economy. The primary ask from farmers is that the Government acknowledge that something is fundamentally wrong in the supply chain, which cannot be remedied without intervention. We cannot go on ignoring that fact and relying on the market to correct itself.

There are codes of practice in the food chain, both statutory and voluntary, that must be either proved effective or reviewed, strengthened and enforced. The statutory grocery supply code of practice applies, at present, only to the biggest retailers. It is overseen, as we know, by the adjudicator. The Government made a commitment in their election manifesto last year to increasing the powers of the adjudicator. I suggest that that might be done by reducing the minimum turnover requirement, making the arrangement applicable to a wider range of retailers. Perhaps that could happen in the two-year review that was mentioned.

Agriculture suffers from the public perception of being hand-out dependent. None the less, many farming families have shown great enterprise in the face of volatile markets by venturing into value-added or branded products. I must in the brief time available to me mention Dylan and Annwen Jones of Bryn Rhydd, Edern—my next-door neighbours, effectively—who, with their Puerto Madryn herd of Holstein-Friesians, have been producing the excellent Glasu ice cream. I am also proud to represent the constituency that is home to South Caernarfonshire Creameries at Rhdygwyn, which has been owned since 1938 by its dairy farmer members. I am proud to say that they are about to launch a new cheese factory unit, although this is a most difficult time to be operating.

I call on the Government to make full use of the potential of public sector and third party procurement opportunities, and to work with devolved Governments to enable and to invest in added-value processing opportunities. Finally, will the Minister make a commitment to press the EU Agriculture Commissioner to move ahead with proposals presently under consideration to allow emergency state aid of up to €15,000 per farmer annually?

3.21 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Big thanks are due to my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), for striking the right balance between optimism, pessimism and realism about the industry.

I have only a few points to make. We have heard a lot about the negative effect on the industry and the supply chain, but not much about the negative effect that that causes for the environment, which is equally significant. There was some reference to the state of the steel industry in Wales, and the impact of potential closure on the community around Port Talbot, and further afield. When I look at the great efforts being made by No. 10, and the huge efforts of the Treasury, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Wales Office, to rescue the steel industry, just as much for social and cultural reasons as for economic ones, part of me wants to ask the Minister whether his Department is looking into assessing the potential downside of the dairy industry’s problems in the same way as those other Departments are looking at the potential downsides of the closure of the steel industry. Numerically, spread across the UK, the numbers of people in each case may not be as dissimilar as we might think. The impact is no less important just because dairy farmers are dotted around individual communities and farms. I hope that that assessment is being undertaken and, if not, I hope it will be, because there are some significant numbers that we need to address.

There has been some reference to the role of Government in procurement, labelling and education. Just on the matter of education I want to say that it is quite frustrating for dairy farmers when advice comes out of the Department of Health about reducing dairy intake by 50%, without, really, any supporting evidence or context to it. Some cross-departmental co-operation on the messages coming out of Government, with regard to the positive side of eating home-produced dairy products, would be useful and would send a positive message to farmers, who are looking to Government, desperately at times, for a positive lead and an indication that the Government are on their side. Such things, small as they may seem, are significant for the message they send. Also, let us, via the Department for Education, talk about the value that home-grown food provides in the many ways that have been discussed, rather than simply talking about the cost of food. Of course cost is a driving factor, but are the Government doing enough with respect to the value of that high-quality product?

As to labelling, the issue is not about labelling milk. Sometimes it is about labelling other agricultural products that farmers produce. The supermarkets will say that they label things very clearly, and up to a point they do, but the frozen lines are not well labelled at all. On any supermarket website it is almost impossible to discover where frozen lines come from, whether that is in this country or not. A little more work by retailers on frozen lines would be helpful.

Finally, on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) made, the DEFRA interpretation of farm-gate average prices and the Arla press release give the impression that the Department does not really understand the severity of the situation. Perhaps now is a good time, with a sort of stand-in Minister—if he does not mind my saying so—to put the record straight and remind farmers that DEFRA completely understands the problems they face.

3.25 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Ryan. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for bringing this extremely important debate to the Chamber.

The dairy sector is vital to the farming and food sectors and the wider rural economy across the UK, including Scotland. It is also an integral part of local
communities. My constituency is made up of many rural areas, and farming and dairy industries have been key contributors to our local economy and job markets for many decades. One of the key issues for my constituency at present is the recent announcement by Müller Dairies that it is proposing to close its site in East Kilbride. That is part of a larger plan to consolidate elsewhere. The plans may also affect two of its dairies in the Aberdeen area.

The East Kilbride dairy has been owned by Müller only since 2012, but it has been a local institution for many years. It was previously owned by Robert Wiseman Dairies, which was founded in 1947, and it traces its roots back to Robert Wiseman senior, who started out in East Kilbride with a milk round, delivered from a horse and cart. Wiseman Dairies grew to be one of the major suppliers of milk and dairy products across the UK, until it was bought by Müller a few years ago. The dairy currently employs 131 staff, and the loss of those jobs would be a huge blow to the staff and the wider community. It is considered to be a vital local industry, and is ingrained in the identity of East Kilbride.

At present, a statutory consultation process about the proposals is going on. I am due to meet with representatives of Müller to discuss the proposals, and I will be following developments closely with the parent company, the Scottish Government, and the local East Kilbride taskforce. Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International will also be meeting with Müller to explore potential options for supporting all the company’s sites in Scotland, and their employees. At a personal level, however, this is an extremely unsettling time for those affected—people in my constituency have been left experiencing a period of uncertainty as they wait to find out the future of their jobs. We must do all we can to offer support and protection for jobs in that vital local industry.

The Scottish Government believe it is important to encourage local production, sourcing and consumption, as that helps to support local businesses and ensure that quality products are available. I reiterate what has been said about the importance of the dairy sector, particularly for my constituency and at this vital time. I ask the Government to do all they can to protect the industry, our economy and our local dairy farmers.

3.28 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for obtaining the debate.

I recently spoke with an 80-year-old dairy farmer, in my North Yorkshire constituency, who told me that in a lifetime of dairy farming he had never seen times as bad. I believe that there are five key steps that need to be taken by Government, industry and consumer to bring some relief to him and others and safeguard the future of dairy farming in the UK. First, we need buyers to give farmers a fair deal. I commend retailer initiatives from Tesco, Sainsbury’s and others, which ensure that farmers receive a fair cost-of-production price for their milk, but if the dairy sector is to be sustainable, retailers need to expand that good work on liquid milk to other dairy products, and, indeed, more milk buyers need to follow the lead of the large retailers. That process should, of course, be overseen by a robust Groceries Code Adjudicator with additional powers to investigate downstream supply chains and indirect suppliers.

Secondly, we must make and buy more British. It might seem that there are few things more British than an honest slice of Cheddar, yet almost half the cheddar consumed in the UK today is imported from overseas. We must invest more in processing technology to ensure we add value to British milk by turning more of it into British butter, yoghurt and cheese, rather than importing. Alongside that, we must have better food labelling so that large retailers and caterers clearly show consumers how much of their dairy products is British.

Thirdly, the industry needs to create more dairy producer organisations. Groups of farmers banding together to negotiate a better sale price for their milk and a lower purchase price for their feed, and to share machinery, are commonplace across Europe. In the UK we currently have only one such producer organisation. In Germany, there are 143. If farmers are to balance out the power of big processors and retailers, that must change.

Fourthly, we need to develop a working futures market. As New Zealand and America show, futures can be a vital tool for providing price stability in a volatile world. It is crucial, therefore, that the Government continue their efforts to ensure that the relevant benchmarking data are available, which will help British dairy futures to become a reality.

Finally, Government at all levels must buy British. I know that the national Government are working hard to purchase British dairy products, but at a regional level we can do more. We must push local government, the military, hospitals and schools to do their part as well.

In conclusion, without its dairy farmers, the lush fields of the Yorkshire dales in my constituency would soon turn to scrub and its dry stone walls would go unrepairied. Only if the Government, farmers and consumers work together will we preserve our dairy industry and, with it, our rural communities and beautiful countryside for generations to come.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): With the co-operation of the Front Benchers, I have time for a couple more speakers. If everyone is to get in, they will have to speak for no more than two minutes. I leave it to their co-operation.

3.31 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The agri-food sector employs about 100,000 people across the whole of the industry, and the dairy sector makes up a lot of that figure. When I speak to farmers, they tell me that there are a number of things that they have no control over. They had no say on the Russian ban, and they had no control over the quotas being done away with or the fluctuations of the euro.

Everyone knew that when the quota system went there would be a free-for-all and production would go up. The production of milk in Northern Ireland has increased by 4% this year, even though prices are falling. On Monday, I spoke to farmers who have been told that they will be paid 16p a litre for milk in May and that it will go down to 15p in June. That is crazy.
We have heard today of the pressure on farmers. Hon. Members have talked about meetings they have had with farmers who have shed tears. I have experienced the same thing. Farmers do not know how they are going to pay their next bill or how they are going to fend for their families. We have also heard about the issues of mental health and stress, about which I have written to DEFRA. Something for the farming community needs to be put into the UK mental health strategy.

The dairy sector is a vital industry, and it needs help. We can talk about retailers and new cheese factories, but that takes time. Something needs to be done now to alleviate the difficulties and problems that the dairy sector faces. In Northern Ireland, there is talk of a voluntary reduction of milk production. Whether that happens is a matter for the farmers and the processors. France and a number of other countries are in favour of a reduction, but the problem is that the tap cannot just be turned on and off in milk production. More help is needed, and we look to the Government to ease the difficulties and problems.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I call Mel Stride—
[ Interruption. ] Sorry, I call Simon Hoare—

3.33 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Thank you very much, Ms Ryan—I think. I want to make two brief points in the time available to me. Like my colleague the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), I am a vice-chair of the all-party group on dairy.

I want to pick up on the point that other hon. Members have made, about the Rural Payments Agency. Last week alone, I spoke to five farmers who had collectively spent six and a half hours waiting on the RPA hotline. I was slightly surprised when I tried to talk to somebody—as did my caseworker—only to find that we were left on hold for an average of 37 minutes. There is no direct email or telephone hotline for Members of Parliament to contact the RPA on behalf of their constituents. Most other Government Departments have such facilities. I urge the Minister to use his good offices to press for that.

In March, the all-party dairy group, after a lot of research, launched its report “Putting Dairy Back on the Daily Menu”. It was based on best practice and used a lot of scientific research. It sought to emulate the French example of having three a day for dairy, just as we have five a day for fruit and veg. Many dairy farmers saw it as a lifeline. One can imagine the shock—my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) spoke of this—when Public Health England reduced the intake of dairy from 15% to 8%. That was a kick in the bucklocks as far as the dairy industry was concerned.

I invite DEFRA Ministers to stand with the all-party group on dairy and talk to the Prime Minister, the Department of Health and the Department for Education to work out what methodology the recommendations of that rather dodgy Public Health England report were based on. They need to understand the huge damage it will do to the dairy sector and the huge damage and uncertainty it will cause for those in the public sector who buy food, whether in schools, hospitals or elsewhere. We look to DEFRA to stand with us to try to get that crazy recommendation overturned.

3.36 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): My constituency is predominantly rural. Dairy farming is at the heart of Ayrshire, so I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Ayrshire is home to the famous Ayrshire cattle and has been described as the dairy of Scotland. That claim is now in jeopardy, as the current milk prices are threatening the livelihoods of many farmers across the region.

Earlier this year, I was contacted by a group of local dairy farmers in dire straits, many of whom would never have previously come to an MP with a problem. That group was just a small proportion of the 70% of dairy farmers in Scotland who are non-aligned—in other words, they do not have direct contracts with supermarkets via milk processors, so they have to accept the price that is given to them on the open market.

Milk prices have gone into freefall in the past 12 months. My local farmers report that they now receive a pitiful 14p per litre, while their aligned neighbours typically get about 22p to 25p. A broker collects the milk from both the aligned and non-aligned farmers, which means that the 22p milk sloshes around in the back of the tanker with the milk that has been bought at 14p. That situation sets neighbours against each other, as the milk ends up in the same cartons regardless of the price paid to the farmer.

I welcome the Scottish Parliament’s inquiry into the milk pricing crisis and the work the Scottish Government have undertaken to support the dairy sector. One of the key issues that we in Westminster can address is the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which has been mentioned a number of times. Unless the adjudicator is given a remit to look beyond the relationship between retailers and processors, there is little point in having one.

One of my dairy farmers recently said to me that people need farmers at least three times a day. And yet the industry is being decimated. We cannot sit back and allow that to happen.

3.38 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you for the chance to speak, albeit briefly, Ms Ryan. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for securing the debate. The dairy industry is extremely important in my constituency, which contains many dairy farmers and associated businesses, such as Graham’s the Family Dairy and Asher’s Ice Cream. In the limited time I have, I will concentrate on just a couple of the things that I was going to say.

As hon. Members have said, dairy is a healthy product. We should encourage further consumption of it to help address some of the underlying problems in the industry. I share the concerns about some of the messages coming from the Government, and I hope the Minister will comment on those concerns and put them at rest.

After the election last year, I visited Graham’s the Family Dairy in Bridge of Allan in my constituency and had a tour of the factory with the managing director, Robert Graham. Graham’s has operated for more than 70 years in my constituency, and it produces a wide range of excellent products. It employs 500 staff and is supplied by 90 dairy farmers across Scotland, many of which are in Stirling. Its products are excellent sellers.
Last month, Graham’s signed a partnership deal with the food supplier Brakes, which represents a significant boost to the industry locally. That is good news, but there is a lot still to do, because the industry is in a perilous state.

Last year, the Scottish Government launched a dairy action plan to offer immediate support because of the problems facing the sector. One of the recommendations was to develop a strong Scottish dairy brand at home and abroad, and to get more Scottish dairy products on retail shelves, in food service and in export markets. Additional funding was given to the Dairy Growth Board to develop a Scottish dairy brand, which was released at the royal highland show last year. Ongoing efforts involve engaging with retailers to encourage the stocking of local Scottish dairy produce, in order to develop a viable Scottish supply base for the future, which will create a more resilient and sustainable dairy industry. Other initiatives have seen the Scottish Government promote the use of Scottish dairy produce in the public sector, for example through work with local authorities to get Scottish cheese, butter, yogurt and other dairy products into schools.

3.40 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) on securing it.

We may have had many debates on this subject, but this one has highlighted the fact that we need time in which to discuss it. What came across to me right from the offset was the desire to resolve the situation. Our farmers get a bit of a bad name sometimes—they have a tough job, with many factors ranged against them, which means that they are sometimes seen as being somewhat negative and complaining. Actually, as one farmer said to me, “To still be in farming, you’re an optimist, because you’re still keeping at it.”

The hon. Gentleman made an excellent starting contribution, which set out the challenges and, critically, put forward proactive and constructive suggestions. As he said, the issue is a complex local and global one, with many factors in play. Fundamentally, the drop in the price received has outweighed the savings from efficiencies in production. He made an excellent point about that.

We are lucky to have my neighbouring MP from across the border, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), responding to the debate, because I am sure that he will talk about concrete steps and not platitudes. He is known for getting his wellies on and getting engaged, and I am sure that he will demonstrate that again today. We need to consider many issues—the Groceries Code Adjudicator was mentioned regularly in the debate, as was the voluntary code of practice, which I will return to—but let us keep it positive and proactive. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) nearly started off a different kind of milk war with her boastful contribution, but such is the nature of politics—it was understandable.

As he said, the issue is a complex local and global one, and we need to look again at the option of compulsory codes in relation to the milk sector, and I welcome that. There is a lot still to do, because the industry is in a perilous state.

It is fair to say that the dairy industry throughout the UK is in crisis, and that is particularly true in Scotland, as we have heard. The downturn in milk prices has led to a fall in returns of some 50% for many Scottish dairy businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) wanted to be present today, but it is in the main Chamber. His concerns for his constituency, and the figures involved, are worth reviewing. Only three years ago, the farmers whom he represents were receiving 32.5p per litre; now, they obtain a farm-gate price of just 15.8p per litre, even though the milk is costing them 26p per litre to produce.

We cannot leave the milk pricing issue simply to market forces. There is a pressing need for action and more imaginative solutions. Collaboration involving Government and the entire supply chain is needed, with urgent action across a range of areas. In the short term, it is critical that banks are involved in the planning process and are prepared to extend credit to dairy farmers. That makes business sense, because global experts believe that the long-term outlook for the sector is promising. We need to maintain a viable UK industry through the lean times, and to do that we need collaboration and innovation now.

Above all, we need to deal urgently with the fact that we have a broken supply chain, with fundamental imbalances exacerbated by short-term opportunism. The chain needs to be fair, workable and responsible. Unless we have that, milk producers and others will continue to get a raw deal and will not have the confidence to invest.

For a start, we need the dairy voluntary code of practice to be refreshed. NFU Scotland says that that is potentially the key to the viability of the sector, and I agree. The code is designed to set out minimum good practice, and as long as it is respected and there is a commitment to it, it could be effective. So far, however, it has not developed enough momentum. The NFUS has warned that to date, and despite Government support, vested interests have undermined the uptake of the code of practice, and that the code is not being allowed to deliver the benefits that it could provide. I know that the Farming Minister is committed to strengthening the code in relation to the milk sector, and I welcome that, but it must include the whole supply chain. If for any reason we cannot make progress with a voluntary code, we need to look again at the option of compulsory contracts.

Another way to assist the dairy industry—this ties in closely with the voluntary code—would be to strengthen the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Some Members have already made specific recommendations, but I will...
summarise the three main possibilities: allowing her to initiate her investigations rather than waiting until a complaint has been received; taking in smaller retailers and indirect suppliers; and reporting on the balance of pricing across the whole supply chain. Another useful step forward, as we have heard, would be to encourage retailers to use labelling to identify the origin of the product, giving consumers the power to buy local and from the home nations.

We cannot allow the retail giants and others to keep on milking our dairy sector. Firm action is needed and firm action must come—we owe that to our farmers, our consumers and our national self-sufficiency. Without wasting another moment, let us give our dairy sector the help and support that it deserves.

3.47 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) for introducing the debate and the many colleagues who have intervened and made contributions this afternoon. Time is short, so I cannot mention everyone, but the hon. Gentleman certainly gave a great cri de coeur for dairy farmers throughout the country, as well as for the steel industry in Wales—I thank him for that.

With the global market in flux and farm-gate prices on the floor, the UK dairy industry is in danger. Some farmers are being paid less than the cost of producing the milk, which is unsustainable. Only last month, thousands of proud farmers felt that they had no other choice but to march on Whitehall and ask for change and for support. The Government must listen to that call. Bodies such as Dairy UK are saying there are no quick fixes, although the Government recognise that a package of support is needed to help save the industry from collapse. However, despite promising much in the face of pressure from the industry, there is still no sign of respite.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report listed many recommendations that I hope the Government will make good on. It talked about a futures market for dairy. Will the Minister make it clear when such a market will be established properly?

The British public have consistently proven that they back a “buy British” principle, but dairy in the UK still lacks country of origin labelling. The Farming Minister has been unable to get the EU to bring that forward, despite the EU approving similar branding on a vast swathe of other products. Meanwhile, he has written to supermarkets to encourage them to display the British flag on British dairy products. That code, however, is voluntary.

On exports, sector leaders such as Dairy UK have called for the development of new markets where we can showcase the quality of British products. It looks as if there may be good news on red meat and the USA this week, but will the Minister detail the results of talks with other countries about their importing our dairy products? All such suggestions are long-term goals, and that is understood, but where is the progress on those key issues?

The NFU and farmers have joined Labour in calling for the Groceries Code Adjudicator’s powers to be toughened up. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has published a report calling on the Government to consider extending the GCA’s remit. The Committee wants it to incorporate both direct and indirect suppliers. Will the Minister confirm that those concerns will be taken into account when the GCA is reviewed later this year?

Jonathan Edwards: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, in Wales many of the powers relating to Government intervention are devolved and, to date, the Welsh Government have decided to pursue a voluntary code of practice in this sector. Does he agree that it is about time that the Welsh Government began to look at statutory intervention, and not just leave it on a voluntary basis?

Nick Smith: That may be helpful and I certainly think it is worth looking at.

The problem of delayed payments has come up too, with the high-profile failure of the Rural Payments Agency system this year. That money is a vital lifeline, given the struggles in the dairy marketplace, yet a Public Accounts Committee report revealed a payments fiasco. The Government must accept their part in a failing IT project that may have landed us with a £180 million annual fine from the EU. Money that could have gone to British agriculture will now be thrown away. The NFU says that that the RPA should be making 90% of payments by the end of December each year. Will the Minister give assurances that that target will be met in future years?

Finally, I welcome the deep analysis done by the NFU on the implications of a UK exit from the EU. The analysis showed that every Brexit scenario resulted in a large drop in income for farmers. Will the Minister join me in recognising that for dairy farmers, staying in the EU is vital for the trade and support that it provides to the industry?

Simon Hoare: The situation is worse than the hon. Gentleman seems to suggest. Right hon. colleagues on my side of the House—although not on my side of the European debate—told us last week that all the money we spend on the EU would be spent on the national health service. My reading of that was that that equals no subsidy and no support to agriculture anywhere in the United Kingdom.

Nick Smith: I need to move on to allow the Minister to come back on the problems and issues that colleagues around the Chamber have raised.

The UK Government have recently failed to support an important EU funding stream for our dairy industries, so I would like the Minister’s response on that issue.

In conclusion, the Government must make good their promises on a futures market for dairy and country-of-origin labelling, give a proper boost for British dairy exports and put the RPA on track. They must speak with one voice about the value of the single market and the value of EU funding for British dairy farmers.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): Unfortunately, I have been asked for answers to 31 separate requests—I have written them down—and I have been allowed only seven minutes to respond, but I will do my very best.
Fundamentally, dairy matters deeply to the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), to whom I pay tribute for securing this debate, made a very powerful case for the importance of the dairy industry to communities. The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) made a powerful case for the nutritional importance of dairy. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a deep and complex argument about the importance of dairy for our history and heritage. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) pointed to the economic importance of dairy and, of course, the chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), made a strong argument for the importance of dairy for the farming industry in general.

The situation is genuinely terrible. Over the last decade, we have gone from having 13,500 dairy farms to having 9,500. We have seen that very directly in Cumbria, as the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) expressed so eloquently. In my constituency, from very large herds—thousand-cow herds in places such as Longtown, producing 10,000 litres per cow per year—right the way down to the herds of 30 or 60 cows in the Bailey valley, we now see them being sold in the marts and we see real pressure and psychological strain. As the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) pointed out, the regional factors are really important in places such as Cumbria and Northern Ireland, where access to the liquid milk markets in places such as London is much more difficult. Our prices are considerably lower.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) made a powerful argument about the global context in which the dairy industry operates, and the Labour shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), also made a very good statement about the context. Of course, global demand has dropped—Chinese demand alone has dropped by 23%. China matters: 30% of the global export market is China and Russia. At the same time, our production is going up. There is a real problem. Production was up last year globally by 6% and UK production was up by 2.7%. This is not just a UK problem. In New Zealand, the prices per litre for their milk are now down to 12p per litre. New Zealand production is falling, as we heard from the chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion and by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorkshire), we have created the legislative framework for those producer organisations. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We have invested £160 million in agri-science.

There are other steps—about 14 of them—that the Department is taking that were not addressed so much in this debate. It is important to bear in mind that underlying the dairy industry is considerable Government investment. On average, about £20,000 per farm comes from the Government. We have provided emergency support of £26.3 million for the current dairy crisis.

Cutting red tape is something that has not been discussed today. We estimate that by the end of this Parliament, we will have saved farmers in general £450 million by moving to single-farm inspecions. We have invested £160 million in agri-science. That is absolutely essential for everybody talking about innovation. We are looking at inward investment and had the Chinese company, Yili, here.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent raised the issue of exports. The Secretary of State is currently in the United States, driving British food exports, and we are also driving them into Chinese markets. We are focusing on the question of whether we can get more Chinese farms to produce milk for us in the UK. We have a specialist working on that in DEFRA with very considerable experience in the financial industry. It is a very complex industry, but we believe that it is something we ought to be able to make progress on.

On producer organisations, which were raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion and by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorkshire), we have created the seed funding to launch producer organisations. We have created the legislative framework for those producer organisations.

On procurement, which the hon. Member for Meirowonnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) raised, £60,000 of British Government money is being put into our schools to provide milk for our children. That is Department of Health money, proving that that Department recognises that milk is nutritionally beneficial to our children. The Justice Secretary has committed to milk coming into our prisons.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the hon. Member for Workington rightly raised issues about the Rural Payments Agency. I am therefore delighted to be able to announce that we will...
make part-payments to every farmer by the end of April: that means at least 50% of their payments by the end of this month to address this issue.

Finally, my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) raised the question of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Again, I am delighted to announce on behalf of the Department that we are doing a full review of the powers and behaviour of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. That is being done by civil servants at the moment, and we will report back on progress and looking specifically at issues such as whether the adjudicator can address the processing industry.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ceredigion for securing this debate and for the extraordinary quality of the argument, interest and commitment in this Chamber. The issue is unbelievably difficult and heart-breaking for farmers. Dairy farmers are at the core of our culture, history, identity, nutrition and heritage. The 17 measures that I have set out are contributions towards that, but ultimately we must get from a short-term crisis to a long-term future in which global demand for milk is rising and Britain is ideally placed to meet it.

Mr Mark Williams: I am grateful for the opportunity to thank all hon. Members, including those on the Front Benches, for their contributions. I am not sorry we asked the Minister 31 questions. I know that if he was unable to answer any as fully as he wanted, he will write to us. I thank him for his contribution and those of the Front-Bench spokesmen. Many points of note were made, some following from my speech, and many new ones.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) spoke about Northern Ireland and the proactive way in which moneys are being released to support investment. That is important. Mention was made of TB eradication. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) may find that history regards various aspects of coalition life and policy rather differently from him. We will see what happens in the fullness of time. Certainly in Wales, there has been consistency in three of the four parties about what we need to do to eradicate TB. I am particularly pleased that Ceredigion, with Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, recently voted for a selective badger cull. That was the first issue raised at a meeting I had on a farm last week. It needs to be addressed.

Finally, I did not raise this, but I am pleased that my constituency has been labelled the most Eurosceptic part of the United Kingdom. I am proud of that—[Interruption.] Hon. Members knocked me off my perch. A strong reason is the importance of the farming industry, which is a major employer in my constituency. Farmers are fully aware of the necessity of continued EU membership. On that controversial note, I thank all hon. Members for taking part in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the UK dairy sector.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended.

Small Weapons Trade

[ANDREW ROSINDELL in the Chair]

4.3 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on the trade in small weapons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I want to say at the outset that I have an interest in this topic. I am a Quaker attender, a member of Amnesty International and I have observed and documented peaceful protestors at the London arms fair at the ExCel centre.

I have called for this debate because some constituents who came to my surgery were concerned about the UK’s role in the small weapons trade. The weapons may be small, but I am sure the Minister will agree that the problem is not small. According to a Government briefing, there is one small weapon for every 10 human beings on the planet. We know from other work by non-governmental and Government organisations that between 60% and 90% of conflict deaths are caused by so-called small weapons. That means about 300,000 fatalities and about 900,000 injuries every year. As we know, in conflict situations, most deaths and injuries in this century have involved civilians. The problem is not small.

I have come across injuries from small weapons in my work as a doctor abroad. I have come across near-fatal injuries from rubber bullets and I have come across fatalities from live ammunition and dum-dum bullets. But I was most concerned about trade in small weapons when I was working in a peaceful setting in an African village with no electricity outside the hospital and no running water. There was an emergency one night—a young man had a gunshot wound—but we had no idea where the gun or ammunition came from.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that our country is at the forefront in the control of trade in all weapons and was one of the first to sign the UN arms trade treaty in 2013?

Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I believe we are leading when it comes to trade in larger weapons, but we are doing very poorly when it comes to small weapons. I will give examples.

The young man in Africa nearly died from his gunshot wound. We need to be responsible because, when there are small weapons in the community, it is very rare for them to be dismantled or to disappear. You may live in a mud hut with no furniture or belongings of note but, if anyone has a small weapon, it remains in that community for generations. We must be more responsible about this and, as a major trader in small weapons, we must take the lead.

Strong defence means transparency and regulation. Historically, we have not done well. I am sure the Minister is aware of some UK traders in small weapons. One transferred about 40,000 AK47s, 30,000 other assault rifles and 32 million rounds of ammunition to Nigeria—
what one commentator said was enough for a small army. That UK trader was under investigation for three years before that licence was removed.

Another UK trader had a conviction in the 1990s for trading in pump-action weapons. They were found guilty in 2009 of selling arms to Iraq. Another UK trader, who we believe supplied the man who was responsible for the Hungerford massacre in the 1980s, was found guilty of trading with North Korea in 2012.

Jack Lopresti: On a point of clarification, are the people my hon. Friend cited as UK or British traders British nationals or do they just trade from the UK? There is a huge difference.

Dr Mathias: I regret to say that they are UK citizens. One was extradited to the US. I believe the others are from the UK. The first one I mentioned was selling arms to our police and our Ministry of Defence. My hon. Friend may know that, when Sir John Stanley was Chair of the Committees on Arms Exports Controls, he went to Ukraine and was given a list of UK traders. Many of those were known to our Export Control Organisation, but it did not know that several of them were transferring arms from Ukraine to Libya, Rwanda and Sri Lanka. Therefore, historically—these are recent enough cases—our policy on the trade in small weapons has not been good enough. I hope that the Minister can reassure me that things have changed dramatically, but I am not aware of evidence of that.

I am asking for a pre-licence register whereby there are criminal record checks so that we do not have a case like that of the person who had a record in the 1990s and was found guilty in the next century of illegal trade, and whereby we check for financial illegalities. My suspicion—again, I would like the Minister to reassure me—is that there is more vetting of a man who would like to volunteer as a scout leader than there is of a man who is going to trade in weapons that end up in the hands of a child soldier in Nigeria.

I am asking that the UK lead on the marking of small weapons—by that, I mean conform to the 2005 UN instrument. I had it from a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Minister that we were or are hoping to go along with those measures, but the instrument is more than 10 years old now. I want these weapons to have the marking of the dealer, the importer, the exporter and the carrier.

I would like to see better sharing of information. I would like the Minister to assure me that there is intra-governmental sharing of information so that we do not have a repeat of those cases in which people were under investigation but still dealing with other Departments. I would also like reassurance that there is a transfer of information between Governments.

I commend the UK for doing well when it comes to large weapons. I believe that if, for instance, there is trade in a combat aircraft such as a Typhoon, a Minister will be a co-signatory on the contract. That shows a high level of responsibility. I am asking for that level of responsibility for small weapons, which as we know are contributing to most of the injuries and fatalities in conflict situations.

The Government did issue a call for evidence last July on a pre-licensing register of arms brokers. What is disappointing is that only 78 people were consulted and most of those were arms traders; I do not believe any of the consultees were victims. One of the problems cited in the consultation was cost, but I would say that, if most UK traders are dealing with tens of thousands of AK-47s or millions of rounds of ammunition, cost should not be a bar to a good register, vetting and good marking of these weapons. We should be responsible and we should be leading on this.

In summary, I would like the Minister to tell me about a register, a vetting for the register, a regular vetting and transparent marking that leads the way internationally. We need to know how many and what type of weapons are being traded, not just give someone a licence and carte blanche to trade. With this strong defence, we can lead. We can take a lead from the scouts on leadership and responsibility. I believe that the Minister can do what is done for the larger weapons and transfer that level of responsibility to small weapons.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) on securing the debate and particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for making insightful interventions, given his history and expertise in this matter.

With your permission, Mr Rosindell, I will interpret the subject of the debate widely and will refer to small arms and light weaponry—rather than small weapons—a term that is more established in the trade and in Government policy, as a way of encompassing the totality of what is happening. I will also try to draw a distinction between traders and brokers, because I think there is a bit of a misunderstanding. A broker is someone who arranges a deal, perhaps through a third country, and the goods more traditionally come through the individual trader.

The effective control of small arms and light weaponry is a goal that clearly unites us all, because, as we have heard, the potential consequences of their misuse are so grave. I see that across my portfolio and particularly on the African continent. When states fail to control the supply and sale of these weapons, they not only jeopardise the safety and security of innocent people worldwide—including a disproportionate number of women and children—but fuel instability more generally and threaten international peace and security.

The debate has focused on national arms trade and controls, so I would like to deal with that up front. The UK Government operate one of the most rigorous and transparent arms export control systems in the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke indicated that. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham talked of Sir John Stanley, whom I served with in two Parliaments. For the last five years, he was the Chair of the Committees on Arms Exports Controls, on which I briefly served as a member of the Select Committee on International Development, which contributes to that work. Sir John Stanley has previously acknowledged that the UK operates “one of the most transparent export licensing systems in the world”.

As always,
So we really are at the cutting edge of what is being done. That is not to say that we should not do more, but I do not want the House to be left in any doubt as to whether we are a laggard on these issues; we are right at the forefront. However, I will deal with the points that my hon. Friend raises. Just because we are right at the forefront and doing the right thing globally does not mean that we cannot and should not do, and aspire to do, more.

It is right that the Government facilitate responsible exports by British companies, and support them in winning such contracts. In many cases, the export of arms is of benefit. It brings security and stability. It is in the interest of the importing country and it is in the British national interest.

Jack Lopresti: Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is vital that we protect our sovereign defence capability, not only for jobs and exports but for our very protection, our expertise and our ability as a sovereign country to conduct our own operations with our own kit?

James Duddridge: Absolutely, and I defer to my hon. Friend, with his military expertise. It is important to maintain that capability overall, in terms of critical mass. Also—I travel from country to country with conflict areas—there are issues of interoperability between weapons, particularly large weapons as opposed to small arms. Having a production facility with similar arms and munitions is very helpful in theatre, as well as in building critical mass to maintain the British Army.

All export and trade licence applications are fully assessed, very carefully, on a case-by-case basis, in line with international legislation but also domestic—national—arms licensing criteria. That takes into account all the factors at the time of application, including the prevailing circumstances in the recipient countries, the nature of the goods that are being sent, the nature of the end-user and, in addition, the stated end-use. The Government follow a clear procedure for each application. That is informed by expert advice from a number of Departments. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham asked about the degree of co-ordination. I think that some of her interactions have been with BIS. The Foreign Office takes the lead on a lot of these matters, but the Home Office and a number of other Departments are also involved. A licence will not be issued in any way, shape or form if it would be inconsistent with the provisions of our export regime in its totality.

If there is a clear risk that the goods may be used for internal repression or external aggression, a licence is always denied. The UK has one of the world’s most effective enforcement regimes for arms exports. Enforcement of the UK’s arms export controls is led by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which works jointly with Border Force to detect and prevent unlicensed arms exports. HMRC and Border Force work closely with other Government Departments and with other intelligence agencies across the world to ensure that arms are not exported through the UK in breach of the UK’s licensing controls.

Additionally, HMRC works with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to engage with legitimate arms exporters and to help them to comply with the law, but we are vigorous in actively pursuing those who either deliberately or carelessly circumvent legislation. We remain committed to transparent exchange control systems, as demonstrated by the publication of export licensing decisions and details of export controls policy in the UK annual report on strategic export controls, as well as in the European Union annual report on arms exports.

The Government recognise and respect the public interest in export licensing decisions, and therefore we took the decision to publish quarterly statistics on all export and trade licences issued, refused or revoked. I understand that my hon. Friend would like us to publish more information. That has a cost. If we were to do that in looking at the overall picture of reducing the number of atrocities, we would focus too much on already law-abiding providers supplying more detail. There is a much bigger picture in respect of the supply of small arms and light weaponry. If someone is looking to source weaponry for nefarious purposes, there are many places across the world where they would look before looking to the United Kingdom, both in terms of laxer export controls and in terms of price and quality—such countries offer lower quality but, all importantly, lower price.

In parallel to our work on our own system, it is important that we ask others to step up and meet the same exacting standards to which Sir John Stanley referred when he said that we operate “one of the most transparent export licensing systems in the world”.

If I were able to do one thing on this issue, it would be to get others to do as well as we are, not to improve an already excellent, but not perfect, system in the UK.

Among other things, in terms of data, we are committed to a reporting timescale and the provision of data analysis. The Government are a world leader on transparency, and we are fully compliant with European Union and other international requirements.

The brokering of arms sales continues to be controlled on a rigorous case-by-case basis through the licensing assessment process. The idea of creating a pre-licensing register of arms brokers was explored by BIS, and my hon. Friend’s predecessor as the MP for Twickenham, in a call to evidence in 2014. I have reviewed BIS’s correspondence. I am sure that my hon. Friend has tales of campaigning against Liberal Democrats in Twickenham. In my 10 years in the House, and during the coalition, there were occasions when—I say this gently—the Liberal Democrats over-promised and under-delivered. If that had been a priority, and if it had been the right thing to do, it could have been pushed forward at the time, but in letters to constituents her predecessor promised a lot but did not deliver. The consultation showed that, actually, delivering that was the wrong thing to do. In a sense, it would have layered in extra bureaucracy without addressing the fundamental problem.

In the last 10 years, the UK has successfully prosecuted eight UK nationals for arms trafficking and brokering outside the UK. Customs investigators work jointly with law enforcement officials across the world to gather the necessary evidence to enable such prosecutions. Additionally, we continue to work with international partners to prevent and disrupt arms transfers before they occur, including through the sharing of intelligence. The global control of arms requires an overall global
commitment to marking, record keeping and tracing weapons. Without the proper management of stockpiles, weapons may end up in the wrong hands, fuelling crime, terrorism and conflict, so we need everyone to up their game.

The UK has signed and supports various politically binding agreements, including the international tracing instruments, which promote effective national controls over the full life-cycle of small arms and light weapons. We encourage and support states to improve their stockpile security, including by funding projects through, for example, the counter-proliferation programme fund, which is FCO-led but delivered across Departments, in priority countries such as Libya. We look at how we can prevent arms from disappearing out of that country, as has happened previously.

In conclusion, the Government support the responsible trade in defence equipment but always apply rigorous and accountable national export control systems. The Government have one of the most rigorous and transparent export control systems in the world. I welcome the continued high level of scrutiny—including debates such as this one—which remains central to our goal of achieving global security through responsible exports.

4.26 pm

Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his response and concur with him that the situation is not perfect. I am glad that work is being done with other Departments. I am not satisfied that the cost and bureaucracy are problems for a register or for vetting. I maintain that the charity sector bears the cost of bureaucracy and more checks and controls. I am not convinced that Sir John Stanley’s concerns have yet been addressed, but I am glad that the Minister considers things on a case-by-case basis. I hope that if I bring individual cases to him he will be open to reviewing the ongoing situation, because I know that he shares my concerns.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.
I have a mantra when dealing with cases and issues that the truth is usually somewhere in the middle of the two parties’ viewpoints. However, I do not think that is the case with the self-determination of Western Sahara.

Morocco claims to have been colonised in different eras by Spain and France. I therefore find it incomprehensible that Morocco cannot learn from its history that the people’s will should not be subverted. It seems that Morocco cannot see the irony of imposing a ruling force to maintain order, as it sees it, and using settlers to complete a colonisation process. Using an army to maintain control and objecting to Ban Ki-moon using the term “occupation” smacks of an inability to look inward.

Morocco also ignores the fact that, before it took control in November 1975, the International Court of Justice ruled that there were no ties of territorial sovereignty between Morocco and Western Sahara and, further, that the Sahrawi people have a legal right to a process of self-determination. The fact that a referendum has still not been held since the ceasefire deal in 1991 suggests both an unwillingness to move forward and Moroccan concern about the likely outcome of such a poll.

Morocco seems to believe that the African Union’s recognition of Western Sahara beles another agenda, which does not seem credible to me. Since 1991 there has been a UN peacekeeping force in place under the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, or MINURSO. Unlike any other modern UN peacekeeping force, it does not have a human rights mandate. That is completely unacceptable. Given that there is another vote on 28 April on renewing the peacekeeping force, will the Minister advise us of what representations the Government are making at the UN to incorporate a human rights mandate for the force?

Furthermore, as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—a status deemed so critical to the UK’s role in the world that it featured in the Scottish referendum campaign—what is the UK doing to bring about a fair referendum some 25 years down the road? What discussions have the Government had with Morocco on this issue, and what is the UK view on the sovereignty of Western Sahara?

From a security perspective, the situation is becoming critical. On 26 March, Oxfam stated that there is now a threat to regional stability. Does the Minister share concerns about possible threats in the Maghreb region from extremist, terrorist and criminal factions? The Western Sahara Action Forum reports the presence of Daesh sleeper cells and attacks. Does that accord with UK intelligence on the region?

We all know the spiral of descent caused by the unrest manipulated by terrorists, which leads to further human rights abuses and so, of course, to further unrest. It is imperative that the UN gets to grips with that. As recently as March, 84 civilian and three military MINURSO personnel were expelled. Their presence in Western Sahara is critical, and given the suggested mandate for human rights, it seems to me that Morocco is giving the proverbial two fingers to the UN and directly challenging the Security Council’s authority. What is the UK view on that?

I keep referring to human rights. On top of the denial of the fundamental right of self-determination, the situation in Western Sahara goes much deeper. In 2012, the UN special rapporteur found that “torture and ill-treatment were used to extract confessions and that protesters were subjected to excessive use of force”.

We know that the monthly peaceful protests are regularly broken up, and on one occasion in 2014 that was witnessed by a parliamentary delegation from the UK. One year on, in 2015, Human Rights Watch noted Morocco’s “growing intolerance for independent human rights organisations and other critical voices”.

In June 2015, two Amnesty International workers were banned, which tells a story.

The US State Department states that there have been an estimated 50 to 70 deaths in detention, and no Moroccan investigations into alleged abuses. I suggest to Morocco that if it is serious about a solution, it needs to recognise allegations of abuse, violence and torture and start some investigations. Other testimonies confirm sexual violence and rape, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights are non-existent. Morocco’s autonomy proposal for Western Sahara proposes self-determination “whilst remaining respectful” of Morocco’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity”. I think that we can see that for what it is.

A cynical assessment of the Moroccan offer is justified when we consider the offer within the context of Morocco’s celebrations to mark 40 years of its presence in Western Sahara and King Mohammed VI’s comment: “Those who are waiting for any other concessions on Morocco’s part are deceiving themselves. Indeed, Morocco has given all there was to give.”

I would like the Minister to confirm the UK view of the Moroccan proposals that have been put forward.

Western Sahara could be a successful independent nation. It has natural resources, including vegetables, fish and minerals. However, Morocco again subverts the will of the indigenous people by using the classic colonial trick of negotiating trade deals itself and ensuring that jobs, particularly in the mines, go to settlers. Again, I remind Morocco to learn from history, because further resentment is the only outcome of such a policy.

It could be that Morocco feels vindicated in adopting such an approach given the attitude of the international community. The EU has negotiated a fishing deal for Spanish fishermen and the UK has made its own trade deals, although the Western Sahara Action Forum reports that those deals are subject to a case at the European Court of Justice. I would like the Minister to give more information on that issue, because, as I say, the international community’s actions give validity to Morocco’s attitude towards Western Sahara.

The way that Morocco is acting is contrary to international law, given that the UN General Assembly recognises the Polisario as “the representative of the people of Western Sahara”. Does the Minister agree with that view and, if so, what are the UK Government doing to engage with the Polisario? Does he agree that no international agreements should be made with Morocco about minerals and oil or gas extraction until these issues are resolved? Does he agree that it is time the
Sahrawi are given their referendum, and will he pledge that the UK will do more diplomatically within the UN to allow the self-determination of Western Sahara?

It really is time that we remove the stain of the last colony in Africa, and there should be a recognised, independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

4.42 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

In recent years, the UK has spent a great deal of its time and effort, and one could say a great deal of its blood and treasure, focusing on the MENA—the middle east and north Africa. However, I have to agree with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who secured the debate, that we have failed in relation to Western Sahara. We have failed to recognise the human rights abuses there, and we have failed to lend our voice to those calling for the legitimate rights of the indigenous people of the region to be recognised and endorsed.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Western Sahara is in essence Africa’s last colony. The Kingdom of Morocco has maintained the territory in subjugation since Spanish rule collapsed in 1976. The Sahrawi people are caught between the competing claims of a repressive Moroccan occupying force and the Polisario Front, which is supported by the Algerian Government and emerged in the 1970s in opposition to Moroccan rule. Their right to self-determination has been recognised by the EU, the United Nations, the African Union and the International Court of Justice, but it is still denied to them.

Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara precipitated a fierce civil war, during which, the Red Cross alleges, Moroccan armed forces deployed napalm and cluster bombs against civilians. Throughout the 1980s, the Moroccan Government sought to cement their position and secure their claim to the territory, and to the vast natural resources that it contains. They encircled Western Sahara with a wall, or a berm, extending nearly 3,000 km, and peppered its perimeter with landmines. The wall also violated Mauritanian security and extended into its territory. Under those conditions, thousands of Sahrawi refugees poured into neighbouring Algeria, where they continue to live in sprawling camps near Tindouf. With an absence of independent food sources or opportunities for employment, residents live dependent on aid to feed their families. A survey conducted in 2012 found that 8% of residents in the camps were malnourished. There is huge opposition to the refugees, who are being denied their human rights. We all too often hear of people in Western Sahara, particularly women, facing sexual subjugation and torture.

A ceasefire was agreed in the 1990s, and a settlement plan was brokered by the then Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations. A referendum on Sahrawi independence was an integral component of that plan, and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was established to oversee the Sahrawi people’s transition to autonomy, but that referendum has not taken place. The composition of the electorate has been complicated by the influx of Moroccan nationals into Western Sahara. There have been allegations that the Moroccan Government have introduced thousands of their citizens as part of an insidious policy of colonisation and forced integration. Sporadic violence perpetrated by both Moroccan and Polisario forces has continued to interrupt and delay the peace process. That stagnation has undermined the credibility of MINURSO and the settlement plan it was established to uphold. In 2013, the Moroccan Government persuaded the US to abandon its plans to extend MINURSO’s mandate to include human rights abuses in Western Sahara and in the refugee camps.

In October 2010, a camp called Gdeim Izik was established by the Sahrawi people near El Aaiún in protest against human rights abuses, the repression of dissidents and the continued reluctance of the outside world to act. That reluctance is shocking once we start looking at the issue. The city is the administrative capital of the southern provinces—of Western Sahara—and the erection of the camp was interpreted by Moroccan officials as an act of aggression. The forceful dismantlement of the camp sparked riots, in which a number of Moroccan security personnel were killed, as were an unknown number of Sahrawi people.

With the camp destroyed, the Moroccan Government set out to convict what they called the instigators and leaders of the riots, and 25 people were convicted of murder following confessions that were said to have been extracted through torture. According to Amnesty International, such practices are depressingly common in Western Sahara. We cannot overestimate the shockwaves that those acts of repression are causing across the region. Eyes are on countries such as the United Kingdom that have a track record of upholding human rights. People in Algeria, Western Sahara and Mauritania are rightly asking, “What is the UK doing? Where are its values? Why are its values not being endorsed here, where there is clear repression of an indigenous people?”

It is time that we looked at Western Sahara. There is a huge danger of it becoming an incubator for terrorism and organised crime. There is a sense of injustice, and of the failure of western Governments to acknowledge that injustice, among the indigenous people, who have been given no opportunity to go anywhere to seek redress, except through organisations such as al-Qaeda and Daesh. The grievances generated by the Moroccan occupation are powerful recruiting tools, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has flourished in the absence of legitimate political authority. The UK can no longer afford to confine the conflict and the plight of the Sahrawi people to the peripheries of its foreign policy. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I hope that we will at last use our position in the United Nations to move forward on the UN mandate and seek justice and legitimacy for these people.

4.50 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for her speech, and particularly to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who initiated the debate. He is a much valued member of the all-party group on Western Sahara, which I chair, and he has done the people of Western Sahara a great service in raising the issue today.
I want to express a few of the concerns that I have had for some time, since I visited the country with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who used to chair the all-party group. It was my privilege to visit Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara, in February 2014, along with the right hon. Gentleman, the director of War on Want and a constituent of mine who runs the Western Sahara Campaign Cymru. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun mentioned that visit, as a result of which we produced a report titled “Life Under Occupation”. I believe the Minister will have seen it and his predecessors in the Foreign Office certainly saw it.

I want to ask the Minister, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun did, for his response to Morocco ordering the expulsion of the 84 civilian and three military MINURSO personnel following the visit of the United Nations Secretary-General to Western Sahara in March. The mission complied with that request, despite the fact that it was a United Nations mission in a country designated a non-self-governing territory. In short, the Moroccan authorities had no authority to make that request. Surely Morocco cannot be allowed to dictate to a UN mission in a territory it does not have sovereignty over. I believe that that represents an unprecedented challenge to the authority of the United Nations Security Council, and I worry that it shows the Security Council is failing to live up to its responsibilities. I hope that it will strongly condemn the action of the Moroccan authorities in expelling the citizens and military personnel after the March visit by Ban Ki-moon.

I visited the mission in 2014, and we sat and talked to the officials there. Without mentioning names, I have to say that some of those UN officials expressed great frustration that they had no human rights monitoring mandate for Western Sahara. They were fully aware of the human rights violations and the street demonstrations in Laayoune, some of which were witnessed by colleagues on our visit. They were also fully aware of the great brutality with which the Moroccan authorities broke up peaceful demonstrations by men, women and children. However, they were unable to take any action because of the lack of any human rights monitoring role. They had no capacity or power to act. That was one of the most distressing things—to witness, with colleagues, those violations taking place in the streets, and to know that there was a UN capacity there with the potential to act, which could do nothing.

There was great brutality. The constituent who came with me attempted bravely to take photographs of the demonstrations. It was perhaps no surprise, given the way things are controlled in Laayoune, that his camera was stolen. It was later returned, with the offending pictures of course removed and wiped completely. While we were spending those three or four days in an unfamiliar city some way from home, it was quite clear that the powers of surveillance, under the pretext of protecting our interests, were following our every move—that is an unnerving experience. However, I had the luxury of being able to hop on a plane to return to this country. The Sahrawi people, of course, continue to be less fortunate.

The hon. member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun mentioned the huge natural resources in Western Sahara are clear from any visit, and their exploitation by Morocco is used as a justification for its occupation. Phosphate mining, fishing and market gardening provide jobs for Morocconsettlers—very few of those jobs go to the indigenous population, among whom unemployment rates are disproportionately high. We visited the ports and saw for ourselves how all offshore fishing is carried out by Moroccan-owned trawlers. In the phosphate mining industry, only 21% of the workforce are Sahrawis, the majority of whom are employed in the most menial jobs. Moroccan influence and money dominates the market gardening industry, its capital and its rewards.

For the indigenous population, there is very little evidence of return on investment and improvements in their lives. We are talking about the absence of democracy and basic human rights, but in narrow economic terms, the people of Western Sahara are not being delivered a fair share—chwarae teg, as we say in Wales—of resources.

Our overwhelming impression from our visit was of deep and utter sadness—of an indigenous people being repressed, their identities being suppressed and their history and culture not being recognised in school. We saw several private Sahrawi schools, which basically meant that parents educated their children in their own history, traditions and culture in their own homes. Again, that took place in secrecy, because it is illegal and the Moroccan authorities would clamp down on it.

All Members who have spoken today have agreed that such violations occur as a direct consequence of the UN’s failure to fulfil its duty to provide self-determination through a referendum for the people there. I know that, as the years go by, that becomes more of a challenge. Concocting an electoral list when the population is so split is, of course, a huge challenge. It is not helped by the concessionary tax and housing rights that encourage people to migrate from Morocco into Western Sahara, which the hon. Member for Bridgend mentioned. I strongly encourage the Minister to do whatever he can, because there is an expectation that countries such as ours should take more of a lead, to ensure progress towards the referendum and a continuing UN presence with a human rights monitoring role. Nothing less will do.

Finally, I want to talk about the case of a Sahrawi campaigner, Mr Brahim Saika, who fell into a coma and died last Friday after being arbitrarily detained by the police and accused of organising protests for self-determination. He was a co-ordinator of a group of unemployed Sahrawis and was arrested on 1 April. According to reports, he was detained and tortured in...
Gulemin police station. He was then transferred to a hospital in Agadir in Morocco from Bozakarn prison, where he had been held. His sister stated that he had been hit on the head, which is why he fell into a coma and subsequently died. After he was arrested, he went on hunger strike in protest against his detention and maltreatment. A few days later, his condition deteriorated significantly, which was when he was transferred to hospital. The reports we have heard suggest that no serious attempts were made to save his life. The hospital authorities are now refusing to conduct an autopsy to determine the cause of his death, despite his family’s demand for one. The family have been told that the cause of death was poisoning due to a rat bite.

I would appreciate the Minister raising the case with Morocco, and the all-party group would very much like to hear back about that in due course. The sad reality is that brave people such as Brahim Saika are by no means the only victims of the continued occupation of Western Sahara.

5 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing the debate and the members of the APPG from whom we have heard. The debate is timely, coming as it does shortly after the 40th anniversary of the Moroccan invasion—40 years during which 165,000 refugees from Western Sahara have lived in the Algerian desert. It is one of the global situations, or African situations in particular, that does not receive the attention that it is due.

Mrs Moon: One of the things that we must put on the record is, honestly, our gratitude to the Algerians. They have provided a safe haven for those people and, let’s face it, we have created additional problems for the Algerians with people fleeing from Libya and Tunisia into Algeria. The Algerians are carrying a huge burden, so we have a responsibility to them, too, to resolve the problem.

Patrick Grady: That is a fair point.

Sadly, we can look across Africa and see a number of forgotten nations that maybe do not get the attention that they deserve. For example, the APPG on Eritrea, of which I am a member, was recently founded. There is the situation in Somalia. Western Sahara’s particular situation, however, with its description as “the last colony”, is especially tragic. I was trying to find some statistics, but that is difficult to do, because of its stateless position. I could not find, for example, a ranking in the UN human development index, although I found a GDP figure of about US $2,500 per head, which is not in any way significant. I pay tribute to the work of the various campaign groups that are seeking to make the issue live. They have helped to provide background briefings for Members for today. I note that the comedian and activist Mark Thomas is doing a fundraiser for the cause on 2 May. I wish him all the very best for that.

Three key issues have arisen in the debate: first, the principle of self-determination; secondly, a reflection on recent developments and the human rights situation in the country; and, thirdly, questions for the Government that I hope the Minister will be able to answer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun said, the SNP feels passionately about the principle of self-determination, and we in Scotland were able to exercise it in 2014, in a wonderful exercise in democratic participation. Here in the UK, after elections in Scotland in a few weeks’ time, on 23 June we will have a referendum on our membership of the European Union. That is the kind of thing that we take for granted, but it is sadly denied in so many different parts of the world—only today, in Question Time, the Prime Minister was asked about the Chagos islands. In any event, surely a referendum has to be the endgame and the way in which matters are resolved.

Mrs Moon: Not a great ask.

Patrick Grady: No, it is not a great ask at all. A peaceful solution has to involve the right of individuals and nations to self-determination. Also, we cannot and should not prejudge what the decision might be. It might be a form of autonomy, or of independence. We will not know until it is put to the test. The UN groundwork has been done, but it is rapidly dating. Generations continue to grow up, still waiting for an opportunity to have their say.

Meanwhile, the situation continues to deteriorate, perhaps not least because of a lack of a human rights mandate for the UN mission. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun referred to the Oxfam analysis, which described the recent crisis and the expulsion of UN diplomats as a threat to regional stability. Other examples can be found of human rights abuses; some were referred to by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams). A 2015 Amnesty International report lists a whole range of different torture techniques used by Moroccan security forces to extract confessions to crimes or to silence activists and crush dissent.

We expect a report in the next few days from the Secretary-General of the UN. Press reports, from those who have perhaps seen advance copies, say that the language used by the Secretary-General seems to indicate that the UN is backing away from its insistence on the concept of self-determination as necessarily leading to independence. I do not know if that is accurate; it is from an article that I have read and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister, because that is the big-picture question. The situation of the people of Western Sahara is important in its own right, but there is a bigger question about the mandate and role of the UN and the respect attributed to decisions by the UN Security Council, of which the United Kingdom is a member. How will the Government use its role as a permanent member to push for further action? The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) rightly pointed out the risks of inaction. Now is a very appropriate time for action.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun said, it would be useful to know the Government’s view on Morocco’s claims to the territory, and on entering into commercial contracts for the exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara. What consideration are the Government giving to support refugees from
Western Sahara in neighbouring countries, as well as to those trying to enter the UK and the EU? Finally, as was touched on in exchanges at the start of my speech, what role do the Government see for neighbouring and regional countries in the area and the broader African Union? The hon. Member for Bridgend noted that a wide range of international institutions recognise the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination. Surely, after 40 years, it is time to stop talking and start doing.

5.7 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I always seem to be following him, so let me hope that I can enhance what he said.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing such an important and timely debate. The Western Sahara is not a region regularly raised in the House, but it is an important area and the situation deserves our attention. We also heard an important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who pointed out that women in Western Sahara often face sexual subjugation and torture, something we really need to press our Government and the Moroccan Government on.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun pointed out something that the hon. Member for Glasgow North reiterated: Morocco has made a direct challenge to the UN Security Council’s resolution by trying to put obstacles in the way of the referendum that the Security Council wishes to take place. Today’s debate is timely because this month the UN Security Council will also be debating the Western Sahara, 25 years after the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. MINURSO was first given six months to hold a referendum on and in the Western Sahara. That was in 1991. If the mandate is renewed this week, the mission will be in its 26th year. In preparation for today’s debate, I read through the minutes of previous Security Council debates on the Western Sahara, as you do. They make for rather depressing reading. There is generally unanimous agreement that the status quo is unsustainable and there is a desire to see a resolution, yet we never seem to get any nearer to a final agreement.

As we have heard, the failure to find a resolution comes at a serious human cost. Around 100,000 Sahrawis remain in refugee camps in the Algerian desert and there are now multiple generations who have grown up there. I also have serious concerns about the position of Sahrawis in Western Sahara. As has been said, numerous accounts of human rights abuses have been recognised by Her Majesty’s Government, the UN and independent bodies such as Amnesty International. Of course we need to see progress on the ground, but there are real fears that the position of Sahrawis, both economically and politically, is worsening.

Those concerns were set out in the report of the APPG on Western Sahara written by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who made an excellent contribution this afternoon and now chairs the all-party group. He is clearly one of our most knowledgeable MPs. That report followed the APPG’s delegation to the area in 2014, the year that I visited the region and Laayoune with the Minister, before he was the Minister. The report is informative and clearly highlights the issues facing the Sahrawi population, especially when it comes to political protest. I join the hon. Member for Ceredigion in thanking John Gurr for the report and the work that he continues to do through the Western Sahara Campaign, which I found helpful in preparing for the debate.

In the long term, we need an agreement among all parties to enable a referendum to take place in Western Sahara. However, getting to that point will require more political will on all sides. I echo the text of resolution 2218 in calling “upon the parties and the neighbouring states to cooperate more fully with the United Nations and with each other and to strengthen their involvement to end the current impasse and to achieve progress towards a political solution”. The international community must never seek to impose a solution on Western Sahara.

5.12 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.23 pm

On resuming—

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Just before I bring Fabian Hamilton back in to conclude his remarks, given the change in timing necessitated by the Division, we will be looking at completing the debate by 5.41 pm.

Fabian Hamilton: I will continue with my speech, if I may. There is not too much left. I had just quoted from the text of resolution 2218.

The international community must never seek to impose a solution on the dispute over Western Sahara. Whether it remains part of Morocco or becomes a self-governing territory or an independent state, Western Sahara will always have to rely on a very close relationship with Morocco. Whatever the outcome, Western Sahara will need to trade with Morocco, particularly if it is to benefit from the significant investment currently going into it from the Moroccan state and Moroccan companies.

We must also recognise Morocco’s role in providing security in an increasingly unstable area with rising levels of extremism and sectarian conflict. However, the difficulties of achieving a long-term solution should not mean we forget the human rights of the Sahrawi population and their political and economic situation.

I was pleased to see from written answers that the Government have repeatedly raised the Western Sahara issue with the Moroccan Government, including with His Majesty King Mohammed VI. I am particularly pleased that the Government made successful representations to ensure that the UN Secretary-General’s personal envoy to Western Sahara was able to gain access to the region. I hope the Minister will be able to tell the House whether his discussions with the Government of Morocco have included the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the human rights issues facing the Sahrawi people in Morocco. I also hope the Minister will tell us
In my briefing, I was not prepared for questions about Members from all three main parties for their contributions. I thank other hon. Members from all-party group on Western Sahara. I thank the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this debate, on his strong interest in Western Sahara and more generally the work of the Brown Group. I thank the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who would have been delighted to respond to the debate, which is within his portfolio. He was, until very recently, engaged in another debate on the Floor of the House. It is therefore my pleasure to respond to the debate, particularly because, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) alluded to with great foresight, both of us went to Western Sahara while on the Back Benches in order to be better briefed for this very occasion. We specifically visited the UN headquarters in Laayoune to see its work for ourselves first hand.

The Government’s position on Western Sahara is consistent and long-standing. The Government consider the final status of Western Sahara as undetermined, and we support the UN-led efforts to reach a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. In line with the debate, I will first speak about the underlying principles of self-determination and our support for those, then move on to the situation in Western Sahara and how it applies to the broader issue of self-determination.

In his statement of principles for world peace nearly a hundred years ago, President Woodrow Wilson said: “Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.”

I am not sure he had the hon. Member for Leeds North East and me in mind when he said that, but nevertheless, I think I can speak for both of us in saying that we hear that principle. Wilson was unsuccessful in his attempts to include the principle in the covenant of the League of Nations.

More than two decades later, in the midst of world war two, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt came up with a set of principles that defined the Allies’ goals for the post-war world, which included “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live”.

Their Atlantic charter is widely recognised as a precursor to the 1942 declaration of United Nations, which was the foundation of the charter of the United Nations. This charter, and many other treaties and agreements to which the United Kingdom is signatory, set out clearly the right to self-determination.

The principle of self-determination is about freedom to make one’s own choices. This country demonstrated its commitment to that principle in 2013, when the Government gave residents of the Falkland Islands the freedom to choose whether they wanted to remain a British overseas territory. Self-determination has allowed, and continues to allow, countries and territories around the world to determine their own fate and chart their own course.

Turning to Western Sahara, the UK supports UN-led efforts to reach a lasting and mutually acceptable political solution to this long-standing dispute that provides,
crucially, for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front both claim sovereignty over Western Sahara. An International Court of Justice ruling on the issue in 1975 means that the territory is “non-self-governing” under chapter XI of the UN charter, and that its people therefore have the right to self-determination. Following Spanish withdrawal in 1975, most of the territory has been under Moroccan administration.

In 1991, after more than 15 years of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front, a ceasefire was brokered by the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations. It was agreed that both sides would stop fighting and the UN would monitor the ceasefire. The UN would also prepare for a referendum in which the Sahrawi people would exercise their right to self-determination, choosing either to be an autonomous region within Morocco or an independent state. That was the mandate for the UN MINURSO, which we have discussed, and which I visited with the hon. Member for Leeds North West in 2014. That body has succeeded in monitoring a ceasefire. The UN has persisted, through rounds of discussion, negotiations and renegotiations, in trying to find a political solution to the conflict. However, despite engagement and credible efforts over the years from both sides, little real progress has been made on the political track.

On 11 April 2007, Morocco put forward a proposal for advanced autonomy for the region. I think that is what the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun was referring to when he asked about the Government’s views on the proposal. UN Security Council resolution 1754 of 30 April 2007 took note of the proposal and welcomed the serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution. It also took note of the Polisario Front’s proposal presented on 10 April 2007. However, neither proposal was accepted by the other party and no further proposals have been put on the table. The solution has to be UN-led. The UN has to move things forward.

In March this year, the UN Secretary-General made comments, which a number of Members have referred to, during a visit to the region. That led to disagreement around the UN troops and to withdrawal of the 84 civilian members of the UN deployment. While the Secretary-General has since clarified his statement and expressed regret for the misunderstanding caused, the civilian staff still have not returned. The UK Government are concerned about the lack of a civilian component in the force. Without that vital support, the UN mission is unable to fulfil its existing mandate, let alone an extended one. It is unable to assist the UN and thus the UK’s interest in finding a political solution, but it is still maintaining peace and security in the region.

We have urged the UN secretariat and Morocco to engage in dialogue that will allow the individuals to return as quickly as possible to enable the full functionality of the mission, allowing it to carry forward the full scope of its existing mission. We are hopeful that a way forward can be found. The situation is not totally gridlocked, but more effort is needed.

Turning to some of the additional points made during the debate, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and a number of other Members talked about Daesh. We are concerned about the presence of Daesh throughout the broader region, although the Moroccan authorities have disputed the assertion that cells have been encountered. On the other hand, the Secretary-General’s personal envoy, Christopher Ross, has told the permanent under-secretary for the middle east and north Africa that about 15 individuals have travelled to fight with extremist groups in north Africa. I do not think 15 can be described as endemic, but we are aware of some people travelling from the region.

A lot of points were made about human rights. Although it is primarily a UN process, the UK, through its position on the Security Council, stresses the importance of humanitarian rights on an ongoing basis in Western Sahara and the camps. That was clear in the UN Security Council resolution of April 2015. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Western Sahara in 2015 and the findings of that report will be reflected in the Secretary-General’s report, which we believe will be published later today. As I stand before the Chamber, I have not seen that it has been published. That is only one way that the UN looks at human rights in the area.

There was a specific case that the all-party group would like me to look into. If it writes to me with details, I am more than happy to look into that and circulate a letter that can be sent around to the rest of the group.

There has been progress on human rights. The Moroccan authorities recently took steps to improve human rights, including ratifying the protocol to the convention against torture and ending the practice of trying civilians in military courts. That is good progress, but I still hear calls to do a lot more. We are considering our position on the mandate renewal but, as I have said, actually getting the existing mandate delivered is troublesome without extending it further. I was asked by the hon. Member for Leeds North East about commercial activity. We do not consider commercial activity in Western Sahara to be illegal, as long as it respects the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara and benefits them. The UK does not prohibit companies from engaging in commercial activity, but they should take legal advice before doing so.

The Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs supports refugees in the camps in Algeria through all the UN agencies, most notably UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme. This is a situation that we are very much aware of and very keen to engage in, and I look forward to progress being made through the UN and through working with the all-party parliamentary group.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Western Sahara and self-determination.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 April 2016

[ANDREW PERCY in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Clean Water and Sanitation (Africa)

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered clean water and sanitation in Africa.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Let us be honest: Thursday is often referred to in the Backbench Business Committee as the graveyard slot. We are approaching the end of the Adjournment debate in the House, which gives us an idea of how business is moving forward. We in Westminster Hall will be the ones who stay the longest today, because the House will have risen before this debate finishes.

Why have I brought this matter to this Chamber for consideration? Very simply, the reason why we are all here to speak is that we want to improve water aid and sanitation throughout Africa. Right hon. and hon. Members, and the Minister and the shadow Minister, are here to speak, to respond and to take on some of the comments that we make. It is a massive issue in my constituency, probably off the back of the churches and comments that we make. It is a massive issue in my constituency, probably off the back of the churches and the local community. We had a wonderful opportunity to hear some of the schoolchildren whom the partnership had helped come to the school and to sing some of their songs. I cannot say I am proficient in the language of Uganda, but we have practised the Ugandan handshake. The Fields of Life project also managed to deliver much-needed equipment for the construction of a kitchen, textbooks, exercise books, hand washing basins and other simple things to help, such as soap. In this debate, we will find out the importance of soap. We wash our hands with soap every day, and probably take it for granted. In Africa, soap could do away with a lot of diseases.

The Sunday school children at the church delivered 232 Bibles. The children came to the school and sang Ugandan songs. One of the phrases that they used was “Webale nnyo”.

William McCartney led and supported the team, and Fields of Life made the whole project possible. It was done with the school, the church and the community.

The typical container used for water collection in Africa, the jerry can, weighs more than 40 pounds when completely full. The social and economic effects of the lack of clean water are often the highest priorities when African communities speak of their own development. The World Health Organisation has shown us the issue in economic terms. Every $1 invested in water and sanitation yields an economic return of $3 to $34. More people have a mobile phone than have a toilet. Globally, one third of all schools lack access to safe water and adequate sanitation. In low and middle-income countries, one third of all health care facilities lack a safe water resource. Every 90 seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease.

In Africa and some parts of Asia, women and children can end up walking an average of 3.7 miles a day just to collect water, spending almost six hours finding water and bringing it back—and we waste water back home by letting the taps run. Of course, in Northern Ireland, water is never in short supply, as we have a regular abundance of rain, but in a majority of African countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 50% of the population has access to improved sanitation. I know that the Minister will respond to questions when he replies to the debate. Although some progress has been made, it has mostly been frustratingly slow. Those figures are in stark contrast to the running water that is virtually universal throughout the United Kingdom, and putting them together makes us appreciate how lucky we are.

In the background information provided by officials from the Department for International Development, we can clearly chart some improved water access. The map of Africa on the first page shows a lot of improvement, which is wonderful. In most parts of Africa, access to water has improved, which we welcome. The second page, unfortunately, shows that access to improved sanitation has not matched access to water. We must look towards that as well. Water is an important and scarce commodity in Africa, but it must be matched by sanitation. In his response, will the Minister give us his thoughts on how best to address that important issue?
and which the Minister will hopefully speak about in his upcoming bilateral aid review, which we all know about sanitation and hygiene, or WASH, strategies in the water, the sanitation, the hygiene and the nutrition, too?

continue to invest in a package of life-saving tools and others, to close the clear gap that exists? Can the UK perhaps the Minister can tell us how we can build upon leadership and support to build upon the positive trends.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to our attention. I will touch on those issues now, as they are vital. When we consider water and sanitation, we must consider disease as well. I want to underline some of the issues addressed by the all-party parliamentary group on child health and vaccine preventable diseases, which was formerly chaired by Jim Dobbin, who passed away. Those of us in this House who knew him, even for a short time, were aware of his magnificent contribution. He outlined the issues from his personal experience of visits to Africa with vaccine programmes, where he witnessed at first hand deplorable hygiene and water facilities in hospitals. People can vaccinate and do all sorts of other things, but if they do not have water and sanitation, it is not going anywhere.

The scale of the problem is massive. In 2014, the lack of access to adequate water is estimated to have killed some 3,500 children under five years of age every day. The latest figures show that every year some 600,000 children lose their lives to diarrhoeal diseases, to which the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) referred. Most of those deaths are of children less than two years of age in the poorest countries of the world.

Rotavirus is the most important cause of diarrhoeal mortality in children; it is associated with 28% of the deaths from diarrhoea. Despite the advances in treating water poverty, which have saved millions of children’s lives by protecting them against diarrhoeal disease, rotavirus remains the second leading killer of children worldwide.

We have to implement a combination of health, safe water, sanitation and hygiene solutions, and then we can do what the hon. Gentleman said—save more lives. That is part of the purpose of this debate. We can save the lives of children who are still at risk with simple interventions: improved safe water; sanitation; hygiene; exclusive breastfeeding; and vaccines that prevent rotavirus.

I will pose a couple of questions at this stage to the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), and to his officials who are here. The United Kingdom has a very proud history of providing expertise, resources and global leadership to improve children’s health worldwide. It continues to provide leadership and support to build upon the positive trends. Perhaps the Minister can tell us how we can build upon the success that we have had so far in order to try, with others, to close the clear gap that exists? Can the UK continue to invest in a package of life-saving tools and services, which includes the vaccines, the medicines, the water, the sanitation, the hygiene and the nutrition, too?

What priority and weighting are given to the water, sanitation and hygiene, or WASH, strategies in the upcoming bilateral aid review, which we all know about and which the Minister will hopefully speak about in his response to the debate? Where do the Government sit regarding ongoing support and commitment to the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Pneumonia and Diarrhoea, which was introduced by the WHO and UNICEF? How do the Government intend to ensure that “sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”, as outlined in sustainable development goal 6, is achieved? What fall-back do they have if that goal is not achieved? Let us consider what happens if we do not get there. What action does the Department for International Development intend to take—I am conscious that this may cross departmental boundaries—in the Nutrition for Growth summit in Rio in August? Has DFID discussed that with stakeholder organisations? If it has, what has been the outcome? Is the Minister yet in a position to state the level of funding that will be provided through the Ross Fund for health interventions, and whether WASH will benefit from the fund? Those are the questions that I wish to pose at this early stage.

Although this issue goes back as far as we can remember, the United Kingdom’s commitment to dealing with it could be significantly better. Investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is extremely cost-effective. According to WaterAid, for every £1 spent we can get £4 in return. In fact, the World Bank has declared that hand-washing with soap is the single most cost-effective intervention. As I mentioned earlier, the Movilla church in Newtownards has sent bars of soap over to Africa, because that is one of the small ways in which we can make a difference.

The lack of sanitation services is estimated to cost the world more than US$250 million per annum. The United Kingdom currently spends some 2% of its bilateral aid budget on water and sanitation, compared with around 13% on education and 19% on health. However, we need to be careful that we are not jumping the gun on this one, as access to clean water and sanitation can often be a prerequisite for success in other development areas such as education and health, and we must acknowledge the overlap between these issues.

Yesterday I had the chance to speak to representatives of some organisations who were keen to add their comments, to help with this debate. When we consider health, water and sanitation, we also have to consider the environment. I will just mark up one thing. Management of habitats is important; it can lead to better water access or worse water access, and to better or worse sanitation. I heard a comment yesterday about Madagascar, where people’s access to water is threatened by habitat destruction over huge areas. The destruction of the African wetlands deprives people of access to drinking water, and threatens livelihoods that depend on water, such as fishing, and the core survival of some people, including some tribes. In Madagascar, deforestation and erosion threaten almost every wetland, and as a result many thousands of people are in trouble and many species could be lost for ever.

I will just mark something else up; it is completely off the line of this debate, but is none the less important. The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust is trying to help to save the Madagascar Pochard, or the “Mad Pochard” as it is called, which is the world’s rarest duck; I am unsure whether calling it “mad” is a compliment or not. In any case, there are only a few dozen left. The point that I am trying to make is that if something is not done about the water and wetland where that duck lives, it
will not be able to provide drinking water for the local people or be used for sanitation, and it will not have any fish living in it either. Again, 6,000 people benefit from this clean water; many livelihoods go with it. That is just a reminder that conservation of nature goes hand in hand with looking after people who depend directly on the natural world.

As I have said, the United Kingdom currently spends some 2% of its bilateral aid budget on water and sanitation, compared with around 13% on education and a large percentage on health. For example, the delivery of quality healthcare in Africa has been seriously hampered by the lack of access to safely managed water. That is why I gave the example from Madagascar.

Sanitation and hygiene also affect practices in healthcare facilities. The WHO and UNICEF estimate that 42% of healthcare facilities in Africa do not have access to a safe water source within 500 metres. According to the WHO, 50% of malnutrition is associated with infections caused by a lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Globally, malnutrition accounts for some 45% of child deaths, of which a large proportion are within Africa. Children in sub-Saharan Africa are more than four times as likely to die before the age of five than children in developed regions. And after the first month of life, pneumonia and diarrhoea are the leading causes of the death of children under the age of five. Both pneumonia and diarrhoea are inextricably linked to a lack of water, sanitation and hygiene.

We have not had a debate on water aid or sanitation in this Session of Parliament. That is why we have asked for this debate today. First, we aim to raise awareness; secondly, the debate gives hon. Members a chance to participate and add their contributions; and, thirdly, we aim to highlight the issues that we feel are so very important.

Approximately 800,000 children aged between one month and five years died from pneumonia in 2013. Around 1,400 children die every day from preventable diarrhoea, and 58% of diarrhoeal deaths are caused by unsafe water, poor sanitation and poor hygiene. That is incontrovertible evidence that access to clean water and sanitation is essential if we are to see any meaningful development in other areas.

In conclusion, I will just give two examples of what I have talked about; nothing better illustrates the case I am trying to prove than case studies. The first involves child health. The name of the mother is Peggy Mpundu. She is 36 and part of the Mwasha village in Lubwe in Zambia. Peggy recently gave birth to twins, Kapya and Mpundu, in hospital. Two days later, they were discharged as healthy babies. However, one day after returning home, both babies started having problems breathing. Their parents, Peggy and her husband Sylvester, rushed them back into hospital, but tragically they both died that day. Peggy said:

“I was then told that water from shallow wells was harmful for babies.”

That was the same water that she had used for years. She continued:

“Having bathed my children using water from a shallow well just left me with a feeling of guilt and regret. I wish I knew that water could be so harmful”.

That is the true story of Peggy Mpundu.

The second case study is about opportunities for girls. The name of the girl involved is Erika Makalli, from Tanzania; I know that the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is here today, has particular knowledge of that country. Erika, who is 12, lives in Mbalawala village, in Tanzania. Like so many young girls, she was responsible for collecting water for her family, leaving her little time, if any, to go to school. The Tanzanian Government estimate that 58% of the country’s rural population do not have access to a safe water supply.

Discussing her old routine, Erika said that previously:

“I had to get up at 4 am and walk a long distance to find water. It took two hours and I could only collect a small amount of water to take home. That meant that Mum had to spend most of the day finding water so that we’d have enough to drink and cook with. I used to try and rush to get to school and wouldn’t be able to wash or have any breakfast beforehand. Most of the time I missed school altogether because I was sick or just exhausted. There were so many diseases in this village.”

I am very pleased that two officials from WaterAid are here in Westminster Hall today; they have helped me in preparing for this debate. WaterAid started working in the Mbalawala village two years ago and now there is a tapstand 15 minutes’ walk from Erika’s house and in her school. Erika now attends schools with her friends. Get the water right, get the health right, get the education, give them opportunities—those things follow on from each other. She is a prefect. Discussing the transformation in her life, she said:

“If I still had dirty water I wouldn’t be going to school anymore. I probably wouldn’t have had any real education at all. Also, most of my friends would probably also have died from the diseases we used to get. Life would be miserable. I feel I can at last look forward to a brighter future. Perhaps I will be a health and hygiene teacher when I leave school.”

WaterAid, this House, our Government and all the many other organisations—whomever they may be, and whether they are Churches, individuals or groups—have enabled that to happen.

Dr Lee Jong-wook, the former director general of the World Health Organisation, said:

“Water and Sanitation is one of the primary drivers of public health. I often refer to it as ‘Health 101’, which means that once we can secure access to clean water and to adequate sanitation facilities for all people, irrespective of the difference in their living conditions, a huge battle against all kinds of diseases will be won.”

I conclude with a question for the Minister. I am convinced that his response will be positive and helpful; I have no doubt about that. The contributions we all make show how united the House is on the issue. I will say it again: in this House, we are fortunate to have access to water for all purposes, whether that is washing, cleaning, sanitation or regular showers. Many of us have a shower every morning, but many people elsewhere would just love to have that water. We have it every day. We have to be the voice for the voiceless. We have to speak here on behalf of those who need help, wherever they may be in the world. Can the Minister give us some idea of the Government’s bilateral and multilateral aid reviews? Will he set out and prioritise water and sanitation in the reviews? We need to be ever mindful of the fact that if we start with water and sanitation, then health, education and opportunity follow.

Andrew Percy (in the Chair): The Front Benchers will be called at the usual time. There is plenty of time for the debate, so there is no need for a time limit or anything like that.
Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Percy. I did not know that you had been made a Chairman. I am delighted to see someone from our intake—you are possibly the first—to become a Chairman in the House.

Andrew Percy (in the Chair): Some have greatness thrust upon them.


I also congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. It is a shame it happened to come on a Thursday afternoon when everyone is desperate to get home, but it is an important debate. I apologise if I repeat things that he said, but I am completely deaf in one ear and 50% deaf in the other since I had a really bad cold. I cannot clear it. Although I listened as much as I could, I did not hear very much of what was said, so my apologies if I repeat anything.

Jim Shannon: Is it my accent?

Pauline Latham: Just this once, it was not the hon. Gentleman’s accent that confused me, but the fact I could not hear. That is my problem, and I apologise.

Clean water is one of the fundamental things that we expect to have. In this country, we have had it for donkey’s years, but we recently saw the problems in the north-west when water was contaminated for some time. One suddenly realised how much we take it for granted in this country that we can wash and use the washing machine and probably the dishwasher. We can have a shower or bath or clean our teeth with no worries at all. That incident showed the population of Britain that we use a huge amount of water without thinking about it.

For those in a developing country—we know that almost a third of the global population lack access to sanitation facilities and more than 660 million people lack access to clean water—it is a daily problem that they have to live with and deal with. We see so many young people dying under the age of five because they do not have access to clean water or sanitation. We and many other countries accept water as something that we can use at any time, and we should be looking to help the countries affected. Other countries have to look at improving clean water facilities, but it is incredibly difficult. Where does a President or a Government start if people have no decent housing, no clean water, no or few sanitation facilities, no education and no good health facilities?

Without clean water, people cannot have access to education or decent healthcare. I have seen some hospitals where there is no running water—how can a hospital facility have no running water? How can things be kept clean? Even in the Crimean war, Florence Nightingale understood that the one thing needed in a hospital is cleanliness and sanitation. That was a very long time ago, but some countries in Africa do not have that facility, and that is totally shocking.

I am pleased to see that sustainable development goal 6 is the aim of achieving universal access to safe water and sanitation by 2030, but 2030 is not very far away—only 14 years. We have been involved in international development for many years, as have many other countries, non-governmental organisations, charities and individuals, along with diaspora communities that send money back. Why do some Governments appear to have little will to install decent water facilities? It is not difficult to do; it just needs a comprehensive plan.

As a member of the Select Committee on International Development, I have visited many countries in Africa where I have been shocked by the poor facilities that people have to live with. For instance, when we went on a visit to Burundi, we were embedded in a house right out in the sticks for 24 hours with no water and no sanitation. The only place to go to the toilet was where they had literally dug a hole specifically for me to go in. I found that rather embarrassing—not for me, but for them to have to do that. They did it, though, and the joke was that they made a wooden box for me to sit on so that I would not have to squat. They thought that as a westerner, I would not have been able to cope with that. It would not have bothered me, but they have to deal with that all the time, and I do not know that things are that much better now in Burundi. There are a lot of other problems there, but when there is conflict in an area, it makes things harder still, and not just for the people living there. How do Governments, if they are in conflict and there is a civil war, or whatever the situation is, deal with the country’s problems with water and sanitation?

I have spent a lot of my time in Uganda with a friend of mine who was a Member of Parliament there. Sadly, he lost at the last election; I do not think it was quite fair. He was very keen on helping his community have sanitation and water as well as decent health. He is a doctor, so he is very keen on health facilities, but he was struggling. I was able to go to Uganda at the beginning of this year, and I saw for myself the problems with malaria. There is no clean water. I went to a hospital that had no sheets on the bed. The parents and family members who had to go to that hospital with their children had nowhere to go to the loo. It was a state-run hospital, and I think that situation is pretty appalling. Some of the children who were in the hospitals I went to did not have malaria. They might have had dysentery or diarrhoea, which are relatively easy to cure if there is clean water and the right medication.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The hon. Lady made an interesting reference to the pit latrine that she encountered in Burundi, but does she agree that those are the least of the problem? Within memory, people in this country had to use toilets at the bottom of their garden or chamber pots. Part of the problem is that there are too many parts of the world where people are still accustomed to defecating in the open, in fields, with all the hygiene problems that that causes.

Pauline Latham: I was going to mention that problem. I well remember living in Lincolnshire as a child and having to go down the garden to the toilet. There was a large seat for the adults and a small seat for the children. I did not mind doing that, because I had not known anything different. Of course, at night we had a chamber pot, and when it was freezing cold it was frozen in the morning. That is not that many years ago; I know I am...
old, but I am not as old as the Queen, although I suspect she never went down the garden to the loo. Nevertheless, I remember doing that, and it was something that I only did when no one lived with. I remember having a tin bath in front of the fire with everybody around me—there was no hot water upstairs. I was tiny, but I do remember it. It has not been that many years since we solved the problem, but we have solved it.

As the hon. Lady says, one problem is open defecation. I described the hole in the ground in Burundi, and it was a tiny hole just for me, not for anyone else. The problem with open defecation is that people have to go into the bushes to get some privacy, so they are at risk of rape and all sorts of violence. Of course, when the rains come, all the sewage is washed through the villages, which is one of the biggest problems in many places. When the Select Committee went to South Sudan, we saw that was happening. The people in the refugee camp who had been told to leave Sudan and go to South Sudan—although they and previous generations had never lived there, they were considered South Sudanese, so they had to go and had walked there—had no toilet facilities and no water. People can go to collect water, but toilet facilities are a basic human right and everybody should have them. It is a huge problem.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a number of interesting points. Interesting though this trip down memory lane is, for most of us these are memories, either distant or otherwise, because we recognise the need for proper sanitation facilities. Is it not right that the focus of the debate is on how we can work with others to ensure that everyone has access to those same facilities?

Pauline Latham: Yes, they should have access to those facilities.

The WHO and UNICEF joint monitoring programme has drawn up a ladder of WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—facilities, ranked according to their degree of safety. The facilities fall into the following categories, from the most to the least safe. The safest are “safely managed” facilities, which include “drinking water sources that are located on premises, and are free of faecal and chemical contamination. Private sanitation facilities where excreta are safely disposed are also included.”

That was what I had, because the night soil men used to come once a week to clear it out. That was absolutely safe, but it was still pretty basic, and people would not want to be doing it now. “Basic” facilities include “piped water sources, protected groundwater sources (such as standpipes, hand-pumps and protected dug wells) within a 30 minute round trip of a household. ‘Basic’ sanitation facilities include flush, or pour-based toilet systems connected to a piped sewer or septic tank and contained pit latrines. Hand washing facilities with both soap and water are counted as basic”—but without them, how can there be any sort of hygiene?

“Unimproved” facilities include “unprotected groundwater sources, water provided by tankers, or water sources that are greater than 30 minutes-walk from a household. Shared sanitation facilities, uncontained pit latrines and handwashing facilities with no soap are also included.”

“Open defecation”, which is the worst and the least safe, is where “human faeces are disposed of directly into the open environment”, as the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned earlier.

When there is a move towards proper, contained pit latrines—not open pit latrines—that are emptied regularly, it is important that girls and boys at schools have separate facilities, because many girls say they cannot go to school because they are in danger of being raped in the toilets. If they cannot go to the toilet in private, that is horrific. Not only that, but if they have to share the facilities, they cannot go when they are menstruating because they find it embarrassing and are likely to be made fun of, so they need better facilities than most schools, particularly those in rural areas, currently have. They need that protection so that they feel safe and have privacy and can go to the toilet during menstruation and at other times without feeling threatened. That is not the only reason why girls do not go to school, but it is quite a large one.

Diarrhoea kills many under-fives, so there should be better testing and better, quicker medication. Mothers often think it is malaria when it is not. There are rapid diagnostic tests, but we all know that in some places in some African countries, the rapid diagnostic tests and medication do not get to pharmacies or health facilities. Better access would help many children to live much longer.

The Department for International Development is providing funding to the SHINE—sanitation, hygiene and infant nutrition efficacy—trial. People will have poor nutrition if they do not have clean water for mixing bottles or whatever. Mothers without clean water will also have problems before they have children. Many children either die before birth—stillbirths or spontaneous abortions—or have low birth weights or stunting. Children who have been stunted never catch up, so access to clean water is needed. I am pleased that DFID is providing £7.2 million of funding to support the SHINE trial that is currently under way in Zimbabwe, because that is another problem that children without clean water face—they seem to have one thing piled on top of another.

As I said earlier, I have worked very closely with a friend who was a Member of Parliament and a medical doctor. In his former constituency is a place that I know only as a landing site. It is on the lake between Kampala and Jinja. The people there spend their whole lives on the lake, because they are fishermen, fisherwomen and indeed fisherchildren—many of the children have to go out fishing and are exploited by their employers. They have water, but because it is not clean there is a lot of disease and stunting. They have very poor livelihoods. They drown in the water because they cannot swim—they are not allowed to, because the water is too heavily contaminated. They need their own borehole, because they have to walk miles to get to one, so of course they do not bother. More places should have at least a simple borehole so that people can access clean water.

I know about the importance of boreholes from my experience with a charity called Free The Children, which the Minister will know. I went out to Kenya with Free The Children staff to see what they were doing there. They are building health facilities and schools in communities, and they put a borehole next to schools so that the children—particularly the girls—can go to school and take water home in the evening. That saves an awful lot of worry for the parents, because they know that the water is clean and that their children are...
[Pauline Latham]

in school, so they are safe and getting an education. There are health facilities nearby to which the mothers can go for pre-natal classes and monitoring, so they are helped too.

There was something that I did not appreciate until I did it for myself. We walked a kilometre with the yellow cans that people put on their heads, although we had them on a rope band around our heads. I could not lift the large, 20-litre ones; I could not even get them off the ground. I managed to get a 10-litre one off the ground, but I could not physically manage to get it all the way back, so somebody had to help me. That was a lesson for me. I have been to countries where women and children walk miles to collect their water, but I had never thought of the weight. Not only is it not good for people to have it on their head, because it affects their neck muscles—although they are obviously more used to it—but the sheer weight of the can means that getting it home is problematic. Sometimes people have to do that 10 times a day to get clean water for their family. A big lesson for me was not just the distances that people have to walk but the weight that they have to carry. We have to encourage children to go to school; that has to be done better. If they have to have a water facility that requires them to carry the water like that, it is incredibly important that it is close to a school and/or a health facility. I am very pleased that DFID is doing a lot of work in that area.

We have to concentrate on water facilities and work with the charities that do such a good job of providing them, but we have to monitor them to ensure that they are being used and that people have access to spare parts. In some parts of the world, a facility can be put in, but unless the spare parts are easily available and simple to install, it will go into disuse. I have seen that happen in Africa. The International Development Committee went somewhere where there was a borehole and a pump, but the pump was broken so the people could not use it and had to go to the next one.

There are many things that can be done to help people in sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world to access water, but we need to act fast. If we are serious about giving everybody access to water by 2030, we have got only 14 years left, which is not very long at all. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing this debate on this important subject. I am delighted that I have been able to take part in it.

2.12 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Percy. I apologise to you and the Front Benchers for not being able to stay for the whole debate. I have a meeting in my constituency later, so I have to get the train. As Members know, my constituency is quite a way away, so it will take me a few hours to get there. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate.

The UN defines access to safe water and sanitation facilities as basic human rights. Promoting hygiene is widely regarded to be one of the most cost-effective ways of improving public health. Poor water and a lack of sanitation have a wide range of negative effects. For example, they are major causes of infectious diseases; they have knock-on effects on educational attainment, public health and economic productivity; and they exacerbate the impact of disease outbreaks, such as Ebola and the Zika virus. That is why this debate is so important, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing it to the House.

Given the amount of time we spend in Parliament discussing access to healthcare and education, it is interesting that we do not spend enough time discussing access to clean water and sanitation. Those issues underpin people’s life chances, so it is extraordinary that we do not look at them in more detail and more often. I hope that today we will be able to set out a clear way forward, which will enable us to return to this issue in later months.

Brendan O’Hara: On that point, will the hon. Lady join me in congratulating organisations such as WaterAid on their great work? They not only educate the wider public but come directly to parliamentarians to give us knowledge about what they do. WaterAid works in 37 countries around the world. I pay tribute to the work that it and other organisations do.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I was going to acknowledge WaterAid’s work later in my speech, not least because Northumbrian Water, which is based in my constituency, does a lot of work with it. Northumbrian Water has been very energetic in getting MPs in our region to take note of the sort of issues that WaterAid gets involved with.

Since 2000, there have been two rounds of UN-sponsored global international development goals. The first was the millennium development goals, which ran from 2000 to 2015 and aimed to halve the number of people without access to improved drinking water and sanitation. Interestingly, the water target was met but the sanitation target was not met by a considerable amount—about 700 million people. The headline figures mask large geographical variations among countries and between rural and urban populations.

The MDGs have been replaced by the sustainable development goals. SDG 6 relates to what we are talking about this afternoon. We need to take on board the lessons learned from the MDGs, which showed that a donor-led approach on its own is not enough. Work has to be done in partnership with the recipient countries. There can be too much of a focus on short-term targets, rather than long-term viability. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) touched on that point when she said that the facilities that are put in might not be appropriate or sustainable. It is really important that there is some sort of community partnership. There was a failure to exploit links with the private sector fully. The focus was on absolute numbers, so the poorest were often neglected because they were not picked out as a group for targeted intervention. I will talk more about SDG 6 in a moment, but it is interesting that it was informed by the lessons learned from the MDGs.

Globally, one in 10 people still has no access to a safe water source and one in four still has no access to proper sanitation. In parts of Africa, a third of the population does not have access to clean water. In Ethiopia alone, 42.2 million people have no access to safe water. There is still a significant problem, which is a big problem for
the new SDG goal to meet in 14 years. Yet we know that it is really important. There cannot be societal transformation without proper access to clean water and sanitation. We know that from our own experience. It was only when the UK recognised, from its public health problems, that we needed properly piped water that we got the economic development that moved us on. There was a transformation in our public health, and that is what we want to see in other countries.

We are not only talking about health, because research has shown that, for every $1 spent on water and sanitation, $4 would be generated in increased economic opportunity. It has been estimated that, if everyone had universal access to water and sanitation, there would be $32 billion in economic benefits each year globally, from reductions in healthcare costs and from increased productivity as a result of reduced illness.

Interestingly, more than a quarter of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa are poorer now than they were in 1960. Therefore, foreign aid is going in, but if it is not directed in the right way, we do not necessarily get the development that we would want. The lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation is among the reasons given for the lack of economic development flowing from aid. Some of the biggest challenges are in sub-Saharan Africa: only about 30% of individuals have access to improved sanitation services; and nearly half of all people who use unimproved sources live in the region.

We have already heard this afternoon about some of the health impacts. According to the World Health Organisation, 50% of malnutrition is associated with infections caused by a lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene. Globally, malnutrition accounts for 45% of child deaths, of which a large proportion is in Africa. A truly stark figure, also mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford, involves children in sub-Saharan Africa, who are over 14 times more likely to die before the age of five than children in developed regions. The figures speak for themselves and are clear: there is an urgent need to improve access to clean water and good sanitation.

Another thing we have heard this afternoon is that limited access to clean water and good sanitation disproportionately affects women and girls, who are more than twice as likely as men to be responsible for water collection. On average, women and girls in developing countries walk 6 km each day to collect water—time that could be spent in school or at work. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, each day, women spend a combined total of at least 16 million hours collecting drinking water. That is a truly staggering figure.

Additionally, more than half of girls who drop out of primary school in sub-Saharan Africa do so because of a lack of separate toilets and easy access to safe water. However, the issue is to provide not any sanitation, but the right sort of sanitation. I have visited villages in Asia and Africa where money has come through for new sanitation in schools. Toilet blocks were put in, but the schools might as well not have bothered, because the toilets were communal ones, could be too easily accessed by a wide range of people, or had doors that did not close properly—people could look over the top. There was a complete lack of consideration about what actually needed to happen to make the toilets a secure, safe place, in particular for girls, enabling them to stay on at school. So, alas, despite new sanitation facilities, the girls could not continue at school anyway, because they still did not feel safe. So many girls leave education at puberty. Obviously, therefore, co-operation with the local community is necessary, and water sources should be as close as possible to the people who need them.

I will now outline some of the things for which WaterAid is calling, before finishing with a few questions for the Minister. As we know, world leaders committed to reach everyone, everywhere with safe water and sanitation by 2030. That is a wide-ranging goal, with eight objectives, and if they are met that should be a good and helpful step forward. WaterAid, however, has said that Governments must bring about a dramatic and long-term increase in public and private financing for water, sanitation and hygiene to achieve strong, national systems so that there is universal access. Private and public sectors need to co-operate effectively to achieve that universal access. An integrated approach could ensure that improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene services is embedded in plans, policies and programmes on health, nutrition, education, gender equality and employment. Last but not least, pledges made at the 2015 Paris climate summit must be implemented, because they are about the long-term sustainability of water supplies.

Are the Government using their strong voice internationally to push up the international agenda the importance of clean water and sanitation? SDG 6 should become a real priority, so how will progress towards achieving it be monitored internationally? Will the Government use the expertise of the Department for International Development, which works on some very good schemes, to inform best practice everywhere and to ensure that women and girls are prioritised for sanitation and water supply?

Jim Shannon: There is much talk in the press maligning DFID projects, or saying that some are not used properly. Sometimes it is good, as the hon. Lady has just done, to focus on some of the excellent work that DFID does and on the projects that are successful. It is good to remind us of such things, because everything is not negative.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I echo that point. I urge the Minister to use that good experience to help to roll out best practice elsewhere.

2.27 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Percy. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for speaking so eloquently, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) and the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods).

I will give two examples from my own experience of why this issue is so important. In 1982, I visited for the first time a country that was then a developing country—Peru. I was in the high Andes and visiting a friend of mine, Philip Archer, who was a doctor with a mission there. For the first part of his service—three or four years—he had been a doctor at a health centre. Time after time, the patients who came through his door had diseases that were caused by poor water or lack of water. For his second period of service, he said, “There is no point in my treating the symptoms; I will treat the
cause”, so he ended up becoming a public health educator and putting in water systems to help the people of the high Andes.

My second example is perhaps closer to home. My wife ran a public health education programme in northern Tanzania, Kilimanjaro region, for the Evangelical Lutheran Church Northern diocese. As part of the programme, she and her colleagues also saw the problems caused by poor water—not so much on the mountain, where there was plenty of water, although sanitation was sometimes an issue, but on the plains, in particular among the Masai, and elsewhere. She, too, said, “There’s not much point talking to people about health education when they don’t have water, or if they do, they have to walk several kilometres to it.” The problems that that brings have been eloquently described. Collecting water is usually—almost always—done by women or girls. They suffer attacks from wild animals. We heard of people being killed and very badly hurt by crocodiles when collecting water from rivers and, when walking through the bush, by other wild animals. People are also attacked by bears and lions from time to time—they have to cope with all that as well as missing out on their education or livelihood.

With the help of the Rabobank Foundation of the Netherlands, the northern diocese of the Lutheran Church instituted a programme for drilling shallow wells in various villages. In my view that was done in a very sensible manner—I have to say that because my wife was in charge of the project and she is an extremely sensible person, as were her colleagues. They did it under the guidance of the local community, which, first of all, would come to them and say, “Let’s have a shallow well. We really want one.” They then had to show a sign of commitment, so the idea was that the well would be drilled with money from the Rabobank Foundation and other donations, but the villagers would collect the money for the pump. By doing that, they would assume responsibility for the pump and for its maintenance.

By and large, the programme worked well. I shall be going back to Tanzania later this year and I hope to see some of the wells that were drilled up to 20 years ago—or even longer—still in operation and maintained, with the villagers contributing a set amount each month for the pump’s maintenance. Perhaps they will have replaced the pump in that time with the money that they have accumulated.

To me, the programme spoke of a lot of things: first, of the determination of the people themselves. They wanted clean water and could see the impact on their wives and daughters; the women were the loudest in saying, “We want this.” Secondly, these were not massive programmes. This was not a huge project. It involved a few thousand dollars per village and the villagers themselves were able to collect several hundred dollars for the pump. We are therefore talking about small programmes, the impact of which, as we have seen in the International Development Committee, is sometimes overlooked. However, a great deal can be achieved by running a large number of small village and community-based programmes.

At the same time, sanitation was a clear issue. Public health education was the way to convey the importance of good sanitation, and it did not take a lot of money; this was a public health programme that covered several hundred thousand people yet probably cost only a few cents per person per year. People did not have to be given money; once they were told the importance of putting in more modern sanitation and modern toilets, they did so, because they saw how obvious it was. They heard about the consequences of poor sanitation and poor water and did something about it. I will come on to what I would like to ask the Minister at the end, but I am talking now about a relatively modestly funded programme achieving significant results. The educators, who were trained by my wife and her team, would go out into their community, month in, month out, and encourage people to improve the sanitation in their homes and villages.

My final point is about the link with disease, which has already been made very clear and is completely uncontroversial. If we look at the diarrheal diseases, in particular, and one or two others that are classified among the neglected tropical diseases—I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire also contributes hugely—we see that many of these diseases are directly linked to a lack of water or poor water and a lack of hygiene. I know that DFID has made neglected tropical diseases a key part of its programme from 2011 onwards. Indeed, under the previous Labour Government, a significant sum of £50 million was committed, which was raised to £240 million over five years under the coalition Government. It has been shown that there is a huge payback from work on neglected tropical diseases—something like £30 to £40 for every £1 invested.

Will the Minister commit, first, to look at the whole area of water and sanitation and see what more can be done? This is a very basic thing. I saw the impact at first hand 35 years ago, yet we are still talking about it. Let us do more.

Secondly, let us do it in a smart way. There are so many programmes around the world. Water Aid is a fantastic organisation that has contributed to many of them, but there are so many programmes that are not big and which perhaps go under the radar. Let us see how we can support them as a country. We may have to go through a larger organisation to do so, but let us ask how we can do more than we are doing at the moment. Let us not hear colleagues come to us and say, “Well, I’ve got a link in my constituency to a water project in Africa, but I cannot get DFID to support it because it is too small.” Excellent programmes such as Aid Match and Aid Direct have made a real impact in this area, but let us make water programmes a priority; they are ideal and they very much fit into that category of spending.

Thirdly, let us look at how we can support health education programmes, which, again, are often fairly low-key but incredibly effective. They can be run through government, faith groups, Churches and community organisations and are often low-cost, involving amounts of money that do not appear on DFID’s radar. There must be ways of ensuring that these programmes are supported, either through some kind of match funding or direct funding, or even possibly, as we have suggested in our Committee, by making funds available to local DFID offices for support, without people having to go through the centre, with the time and effort that that involves.

[Jeremy Lefroy]
Finally, I emphasise again the importance of continuing to support neglected tropical diseases alongside the work on WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene. In fact, WASH projects and NTD projects should go together. Even though providing medicines to schoolchildren to get rid of worms is excellent, there is little point in doing that year after year when those children will get worms back immediately because the water is poor. Let us have the two kinds of projects going hand in hand. As the current programmes come to an end and the Department considers the future funding of neglected tropical diseases, I urge the Minister to consider the huge value for money that those programmes provide.

Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Percy, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing it.

2.38 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Percy. Although I am responding for the Scottish National party from the Front Bench, I would like to put on record the apologies of the SNP’s international spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). He has important constituency work today, otherwise he would have been here; this is a cause he is very passionate about.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate, which has been really good. I have a feeling that because he covered the issue so comprehensively, a lot of my comments will be prefaced by, “As the hon. Member for Strangford said earlier”. The two cases he mentioned at the end of his speech were very powerful and illustrated the need for further action on water and sanitation in Africa.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) certainly added to the debate, giving examples from Burundi, Uganda and South Sudan. She talked about open defecation in the fields and witnessing the sewage traversing towards villages, and that underpins the need for more action. I must say, I have learned more today about Members’ childhood toilet activities than I thought I would.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) made some important points about the millennium development goals and learning lessons for the sustainable development goals. She made a powerful point about sub-Saharan countries being poorer now than in the 1960s.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) presented some excellent examples from his personal knowledge of and involvement in projects. Importantly, he touched on the fact that small programmes and smart working are the way forward. There does not have to be big money. We hear about expenditure on headline projects and the overseas aid budget, but the way forward is to work smart and invest in small, sustainable projects so that communities can take ownership of them.

I am a civil engineer, and prior to being elected to this place, I spent my career in the water industry. I have always known the importance of clean water and sanitation in this country, let alone in the developing world. I used to do presentations in schools, and to try to capture the children’s imagination I used the example that the water infrastructure in this country saves more lives than the NHS. That is backed up by the fact that the World Bank has declared that hand-washing with soap is the single most cost-effective health intervention.

Hon. Members have touched on the fact that because we have a successful water and sanitation infrastructure in this country, many people take it for granted. Some people complain about the taste of water if there is a slight change and do not realise that it is still perfectly healthy and provides great health benefits. They complain if they lose their water supply for three hours and cannot put their kettle or have a bath or shower, without realising that some people without water and sanitation face personal challenges every day.

It was when I worked for Scottish Water and its predecessor that I became aware of WaterAid and WaterAid Scotland, and I pay tribute to them. What struck me when I first went to a WaterAid presentation was the sustainability aspect of the projects it invests in, which struck a chord with me. That touches on the point the hon. Member for Stafford made about smart investment in sustainable projects. I am also impressed by the wider education that WaterAid is involved in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said, it is fantastic at engaging MPs and widening their education, but it goes further than that in its education programme.

I was pleased that earlier this year a school in my constituency, James Hamilton Academy, won WaterAid’s star supporters competition as a result of its innovative learning programme about water collection and sustainability. The project challenged pupils to think differently about water usage and to compare their usage with that of a child in the developing world. We can safely say that the pupils will no longer take their water supply for granted.

Another example of education was in October 2015 when a group of Scottish Water staff headed out to Zambia to visit WaterAid projects. They visited communities with and without access to safe water, which helped them to gain a real understanding of the challenges facing communities. Since their return, the Zambia team have delivered numerous presentations to their colleagues at Scottish Water. That became an ongoing education programme to spread the word.

Statistics highlight the importance of this debate. It is a basic fact that unclean water and the lack of basic sanitation prevents the eradication of poverty and disease globally, and particularly in Africa. It is well documented that water and sanitation are necessary for success in many other development areas, such as improving health, education and the prospects of women and girls.

In sub-Saharan Africa, only 68% of people have access to clean water and 30% to adequate sanitation. That means children in sub-Saharan Africa are more than 14 times more likely to die before the age of five than children in developed regions. In Uganda, 80% of the population does not have a safe place to go to the toilet. Every year, 500,000 children, most of whom live in Africa, die from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. That is more than one child every minute.

Pauline Latham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is not a proud record for a President who has been in power in Uganda for more than 30 years? What
progress has been made over the past 30-odd years? The President plans to carry on for ever. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the situation in that country is desperate?

Alan Brown: I agree with the hon. Lady. She obviously has a good understanding of Uganda, and I thank her for her intervention.

More than 9,000 children die every year in Ethiopia alone from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. Approximately 800,000 children aged between one month and five years died from pneumonia in 2013, and about 1,400 children die every day from preventable diarrhoea. Some 58% of diarrhoeal deaths are caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation and hygiene.

The effects of a lack of water and sanitation go much further than just disease, as other hon. Members have said. It affects all aspects of life and has a profound impact on women and girls in Africa. As we have heard, they are typically responsible for collecting water for their family, and girls spend as many as six hours a day collecting water, leaving them little time to go to school. In many places, schools are not located within villages or close to where people work, so if girls must travel for hours to collect water, they face the problem of having to travel for hours to go to school as well, so attendance is difficult.

Without a safe and private place to go to the toilet, many girls are forced to drop out of school when they start to menstruate. Many women and girls also have to wait until night to relieve themselves in the open, which causes further health problems and strips them of dignity. Many are harassed or even assaulted. A former work colleague of mine who went to India on a fact-finding mission gave harrowing accounts of women being raped as they went out at night to open fields to use as a toilet. Clearly, the same can happen in Africa.

A lack of clean water also makes it extremely difficult to give birth safely, and mother and child often do not survive. I would like to illustrate that point with one case. Aisha Mkude, who is 38, lives in Lugono village in Tanzania. Last year, she gave birth to her first son, who was born healthy. Aisha says she left the hospital feeling joyful, but just two days later her son got a high fever and started discharging smelly water from his belly button, so she returned to the clinic with him. She says:

“Ther wasn’t enough water at the health centre when I gave birth, resulting in him catching an infection.”

That was because after the birth, she had washed herself and her baby in water that her brother’s wife had fetched for her from the nearby river. It was the dry season, so she had to dig out part of the river to get water. Unfortunately Aisha’s son lived for only seven days, but if there had been regular availability of safe water, he might have survived. She says:

“I feel so bad because I never expected this but because it has happened I will just accept it.”

She should not have to accept it, and that is the thrust of today’s debate. That example highlights the importance of WaterAid’s Healthy Start campaign, which brings into sharp focus the importance of water, sanitation and hygiene in improving the health and nutrition of newborns and children.

That example also illustrates why global action and co-operation are required in a wider context. To that end, we welcome the UN members signing up to the sustainable development goals, particularly goal 6—access to water and sanitation for all by 2030. It is vital that the UK Government set an ambitious and realistic agenda to help ensure that that framework of goals is achieved.

Other hon. Members have touched on this point, but investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is an extremely cost-effective way to spend the UK’s aid budget. We have heard about the 1:4 ratio—for every £1 spent on improving access to water and sanitation, an estimated £4 is returned. We also need to consider that according to the World Bank, total global economic losses due to inadequate water supply and sanitation services have been estimated at $260 billion a year. That illustrates the fact that it is imperative that suitable money be committed. At present, only 2% of UK bilateral aid goes to water, sanitation and hygiene. I put my name to a letter issued in the name of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) calling on the Government to increase that percentage. It would be good if the Minister could give his thoughts on that.

The hon. Member for Strangford touched on the fact that the House is generally united on this subject, but I will make one criticism of the Government. Their overseas development aid needs to be concentrated on programmes relating to water and sanitation projects throughout Africa and elsewhere, instead of on defence. I am concerned that there is increasing double-counting of defence expenditure towards both the NATO targets and official development assistance, through mechanisms such as the conflict, security and stability fund. We should not blur the lines between aid and defence spending. The Government need to realign their moral compass and redirect aid towards those who need it most. The £1 billion conflict, security and stability fund, which the UK Government lists as overseas development aid, is not an appropriate use of UK aid spend. Indeed, in February 2016, Oxfam, Global Citizen and ONE called on Governments across Europe to ensure that aid budgets are used only for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

On a more positive note, I welcome the Government’s commitment to reach a further 60 million people with access to clean water and sanitation by 2020. I look forward to seeing how that will be advanced when the bilateral aid review is published. I suggest, however, that the Government could be even more ambitious.

In Scotland, the SNP-led Government are also committed to boosting water and sanitation projects in Africa, through their climate justice fund. In December 2015, Nicola Sturgeon announced £12 million of funding to help mitigate the effects of climate change on the world’s most vulnerable populations. That was a doubling of the climate justice fund. The head of Oxfam Scotland, Jamie Livingstone, said that the Scottish Government’s enhanced commitment to climate justice is very welcome—it increases the funding promised and creates much needed predictability.

The work enabled by that fund has focused on clean water provision and is aimed at mapping pollution sources, which are very often sanitation facilities. The Scottish Government are working to position water and sanitation assets to maximise access and minimise cross-contamination.
A lot of good work is ongoing, and there is the ambitious aim to supply water and sanitation to all by 2030. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire said, that is not far away, but I remind the House that even if we achieve that goal by 2030, there will still be millions of deaths before then, and that is why urgent action is needed.

2.54 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Percy. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for initiating this very important debate. I listened with interest to the contributions from the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and the hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). They all brought their different perspectives and insights to bear on this subject.

I do not want to repeat the points that have already been made, but I will begin by saying this. Last week, I was thousands of miles away from this Chamber in Somaliland, in the horn of Africa, where people are suffering an absolute lack of clean water—drought. If the Minister will forgive me, I will say a few words about the incidence of drought in eastern and southern Africa before I complete my remarks.

However, on the question of clean water and sanitation, I, like others, pay my respects to WaterAid, an international organisation whose mission is to transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people by improving access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene. As hon. Members have said, WaterAid works with partners in 37 countries, and within Africa it works in 11 countries. Its global advocacy priority focuses on the importance of water, sanitation and hygiene in improving the health and nutrition of newborns and children.

There can be a tendency in advanced western societies to take clean water for granted. In this country, we expect to turn on a tap and see clean water. We probably spend more time worrying about water, precipitation and rain than about its absence, but I remind the Chamber that, in north America, people are just coming through an awful crisis, in Flint, Michigan, caused by an absence of clean water. In 2014, the water supply for that very poor city in Michigan was changed to save money. As a consequence, for the past two years, the people of Flint have been exposed to polluted water; 6,000 to 12,000 children have been exposed to drinking water with high levels of lead; and, most recently, Government officials have had to resign and criminal charges have been filed. Even in relatively prosperous western countries, we should not take clean water for granted.

Before the Minister responds to the debate, I have the following points to put to him; they were reflected in earlier speeches by my colleagues. Hon. Members want the Government to set an ambitious agenda that will help to ensure that SDG 6 is achieved. It is crucial that water, sanitation and hygiene are integrated into Government plans to help to achieve other goals—for example, on poverty, hunger, education and gender equality. Water, sanitation and hygiene are enablers for and signifiers of different types of development, so the UK Government should prioritise water, sanitation and hygiene. That of course includes increased resources. The proportion of UK bilateral aid that goes to water, sanitation and hygiene is currently just 2%. We would like those resources to be increased and will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say to that. We would like water, sanitation and hygiene to be integrated into relevant health and nutrition programmes, including those to be announced in the bilateral aid review, which is expected shortly.

The UK Government should use their global influence to encourage national Governments to ensure that water and sanitation is prioritised. It is a contradiction that in Ghana, for instance, residential developments being built now are the equal of any in Miami or elsewhere in north America, but it is the country with the second highest level of open defaecation in the world. We want to ensure in these societies that as well as private affluence, we see an end to public squalor. That includes public defaecation and an emphasis on clean water, sanitation and hygiene.

This August, global leaders will attend a crucial summit on nutrition to pledge resources to tackle all forms of malnutrition. At that summit, we would all like the Government to prioritise water, sanitation and hygiene within any financial commitments that are made. The Government should also make clear the links between water, sanitation and hygiene and nutrition in keynote speeches that they deliver.

We are faced with many development challenges in an increasingly globalised world, but drought in the horn of Africa and southern Africa is a real issue. I was pleased to visit British Somaliland last week with the Muslim Charities Forum to see at first hand the consequences of that absence of water and to understand how problematic an absolute lack of water is. The peoples of Somaliland are largely pastoral, and they take their flocks of goats, sheep and camels from region to region looking for water to graze. In effect, they follow the clouds. A succession of seasons of drought has put them in a serious position. The danger in British Somaliland is that drought may turn into famine.

We know that Ministers have some excellent programmes in Somalia, but immediate help is needed, both to provide water, food and shelter and to make regions such as Somalia resilient to the increasing incidence of drought, which means more boreholes, better irrigation and better methods of storing rainwater. We saw flash floods when we left British Somaliland, but the water runs off the earth and into the rivers. Clean water is an issue, but so is an absolute lack of water. If the Minister is unable to answer now, will he write on what is being done to help the people of Somalia to deal with the incidence of drought that they are enduring now and on what is being done to help them to be resilient? With climate change, such regions of the world, which once might have seen drought every seven years or every decade, are seeing drought year after year. They need help in both the short term and the medium term to become resilient to drought.

It is easy in a country such as the UK to take water for granted, but whether it is the complete absence of water in the shape of drought, the absence of clean water or the absence of sanitation, such issues are
crucial for developing countries. In this Chamber, which is within a few hundred yards of the River Thames and Peter Bazalgette’s great sewer, we cannot forget that nothing in the 19th century pushed back the incidence of infectious disease more than the creation of genuinely clean water and access to sanitation. What we did in the UK in the 19th century we can do in Africa and the developing world in the 21st century. I await the Minister’s response with interest.

3.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. You have missed a good debate, with some typically thoughtful Back-Bench contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) and from the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who unfortunately has had to go back to her constituency. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate, which is an opportunity to throw light on an important issue that is central to what we do to try to help people in Africa out of poverty. It is worth remembering that we invested almost £800 million of taxpayers’ money in that work in the last Parliament. People complain about the smallness of that as a percentage of overall spending, but it is a lot of money to most of our constituents. It is therefore important to take such opportunities to remind ourselves of why we are spending that money and to what effect, and to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough.

Like others, I congratulate WaterAid on its work, and through the hon. Gentleman. I congratulate the charities and churches and the scouts in his constituency on their work, which is emblematic of some of the small-scale, hugely valuable work to which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford also alluded. I have been pleased by how many speakers have been informed and perceptive enough to see the links between this agenda, which cannot sit in a silo, and other agendas about which we care deeply, particularly the transmission of diseases. I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend talk about the huge physical burden on them. I lifted a water container in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and I was staggered by how heavy it was. I was also extremely encouraged to hear how many Members wanted to emphasise the particularly heavy burden that falls on women and girls, which matters a great deal to the Department. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire spoke powerfully about the huge physical burden on them. I lifted a water container in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and I was staggered by how heavy it was. I asked the ladies how far they had walked with it, and they said that by the end of the day another 1,000 children under five will have died from a lack of clean water and basic sanitation, which is just not acceptable. Such deaths are utterly preventable. The drinking water of at least a quarter of the world’s population is contaminated with faeces, and more than 650 million people do not have access to a water supply close to their home. Those numbers are shaming, given what we take for granted. That ground was well covered in the debate.

I was also extremely encouraged to hear how many Members wanted to emphasise the particularly heavy burden that falls on women and girls, which matters a great deal to the Department. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned drought and the region’s vulnerability to extreme weather. She deserves great credit for visiting and seeing that for herself. We are living through a period of enormous risk to people’s lives, and the impact of El Niño in that part of the world is not sufficiently understood or appreciated. I thank her for raising its profile, and I assure her that DFID is on the case in the sense that, since mid-2015, we have committed an additional £150 million of support to the area. I have been to Ethiopia, and I am in regular contact with Ethiopia to help it manage the risk, which is at a 1984 Band Aid-type level—it is as severe as that.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I am happy to give way to a late arrival, if protocol allows.

Tom Tugendhat: Forgive me for my late arrival. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for being kind enough to help me prepare for it. One point that I have not heard in the Minister’s summing up—perhaps it was raised earlier—is about nature of power. I served in Afghanistan and sought to develop civil culture in areas where water was controlled by an individual or a small group. WaterAid should truly be valued for equalising power in communities that have only one source of life. The work being done is not simply about health or the ability to grow a crop or two, but about changing the democratic mandate in any group, whether it be a small tribe or a whole country. The work being done by DFID, which I saw for myself in Helmand in Afghanistan, is about exactly that. It is about empowering communities to take control of their own lives, not just to be free of disease.

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend adds another texture—another layer of relevance that has not yet been mentioned in this debate—so he has added value.

Like the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, I will not go over the statistics again, because they have been given a good airing. However numb we have become in this House to the horror of much of what is happening around the world, it is still staggering that by the end of the day another 1,000 children under five will have died from a lack of clean water and basic sanitation, which is just not acceptable. Such deaths are utterly preventable. The drinking water of at least a quarter of the world’s population is contaminated with faeces, and more than 650 million people do not have access to a water supply close to their home. Those numbers are shaming, given what we take for granted. That ground was well covered in the debate.

The human dimension has come through powerfully in the debate, but the economic dimension has not come up. Some clever people have attributed an economic cost to the lack of good water and sanitation at about $1.8 billion a year in Nigeria alone. Whether that is right or wrong, the human and financial cost is massively significant. So this issue matters, and I genuinely congratulate hon. Members on throwing a spotlight on it today. The good news is that we can do something about it. We have done something, but not enough. I will return to that, but it is worth noting that human endeavour has moved the needle in important ways.
The world met the millennium development goal for drinking water in 2010, and although the sanitation target was missed—I will return to that—2 billion more people had a toilet in 2015 than in 1990. Some countries have shown outstanding leadership in that context. For example, Ethiopia has reduced open defecation by 64% over the MDG period.

I am genuinely proud of the role that the UK has played over many years. It predates me and this Government, so I claim no credit for it. Between 2011 and 2015, we helped more than 60 million people to get access to water and sanitation, exceeding the coalition Government target. That has made a real difference to poor people's lives in countries such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Nigeria. Many Members have seen that for themselves in their visits and know how powerful and important it is.

In Ethiopia, we are working hard to support the Government to reach 31 million people with sustainable water and sanitation services. That includes ensuring that the services are resilient to future threats from climate change, because as many Members will know, the sustainability of such services is critical.

Pauline Latham: Does my hon. Friend agree that the money that DFID is putting into Sierra Leone post-Ebola will be incredibly important to it in moving forward? The fight against Ebola required a lot of water, and water is crucial for many countries to stop disease. Sierra Leone had many problems before Ebola, and obviously during the outbreak it had more. In Freetown, in the slum area, pigs, chickens and people can be seen sharing the same dribble of water along the main street. Until that situation is solved, Ebola could occur again.

Mr Hurd: This is freaky; my hon. Friend has obviously seen my speech, because my next point is on Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone our support has been crucial in a country that was so cruelly affected by Ebola. I look forward to seeing our support on the ground there in a forthcoming visit. Our support for solid waste management in Bo will create more than 300 new jobs. There are many dimensions to the support being provided that we need to understand and appreciate. We have been leading innovation in how to deliver water and sanitation programmes. Through the WASH programme we have reached nearly 5 million people, but we have paid the NGOs undertaking the projects only once we have independently confirmed that the services are in place. Of course, we are working in a context of extreme and quite understandable scrutiny of the value for money of what we do, so as we contract services we have to be more innovative in how we push to make sure that we pay for results and get value for money for the British taxpayer.

Ms Abbott: I quite agree with the Minister about value for money, but there is another aspect that we have to be certain of. It is not enough to have capital spending and to physically put in place toilets, boreholes and so on; we have to work with communities so that they actually use those facilities.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, and I will say a little more about that.

The focus of the debate has been largely on the role of Governments, with some entirely correct acknowledgment of the role of civil society. We have perhaps not talked enough about the role of the private sector, which has an enormously important role to play in its responsibilities and opportunities to scale up and sustain solutions. I draw Members’ attention to an interesting initiative, the Toilet Board Coalition, which is looking at new ways in which companies are planning investments in water and sanitation. Through our support provided to Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor, DFID has played a leading role in developing private sector sanitation solutions, including the award-winning Clean Team, which is delivering high quality services in Ghana. That is an example of using a business model for installation and service, which provides an opportunity to scale and sustain work.

So there has been some genuine progress, but, as the tone of the debate has made clear, not enough. There is still a great deal more to do. There have been shortfalls, and it is important to understand why. Meeting the challenge of water supply requires a collective effort of Governments, donors, NGOs and the private sector. On sustainability, at any one time 40% of water supplies do not function because of poor operation and maintenance.

On sanitation, there has been a gap, because we are fighting against the reality of political and community priorities, which shift if cholera strikes. Sanitation is the responsibility of the household and community, but households have competing priorities.

On the hon. Lady’s point about sustaining services and building community support, in a lot of the work that we do, our preference is to work through community-led total sanitation solutions, which is about promoting the construction of latrines and also the maintenance and rebuilding of them after the rains come. We have to take time to invest in and engage with the community so that they understand the priority that should be attached to this against other competing priorities. So this work is not easy.

I assure the House, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford, who secured the debate, that the UK remains—there is cross-party support for this; we have heard it today and I am grateful for it—hugely committed to this agenda and wants to stay ambitious. We have to because, as various Members have said, sustainable development goal 6 calls for universal access to water and sanitation by 2030, which is massively ambitious and time marches on, but we are determined to play a key role in achieving the goal.

The UK aid strategy confirmed that, on top of the millions of people we helped to gain access to water and sanitation during the previous Parliament, the Government are committed—it is printed on my table in my ministerial office—to helping a further 60 million people gain access to water and sanitation by 2020. That is the commitment we will be held accountable for and we will meet that through our bilateral aid review and through our centrally managed programmes. Our commitment is hugely ambitious, but we are determined to see it through.

Tom Tugendhat: The point that the Minister is making about increasing support is absolutely essential. I am sure I am not alone in having people write to me about concerns over migration to this country. There can be
few better ways to encourage people to stay at home than to allow them the opportunity to enjoy the normal areas of sanitation and life that we enjoy here, so the commitment that he is making is extremely welcome and I thank the Department for it.

**Mr Hurd:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has skilfully brought us back to the national interest that we consistently need to focus on. There is a great deal of quite justified concern about migration from Africa. It is principally economic, but also driven by other factors. The drivers for why people move—or of course, people have always moved in Africa, since time began—include land, access to water, and natural resources. Therefore, the more we can do to help people feel they can rely on resources and get access to those services in their area, the less risk there is that they will move.

The 60 million people are our additional commitment—they are in addition to the 60 million in the previous Parliament. I reassure the House—because it is the focus of the debate—that we will maintain an extremely strong focus on Africa and on meeting the needs of women and adolescent girls. Building on experience from countries such as South Sudan, Malawi and Tanzania, we will develop programmes that deliver improved nutrition as well as water and sanitation. It is becoming increasingly clear to me and the team I am working with that we must make more linkages across areas. Water and nutrition are an obvious case where work and thinking need to be integrated more.

Through our health programming we will continue to work with our partners to ensure that all healthcare facilities have safe water and adequate toilets and handwashing facilities. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has been passionate and eloquent on that point, on the basis of her many visits.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Hurd:** I am delighted to give way to another latecomer.

**Fiona Bruce:** It is heartening to hear about the Government’s commitment, and the figures that the Minister has given. Does he agree that it is critical that the UK should use its global influence to work with the Governments of other countries and ensure that they make a commitment to informing and educating their populations about how the connection with water can improve health and hygiene? There is a great deal to be done on that account.

**Mr Hurd:** I am delighted that another highly valued member of the International Development Committee has joined us. That is a hugely important point, and there are two elements to it: one is the role that the UK can play in influencing other international donors and Governments to step up—because we have taken a lead and others need to step up, in a crowded environment where there are many pressures on time and money. However, there is also a conversation to be had in countries that we try to help—about priorities and capacity. As I elaborated on when I was speaking about Ethiopia, we now have some quite rich experience of how to help with the thinking, within Governments, about the priority to be given to this agenda.

I want briefly to mention water resource management, which the hon. Member for Strangford raised. It is a critical aspect of the matter, and we will continue to invest in water resource management, to ensure that water and sanitation services are sustainable. Those investments also help countries to reduce the impact of floods and droughts. It is worth noting that water insecurity in Africa is estimated to cost about 5% of GDP, and we think that unlocking investment in water, together with improved governance, could help more than 2 billion people to lead healthier and more prosperous lives.

The whole agenda of how water is managed is critical and it needs to be part of the debate—as does the need for evidence. That may not have come through strongly enough, but what we do must be based on solid evidence. That is why we are one of the largest funders of research in the sector, with flagship programmes including the Sanitation and Hygiene Applied Research for Equity programme, which is showing how sanitation can be improved most effectively.

We are keen to drive innovation in this area, wherever it comes from. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the statistic, which may or may not be true, although it sounds right, that in some areas more people have access to a mobile phone than to clean water. Our challenge is how to use that mobile phone technology as part of the solution. Part of the problem is the fact that often no one knows when water pumps fall into disrepair, and we are piloting work on building sensors into the pumps to provide real-time information on which ones are down and in need of attention. We are keen to see how the digital technology that is transforming all aspects of our life can help in that context.

I want to close by talking about our role in convening, encouraging and bringing people together. I am quite serious when I say that the pressures on the development budget are intense, because of all the problems around the world, such as El Niño, Syria and the humanitarian crises everywhere. There are lots of people competing to assert priorities, and powerful lobbies saying “We need more; we need to jump higher.” That is the reality of our world. The sanitation and water for all initiative was set up to develop political momentum and to secure financial commitments from countries and the private sector. We play an important role in that process; we think it is valuable and we will use it to hold others to account on their commitments, and to enable them to hold us to account on the achievement of our ambitions.

There has been clarity in the debate about the importance we should attach to helping millions more people to access the most basic necessities, which we take for granted. We can see all the development benefits that will accrue through doing that. In our view it is clearly in our national interest and we can see the consequences of failure. The evidence makes clear that focusing aid money on delivering water and sanitation gives value for money, because of the changes it brings about. I hope that I have provided assurance to the hon. Member for Strangford in particular—who deserves credit for securing the debate—that the Government remain extremely...
committed to the agenda, to meeting the manifesto target, and to maintaining British leadership in this area.

3.26 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken for their valuable contributions, which I appreciate. I thank the ladies from WaterAid who kindly facilitated our debate with information, and whose knowledge helped us to bring the debate together factually. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) spoke with great personal knowledge gained through Select Committee work and the visits she has made. She mentioned having a tin bath, and I am in an age group that means I can remember that as well. I can also remember outside toilets. We have come on a great deal in our own countries, and there is a similar need to move on in Africa.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) mentioned the global goals—on water aid, which has been met, and on water sanitation, which has not. She talked about long-term viability and short-term fixes, and was clear about the need to have a vision and a strategy and to address urgent needs. I thought that she made an important comment when she said that some sub-Saharan countries are poorer today than they were in the '60s and '70s, and that addressing water aid and sanitation is even more difficult for them.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whose contributions I value, as I do his friendship, gave us examples from Peru and Tanzania, where his wife has done good work, and talked about the importance of health education and treating problems at source. I thought it was great that he gave examples of what can be done with a £2,000 spend. A small investment can give great returns, and I thought it was a tremendous example. Some things that were done 30 or 35 years ago are still working today. He referred to the neglected tropical diseases, and we may want to focus on that over time.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) referred to communities involved in projects, including Scottish Water staff and their project in Zambia. He spoke of young people dropping out of school in Africa because of lack of access to water aid and sanitation, and the need to prioritise poverty eradication projects.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), brought to the debate something we had not considered: the problems stemming from drought that affects Somali tribesmen and their animals in their wanderings across Africa as they follow the water to where the grass is. She wanted to encourage national Governments to act together. She referred to the storage of water and the need to ensure that we access water wherever it is and retain it as best we can.

Some of the interventions were very helpful. I thank the two hon. Members who came in after the start of the debate; they had other engagements. I was aware of that. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) referred to the power over water rights and access, which, until he intervened on the Minister, had not been considered in the debate, but it is a vital issue in countries where water is almost the equivalent of oil. Water is of tremendous importance. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) referred, as she always does in the good work she does on the Select Committee, to the importance of the work within DFID to ensure that the Governments can deliver.

I was impressed by the Minister's response—I am impressed by him anyway—for which I thank him. We recognise his commitment to his portfolio and to achieving what he wants to achieve, which I believe is what those who have spoken today and those in the House more widely want to achieve. That is important for us.

Water, sanitation and hygiene are enablers for other areas of development, including health and education. That theme ran through all the contributions today. Water, sanitation and hygiene are also highly cost-effective, but only 2% of UK bilateral aid goes towards that. However, I recognise the £800 million the Minister referred to. It is a significant contribution, but if we can do so much with small moneys, that is what we should be trying to do. I would also like water, sanitation and hygiene to be prioritised in the forthcoming aid reviews.

I have been told before that we are not allowed to use props in our speeches, so I am not going to use a prop, but I will refer to this bottle of water. To be truthful, I did not know this until yesterday, but on the labels of the bottles of water in front of us, it says:

“Belu is an ethical bottled water produced in the UK. It is completely carbon neutral. It comes in a lightweight recyclable bottle”

and so on. It then says that 100% of profits go to WaterAid. So, every time we pour a glass of water in this House from any bottle of Belu, we will be supporting WaterAid. WaterAid transforms people's lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in the world's poorest communities, and to date Belu has donated more than £1 million to WaterAid. If anyone ever needs a prop, or something to reach to and say, “That's what WaterAid does”, they can use that bottle.

I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister, and all other Members for their contributions and for highlighting this issue and the position of the people outside the House whom we and the Government want to help.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered clean water and sanitation in Africa.

3.33 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 25 April 2016

[MARK Pritchard in the Chair]

Meningitis B Vaccine

[Relevant document: Oral and written evidence from the Petitions and Health Committees. Petition on the meningitis B vaccine, HC 900.]

4.30 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 108072 relating to the meningitis B vaccine.

As ever, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and it is also a pleasure to see such a high level of interest in this debate from colleagues from all parts of the House. The petition that sparked this debate gathered over 820,000 signatures and received widespread media attention. Someone from every one of our 650 constituencies signed this petition; that shows just how horrifying meningitis B is, and gives a very strong indication of the level of public support for efforts to eradicate this disease.

Before today’s debate, the Petitions Committee and the Health Committee undertook joint oral evidence sessions, during which we heard from families who have been affected by meningitis B, as well as from charities and experts in the field. Some of those families are here today; I thank them for taking the time to share their stories with us. I also thank the charities that came along to the evidence sessions. The evidence that we heard will undoubtedly inform today’s very important debate.

Meningitis B is an evil disease that kills or maims hundreds of children in the UK every year. Finding out that their child has contracted this dreadful disease is clearly one of the worst things that can ever happen to a parent. We need to eradicate it as soon as possible. I hope that the debate and the attention that it brings to the topic will lead to a new action plan from the Government.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has talked about the need for action soon. I got a sense of urgency from the constituents who contacted me. Does he agree that that sense of urgency needs to be reflected by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation when reviewing the position with regard to meningitis B?

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; as ever, he is fast off the mark in intervening. I agree that urgent action is needed and I will come on to give the reasons why. From the evidence that we heard, there is, in effect, a two-year window for a vaccine’s shelf life, so I hope that when the Minister sums up, she will make that case clear. Previous campaigns on this issue have brought about change, and I can only hope that this campaign has gathered enough momentum to follow in their path.

Before I turn to the evidence that we heard in the joint sessions, I will mention a constituent of mine from Bath. I am sure that many hon. Members here have seen for themselves, as I have, the effects of this awful disease and what it does to those who suffer from it. One case that has particularly moved me is that of my constituent, Harmonie-Rose. She contracted meningitis B when she was just 10 months old. Just a few days after she had taken her first steps, she was taken into hospital with one of the worst cases of the disease that her doctors had ever seen. As she battled to survive, the toxins in her body spread to her limbs. The disease attacked and destroyed the tissue in her arms and legs, meaning that they had to be amputated in order to save her life.

Although Harmonie-Rose eventually recovered, she now lives as a quadruple amputee. Harmonie-Rose is a lovely, bubbly young child, living her life to the absolute full. She is beginning to adapt to her prosthetics; one day, she will have the freedom to move around that we all enjoy.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, and I also congratulate all the people who signed the petition. While this debate in Parliament is very timely, meningitis has in fact been around for a very long time. A constituent wrote to me to say that they were having difficulty getting the vaccination. More importantly, if they had gone private, it could have cost them something like £700, which is very expensive for any family, for any treatment. I wonder what the hon. Gentleman thinks about that.

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is quite right to pick up on the fact that the long-term costs to families need to be taken into account when the JCVI makes its decision about whether to extend vaccinations; I will come on to that issue later. It is quite clear that without the support of many of our constituents—those who fundraise and do so much work to help support families in need—those families would be in a much more challenging situation.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman on leading this debate. He gave the very powerful constituency example of Harmonie-Rose. We heard evidence from the parents of Faye Burdett, who made it very clear how fast the disease can strike, and how vital it is that meningitis is treated as quickly as possible to minimise damage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as we heard in evidence, children under the age of five have difficulty communicating the symptoms that they are experiencing, and that is one of the factors that should be taken into account very carefully when considering extending the vaccination programme to those in that age group? They cannot communicate, which delays the delivery of the medical treatment that they so vitally need.

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I agree. Without giving away what I am about to say, I think that the evidence is quite clear on that, and I hope that the JCVI will look at that in due course. The fact is that Harmonie-Rose and many other children see their lives dramatically changed, or even cut short, by this tragic and awful disease, and it is time that we did something about it, here and now.

The petition that led to the debate was started by Lee Booth, who was told that his eight-month-old child was too old to qualify for the meningitis B vaccine. Lee was...
quite rightly uneasy about that, as the group most susceptible to contracting the disease are babies under the age of one. I am sure that we were all pleased when the Government made the unprecedented announcement that from September 2015 all newborn babies would be given the vaccine, making the UK the first country in the world to make that provision.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): On behalf of colleagues from all parties in the House, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the eloquent and passionate way that he is leading this important debate. He is aware of the heartbreaking case of Mia Barton, who tragically passed away last month after contracting meningitis B. Her courageous parents, my constituents Rebecca Barton and Matthew Bright, are campaigning incredibly hard, even in the midst of such awful grief. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, at the very least, the JCVI should be open to reviewing its recommendations to the Government, and that the tragic death of Mia Barton underlines the need to look again at the age requirement for the national vaccination programme?

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and my condolences go to Mia’s family, because obviously anybody who is lost to this tragic disease is a loss overall, and it is horrendous what Mia’s family have had to go through; I have seen that with the family of my own constituent, and as MPs no doubt we have all seen that. There is a question around age, and I will come on to that shortly. Like Mia’s family, Lee Booth is calling for the Government to extend vaccinations up to the age of 11, and I think that we need to review some of the evidence today.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher). I have been involved in this campaign for a considerable while. Does he agree that there is not an issue about the safety of the drug, because it is very safe—we know that because it has been used very safely on students in American universities—and that it is simply an issue of cost?

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I am aware of his work in championing this cause, which he has done for a while. I very much hope that the Minister will consider that point when she makes her summation.

Although it is quite difficult for all of us as MPs to say this, throughout this debate we must of course keep at the back of our minds the fact that the NHS has finite resources. Everything that the NHS provides has an element of cost to it, and a life cost-benefit, too. However, along with many other Members, I worry that the long-term benefits of childhood vaccination and the life chances that vaccination can give to so many children are not being considered as much as they should be.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on leading this debate, and on speaking so passionately but in a measured way about this awful, awful disease. GlaxoSmithKline reported annual profits of £10.3 billion in 2013. Its website devotes several pages to corporate social responsibility. Does my hon. Friend agree that the company would show real leadership and great responsibility if it was prepared to relax further the price of the Bexsero vaccine?

Ben Howlett: I met GlaxoSmithKline and we had a conversation on the issue. There needs to be a long-term conversation in the here and now with GlaxoSmithKline about the pricing of a catch-up programme. We heard an awful lot of evidence about that, and JCVI needs to take it into consideration. As part of that, I lend my support to those campaigning for a full review of the cost-effectiveness methodology for immunisation programmes and procurements, or CEMIPP, its understanding of life benefit, and what it takes into consideration when making a judgment call on life benefit. That has a huge impact on how JCVI makes its decisions. I hope that a review would have a wider benefit for all those children who might be put at risk.

From September 2017, we will start to receive information from the current vaccination programme of babies under the age of one, and we can begin to assess the success of the new approach. In September 2016, we will get early preliminary data on the early introduction of the vaccine. That will hopefully help JCVI readdress its decision on extending the vaccine to those aged up to five. As the UK is the first country to use the meningitis B vaccine, it is understandably difficult to predict its effects when administered on a large scale. The data will be incredibly useful in helping to formulate a plan from September 2017, but it is important to remember that while we sit waiting for the data, children are contracting the disease, with life-changing consequences. Sadly, in some cases they are dying. Families going through that trauma will not be comforted by the fact that from 2017 we will have a better idea of what to do.

It is the opinion of many research organisations that while we wait for the data, we should prioritise protecting the most vulnerable from contracting the disease through a one-off catch-up programme for children under the age of five. They are the age group at the next highest risk of meningitis B infection. That one-off campaign would put many minds at ease and help the future eradication of the disease. The current vaccine only has a two-year shelf life, so it makes sense for the UK to use the vaccines while it can, to catch all those under the age of five. The evidence that we heard showed that the number of cases falls substantially after the age of five. While it is always uncomfortable to set a cut-off age, that would be a sensible one to introduce in the here and now.

At the heart of every successful immunisation campaign is uptake of the offer. Information shows that uptake for the under-ones is strong; that is unsurprising given what the papers are publishing, and the sad stories of families who have suffered the devastating effects of their child contracting the disease. We must ensure that uptake is continually high and does not negatively affect the uptake of any other vaccinations, especially if a one-off catch-up programme is undertaken.

Catherine McKinnell: This is an opportune moment to highlight one of the other points that came out of the evidence we took in Committee: while vaccination is vital, public awareness is a huge concern for everyone.
It is not only parents who need the best possible awareness of the symptoms; medical staff need it, too. Perhaps that awareness is not high enough. It would be good to hear from the Minister what the Government will do to ensure that public awareness and awareness among medical personnel is the best it can be, to ensure that the disease can be treated as quickly as possible.

Ben Howlett: We both heard the evidence that we need to increase awareness of meningitis B. Just because someone has had the vaccination, it does not mean that they are 100% certain not to contract the virus. We have to ensure wider awareness, not just among clinicians, but in nurseries and schools. That will ensure that the issue is higher up their agenda. I have seen some of the highly successful campaigns run by the Department of Health, and I hope we can support the Department in pushing more of those campaigns in the future.

We heard evidence about the importance of vaccinating young children, but Meningitis Now and the Meningitis Research Foundation point out that vaccinating teenagers could be the key to protecting the whole population from meningitis B, knocking out the infection at source before it can spread. That is because teenagers may be responsible for a high proportion of disease carriage. During our evidence sessions, we discussed at length the evidence to back that up. Vinny Smith, the chief executive officer of the Meningitis Research Foundation, explained that the bug lives in the noses and throats of people, particularly teenagers, but it does not live in everybody. The idea is that the key carrier group is targeted with a vaccination campaign that would hopefully protect the most at risk groups.

That targeted immunisation programme could be the solution when it comes to eradicating the disease. However, in-depth research has not yet been done on how effective that would be. It is hoped that the programme would severely reduce contraction of the disease, but it is unclear. What is clear is that a better understanding is at least three years away. We need to get the research process started as quickly as possible. It could benefit those young children who have not been vaccinated by reducing the chances of exposure. It is clearly very difficult to vaccinate all teenagers, given that evidence is still unclear about the effects of immunisation beyond prevention in adolescents. When the research process is under way—I repeat that I hope it starts sooner, rather than later—a short-term option would be to extend the vaccination programme to under-fives who are at a higher risk of contracting the disease.

GliaxSmithKline, which produces the vaccine, has said that it is prepared to work with the Government to ensure that there are enough vaccines for the catch-up period. The company will be under pressure from other nations looking to focus on their vaccination programmes. The Government need to place an urgent and vocal emphasis on vaccinations, as well as prevention. They would be an important voice in encouraging vaccination producers to have greater confidence in investing in the UK. All the families in the UK who want the reassurance a vaccination would bring would much rather we had a stockpile of vaccinations used in a one-off catch-up programme than for our country to miss out because we were slower on the uptake than our competitors. I hope that the urgency of the discussion is at the forefront of the Minister’s mind.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I think the hon. Gentleman spoke about the benefits of reassurance. Does he agree that it is important that peace of mind is taken into account in evaluating the spreading of the vaccination programme?

Ben Howlett: Yes. I do not think JCVI gives as much consideration to peace of mind as it should. From speaking to the parents of Harmonie-Rose and others, I know that that sense of reassurance is in many instances unquantifiable, which makes it difficult for the JCVI to base a decision on peace of mind, but at the end of the day, my opinion, from the evidence we heard in the Committee hearings, is that we need a review of these matters.

As was highlighted repeatedly during the evidence sessions, the exact effect of the vaccine is still unknown, and parents should not ignore any potential signs of the disease just because their child has been immunised. They may still contract the disease, although the chance is much smaller. As ever, early identification is key. The families and experts we heard from stressed the need for strengthened education campaigns highlighting the symptoms of meningitis B, which include a rash that spreads quickly across the body, a high temperature with ice-cold feet and hands, and babies who are agitated and refusing to feed. While it is important that all parents receive that information, it also needs to be targeted at all those with responsibility for children, including childminders, teachers and nurses.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One of the things that struck me was that there has always been difficulty negotiating the price of drugs with manufacturers. Has the hon. Gentleman come across any evidence that in this case that could contribute to any delays with progress?

Ben Howlett: I have not yet seen that evidence, because we are a couple of stages away from that point. Compared with some of the other long-term battles in this place to get access to particular drugs, the conversations that were had with GlaxoSmithKline when the immunisation programme went up to the age of one were particularly small. Longer term, there is obviously a wider conversation that we need to have around access to medicines, if we are going into a world where everybody will, effectively, have a rare disease. We know even more now about genetics and the genome. The system is not set up to help the 68 million people in our country to access medicines in a quick way. That system needs to be created, and the work that the Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences is doing is leading the way on that. I call on all Members in the Chamber to help speed up that process, and to put pressure on the Government to come up with an accelerated access to medicines review as quickly as possible to help the people that the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) identified.

While we decide what needs to be done, we need to be thankful to the public for raising so much money to support the families living with the reality of a child having meningitis B, and thankful to the charities that provide them with financial, emotional and practical support. Only yesterday, some of the London marathon runners, including seven Members of Parliament, raised thousands of pounds to support such families. Such efforts are vital to providing support, and I know that
families are thankful for those efforts. I am tremendously proud to represent a constituency where thousands of pounds have been donated and fundraised for Harmonie-Rose. I know the family are immensely grateful for all the support.

In summary, I am honoured to have been able to open today’s debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is unsurprising that this campaign has gathered so much attention following the sad stories in the media. I hope that the Government listen to the widespread calls for a change in policy, and I hope that they have a one-off catch-up vaccination programme for those up to the age of five to put parents’ minds at rest while research is conducted into the impact on adolescents and the spread of this horrendous disease.

4.51 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who has given a comprehensive account of this important subject. The debate was initiated by those who signed the petition, which received more signatures than any other petition that has reached the House of Commons, so it is obviously right and proper that we should have this debate.

I rise to speak about one of my constituents. I want to briefly mention what happened in a tragedy experienced by my constituents Mr and Mrs Timmins, who lost their beloved son, Mason, at the age of seven. Mason had been vaccinated against meningitis C, but in 2013 he tragically contracted meningitis B. The red rashes that I understand are usually associated with this disease did not appear. Mrs Timmins said she heard her son coughing and then he started to be sick. He fell seriously ill that day and, tragically, by midnight he was brain dead.

That day, the parents had rushed their son to the doctor, who immediately recognised that he had meningitis B and gave injections accordingly, and then he was taken to hospital. I do not think there is any criticism of the health service, but Mr and Mrs Timmins, understandably, are of the very strong view that all children should have the meningitis B vaccination. Indeed, Mrs Timmins arranged for her three-year-old daughter to be vaccinated privately. The family are of the view that had Mason had the vaccination earlier, he would have survived. We do not know that—there is no guarantee about anything—but I am speaking because of their strong feeling that that would have been the case.

Afterwards, to publicise what had occurred and so that it would not be a one-off obscure case that no one knew about, the parents released pictures of their son in his final moments, which can be found online. In the circumstances, I believe they were right to do so.

I am not a medical person. I do not have the medical knowledge to know whether what is being urged by Mr and Mrs Timmins and so many other parents is right. I do not know whether the reluctance to give the vaccine is because of cost, so I shall listen carefully to the Minister. However, I do know—I do not think there is any disagreement among Members of Parliament—that if children can be saved from the fate suffered by Mr and Mrs Timmins’ son, action should be taken along the lines that they urge.

So I shall listen carefully to the arguments, but I—and I believe many hon. Members—cannot accept the view that no action should be taken for reasons of cost. The debate is very important. Children have lost their lives and parents are grieving. We want to know what can be done to avoid the situation so tragically faced by my constituents.

4.56 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) for his powerful contribution and my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for his comprehensive opening speech.

I want to start by paying tribute to my constituents, Neil and Jenny Burdett, who are with us this afternoon. Their two-year-old daughter, Faye, died on Valentine’s day this year after an 11-day battle against meningitis B. It is their determination that something good should come of their loss that has brought us all here today. More than 800,000 people signed the petition after they published a picture of their daughter gravely ill in hospital. They have shown incredible courage over the past few weeks and months since her death. They did not expect to receive this much attention; they just wanted to prevent other families from suffering as they have. The scale of the response to the petition shows how strongly people in this country feel about meningitis and the level of fear and concern that there is out there among parents.

I am proud that Britain was the first country in the world to vaccinate the most at-risk group of babies against meningitis B. In this debate, we should not overlook the important fact that the rest of the world is watching our vaccination programme and seeing how it fares. In the evidence sessions prior to this debate, we heard Britain’s immunisation programme described by one expert as “the envy of the world”, but that does not mean we cannot do more.

It feels cold-hearted to talk about cost-effectiveness, but we have to introduce that to the debate because we know that NHS resources are limited, and we must recognise that money spent on meningitis cannot be used to fight other diseases. After extensive research and the work that was done to make the case for the vaccination to be introduced, costs were included that would not normally be included in such a case for vaccination. For instance, litigation costs and health losses to family members were included. The JCVI, which makes the recommendations, concluded that it would be cost-effective to vaccinate babies up to 12 months, but not older children. If I understand it correctly, the Government are legally bound by that decision. I am sure the Minister will confirm this, but I do not know whether we can simply call for that decision to be overturned and an instant change in the programme introduced. But questions can be asked, particularly as a group is looking at the moment into how the cost-effectiveness calculation is carried out.

Mrs Helen Grant: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not ignore things simply because they are hard to measure, especially in a situation such as
this? Issues that have already been mentioned such as peace of mind and public preference are really important.

**Helen Whately:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend and neighbour in Maidstone. I know she has been contacted by many of her constituents about this issue. We need to ensure that the formula used to calculate whether the vaccine should be introduced includes things such as peace of mind and the level of fear about meningitis. It should also take into account the public preference for protecting children from illness.

**Catherine McKinnell:** The hon. Lady is making an important point. My understanding—I would be grateful if the Minister would clarify this in her response—is that in calculating the cost-effectiveness of the meningitis B vaccination, the JCVI has not fully considered the potential outcome for those children who contract meningitis but survive and the long-term costs for them and their families for the rest of their lives. Such costs are often borne by the state, so, along with the factors that the hon. Lady is outlining, there are other financial costs that have perhaps not been considered fully.

**Helen Whately:** I thank the hon. Lady for that comment. We may well hear from the Minister that some of those extra costs have been taken into account, but when the Select Committee took evidence a few weeks ago we heard from the Meningitis Research Foundation and others that the cost-effectiveness model tends to privilege near-term costs over long-term costs and benefits. It does not look at the long-term lifetime health impacts, positive or negative, from a person having had or not had meningitis.

That brings me to something called the discount rate, which is applied at 3.5%. I have been told that, as a result of that discount rate, the benefit of a vaccine reach zero by the time somebody is 27. People clearly live for much longer than that, so is enough account being taken of the long-term benefits of a vaccination programme when cost-effectiveness is calculated? For instance, it has been calculated that if a 1.5% discount rate were used instead of the 3.5% rate, the answer would be different and a catch-up programme for under-fives would be cost-effective. The NICE guidance states that a 1.5% discount rate can be applied if health benefits would be attained over long periods and for public health interventions. Surely vaccinations should fall under those categories?

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Given my hon. Friend’s experience in the NHS and the clear point she is making, does she think we are missing a trick if we do not listen to that argument now?

**Helen Whately:** The arguments I am putting forward should certainly be looked into, and it is timely to consider them now, because a working group is currently looking at the cost-effectiveness calculation. We need a real sense of urgency about the report on the calculation and it should be published as soon as possible. According to the conversations I have had, there seems to be uncertainty about how it is progressing and when we will be able to discuss the findings.

In the meantime, ever greater awareness of meningitis is important, particularly as it strikes so quickly. Parents need to trust their instincts if a child seems unusually ill, and it is critical for health professionals to listen to them. We have heard many tragic cases of children getting meningitis in which the parents had suspicions that their child was really sick. They have gone to hospital and seen doctors, but they have been sent home with instructions to give the child Calpol or something similar. We know that meningitis is very difficult to diagnose, but it is worrying that there is such variability in how children are treated when they turn up with potential symptoms.

**Mrs Helen Grant:** During the Select Committee’s evidence sessions it was suggested that information about the disease could be put in babies’ red books to raise parents’ awareness. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a good idea that should be considered?

**Helen Whately:** It should most certainly be considered. The Government should look into all possible avenues for raising awareness. Charities such as Meningitis Now are working very hard and have some excellent leaflets, but parents are often still not aware. I have three young children and I have worried about meningitis. I would look out for a rash, but through being involved in this petition I now know that the rash comes so late in the process that it can be too late by the time it is seen. Parents have to be ready to spot a whole host of other symptoms and, when they speak to doctors, to be really confident that they think their child is more sick than usual and that it does not feel like a case for just Calpol. Parents have an instinct. We need to encourage them to trust it, and health professionals need to encourage them to speak up about it.

I know that other colleagues want to speak, so I shall conclude my remarks. We need a much greater sense of urgency about the work on the cost-effectiveness of vaccination. Bearing in mind the points I have made about the discount rate and the value that society attributes to the life of a child, a case could be made for extending the vaccination programme to more children. Work should be done on how health professionals deal with possible cases of meningitis B. Whether or not the NICE guidance is still right, it is certainly confusing. We also need more transparency about doctors’ reactions to possible cases of meningitis B, because it is hard to see the difference in the data—we only have anecdotes about how doctors and others respond when they see a possible case.

The Government must do all they can to raise awareness. Whatever the outcome of the debate, I thank Neil and Jenny very much for all that they have done. The petition and debate have surely raised awareness of meningitis B throughout the country, which in itself will have saved lives.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mark Pritchard** (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Mark Durkan, may I ask everybody to check that their mobile phones are on silent mode? It affects the broadcasting equipment—[Interruption.] I rest my case—somebody does have their phone on.
Secondly, I am aware that there was an important health statement in the House today. Some colleagues wrote to say that they would arrive late, and I thank them for that courtesy. If Members stand, they will be called, subject to the order of speakers given to me by the Speaker’s office.

5.7 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). She spoke so strongly on behalf of the Burdett family, whom she represents, and about the tragedy they have faced, and she also spoke to the wider issues raised by the petition following Faye’s death.

I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for introducing the debate in the way he did, and I also thank the members of the Petitions Committee for the great service they provided to not only the House but the public by holding hearings in conjunction with the Health Committee. These petitions are a new way for Parliament to engage with the public on important issues, and I hope we will learn from this debate that there is also a new way for Members to engage with Ministers to deal with questions that are not always as easy to address as we might want them to be.

Over the past few years, ever since Bexsero was first licensed as a vaccine in Europe, I have tabled a number of early-day motions encouraging the Government and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to move more quickly. Like Meningitis Now and the original Meningitis UK “Beat it now” campaign, I wanted to ensure that we did not have to wait another five years, as we had to for the meningitis C vaccine, with all the accompanying loss of life and life-changing damage done to children in the meantime.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I met Harmonie-Rose the other day, and what a beautiful little girl she is. I do not want to make inappropriate or spurious comparisons, but the swine flu vaccine cost £1 billion, which, despite the criticism, was money well spent. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a vaccine catch-up programme would also be money well spent?

Mark Durkan: I believe that it would. I will come to that point shortly.

Many Government and Opposition MPs in the previous Parliament and this one have been aware of the issues and concerns involved. First, there was the issue of whether we would get the men B vaccine on to the immunisation schedule as soon as we should. Thankfully, steps were taken last spring, and it came on stream in the autumn. The decision that was made by the Department of Health here effectively became the predictive text for what happened in my devolved area, and I welcome the fact that the Health Minister in Northern Ireland followed suit. A similar issue has arisen here. If the Department responds to the evidence that the Petitions Committee and the Health Committee took, which was based on the issues that the petition raised, that will make a difference not only to NHS England, but to my devolved area.

Being based in Northern Ireland, I am conscious that the south of Ireland has taken the decision to follow the UK on the men B vaccine. It will take it up later this year, which may have an impact on the supply of the vaccine. That is why we need to ensure that, when we talk to Government Ministers here and the devolved Ministers, we also talk to the authorities in the south of Ireland. Between us, we have a very good instrument—the British-Irish Council—which brings together all the Administrations on these islands. They should collectively discuss these policy issues and challenges, and they should combine their muscle to improve their negotiating power with Glaxo on any price implications or sensitivities in relation to the drug.

We have been asked to address three main questions, and I hope that the Minister will do so. I know that some will sound like technocratic issues, and perhaps talking in those terms will make the Minister feel uncomfortable or insensitive. There are the issues that delayed the men B vaccine being put on the schedule in the first place and the issues that we face now, particularly the cost-effectiveness framework. As many hon. Members have said, the framework needs to be adjusted to take into account peace of mind factors and the lifelong impact on those who survive meningitis but suffer lasting damage and have difficulties with the economic and social costs that arise from that. The hon. Member for Bath addressed the issue of ensuring that there is a commitment to funding the adolescent intervention study. Rightly, he did not over-speculate about that, but we need to fully understand it and see what can come of it.

As the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said, there is the question of the under-fives catch-up. Most parents understand that that is a basic thing that should be done. People find it hard to believe that there is a significant case against it; they think it is just a question of how we manage and organise it. It is not enough to say, “If we reach the newborns, that will be enough.” The risk is significant.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I met Harmonie-Rose last week in Westminster Hall. I could not help but be conscious that I was talking to a beautiful, lovely child, and that perhaps, if the men B vaccine had been on stream earlier and in the immunisation schedule when it was licensed, she would not have had to use her great charm to lobby on this issue.

If we delay the under-fives catch-up, how many other people will be affected? How many other young, precious lives will be lost? How many families will be plunged into grief? How many young lives will be harmed? How many young people will lose limbs or suffer brain damage or facial disfiguration? We need a response and an intervention, which is why people have petitioned so strongly. The people who petitioned us want action, and I hope the Minister will address them in honest but hopeful terms.

5.14 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Pritchard, despite the fact that I was unable to be here at the start of the debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Decades of immunisation have provided protection from a wide range of diseases and have been crucial to improving the health of the nation—indeed, health
worldwide. The United Kingdom benefits from a world-class immunisation programme, which, as other hon. Members have said, is envied by many other countries. Nevertheless, there is still variation in the take-up of some of the key vaccines in both the early and teenage years, and the take-up of the flu vaccine in the older and vulnerable population could be better, so there is a problem in every age group. That does not seem right, given that we are debating a petition calling for the men B immunisation cohort to be expanded.

I commend the UK for being the first country in the world to provide a men B vaccine. As we have heard, the Republic of Ireland is going to follow suit. We lead the way in many areas of medical research and healthcare, and I am delighted that we continue to do so for this important public health and disease prevention measure, which will tackle the devastating condition of meningitis B—and, indeed, all types of meningitis.

Having a wide-ranging immunisation programme can cause problems. During the pre-debate inquiry, we heard evidence from parents who knew that their child had been vaccinated against meningitis but did not know that there are numerous types of the disease and that one vaccine does not protect their child from all of them. That can cause parents to rule out the possibility that their child is suffering from meningitis, which can delay their seeking medical help.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the rapidity of meningitis B is terribly frightening for parents? I pay tribute to my constituent Emma Moore, who lost her first child, George, to meningitis in October 2013. She told me that she had a perfectly healthy little boy in the morning, and that by 11 pm at night she had to see his dead, lifeless body. She would not wish that nightmare upon anyone.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I agree with her.

As we heard last week during the debate on funding for brain tumour research, no price can be put on anyone’s life, at any age. We must use all the evidence available and do whatever is necessary and appropriate to provide protection from meningitis and other potentially fatal conditions.

The petition has already raised the profile of the disease, which will help to bust the myth that there is one meningitis and that vaccination against one strain makes a child immune to other strains. It is often difficult for parents to know what vaccines their children have had, when they had them, when their boosters are due, and what they are protected and not protected against. In evidence to the inquiry, we heard that irrespective of that confusion, medical professionals should and must trust parents’ instincts more. Despite the fact that the numerous vaccines for the different types of meningitis can be confusing, parents often have a sixth sense that tells them that something is really wrong. However, I understand that medical professionals are concerned that we are becoming more and more resistant to antibiotics, and that if a child is treated with antibiotics without clinical evidence, that resistance builds up even more. This is a complex subject with no easy answers.

The good news is that the vaccination programme has started and is almost one year in. This time next year, the majority of infants under two years old—the group that shows the greatest prevalence of meningitis B—will have been immunised. I am pleased that the Minister has asked the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to reconsider the men B vaccination in the one to two-year-old age group. Given the potential community effect, I hope we will start to see the end of the disease.

There has been a lot of focus on meningitis B in recent months, but we must not lose sight of the impact of other types of meningitis or the fact that many other serious diseases can disproportionately affect infants, who cannot tell their parents or the doctor where they hurt or how poorly they feel. It was clear from the evidence that the Petitions Committee and the Health Committee took that a great deal of work still needs to be carried out to ensure that we get the best possible vaccines at the best possible price, and that they are as effective as possible. As is already happening, it is important to assess the outcomes of each and every infant who receives a men B vaccine. If possible, I would like to see data included from older children who have been immunised privately.

Mrs Helen Grant: In addition to vaccines, on which my hon. Friend is making a strong case, does she agree that we still need to do much more about prevention, and that the completion of the adolescent carriage study, which was recommended in June 2015, might be a good start? It would be helpful to hear from the Minister about progress on that.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I agree with her.

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rocket, something that would normally excite the imagination of any young boy, he started to chat less and become quieter. At that point, his mum became concerned about a pinprick rash that had appeared. It did not look like a typical viral rash, and doubts started to form in her mind.

After they had watched Tim Peake go into space, Rose noticed Charlie was staring vacantly at the television, but she put that down to him perhaps being a little sleepy. Shortly after that, Charlie was sick, and he fell asleep next to his mum on the couch. As his mum said: “I don’t know what prevented me from putting him in his bed and to keep him on the couch—it would have been so easy to do that and he may not have been so lucky.”

While Charlie was napping, his mum noticed what she thought was a bruise on his upper leg, with one on his arm and another small one near his neck. Rose knew that was a potential sign of blood poisoning, and she started to piece together the other symptoms. She looked at the Meningitis Now website for the checklist of symptoms. She called her husband, who told her to call their GP. Unfortunately, the GP closed at lunchtime, but she was put through to an out-of-hours doctor, who told her to call 999 immediately. She decided to check the rash, to see if it disappeared with a glass— it did not.

Rose called 999 and was told that an ambulance would be sent straight away. When the fast-response car arrived, Charlie was lying on his side on the couch. He immediately had antibiotics administered to him. The ambulance arrived about five minutes later and took him to the Royal Bolton hospital, which, as his mum said, did “an absolutely amazing job”. The hospital staff explained everything they were doing, including when they decided to induce Charlie into a coma and he was transferred to the intensive care unit at Alder Hey children’s hospital. At that point, they told his mother that they were treating him for meningitis B.

Charlie stayed in Alder Hey until Christmas day, including eight days in intensive care. He received fantastic care and treatment, but his family were disappointed that they were not given more information about meningitis and its after-effects. At this point, however, I will place on the record the enormous help that the charity Meningitis Now gave to Charlie and his family. I know that they are all extremely grateful. The charity sent them lots of information and they found that reading others’ stories helped them to understand the impact that the disease can have. It helped them to cope.

Unfortunately, three days after Charlie’s initial discharge, he was readmitted to the Royal Bolton and then Alder Hey, as he was struggling to stand and walk. The doctors suspected he might have a bone infection. That meant another week in hospital, including over new year, but he was finally discharged, with much more mobility, as the doctors discovered that the problem was inflammation around his ankle and hip joints. As an MMR scan confirmed, the meningitis had scarred his bones. It was two months before Charlie could walk and stand properly.

Charlie will continue to be monitored by Alder Hey for the next few years, to keep an eye on his growth plates. As Charlie’s mum said: “I will be forever grateful that Charlie can say he has survived meningitis and I want him to remember how lucky he is and we are that he is still here despite being hit with such an awful, awful disease. The speed at which this disease acts is frightening and the symptoms can be so easily confused with other things. This is why it’s so very important to recognise the signs and symptoms quickly.”

I hope that one benefit of this afternoon’s debate will be that more people learn the signs and symptoms, and know what to do. Understandably, Charlie’s parents want to see the roll-out of an improved meningitis B vaccination programme, so that others will never have to go through what they had to go through. Mr and Mrs Edmondson did not know that they could have vaccinated their children privately until the consultant told them that he had vaccinated his children because he knew how important it was.

I appreciate that even with the increased resources being made available to our NHS, the advances in medical science, new treatments, new drugs and a growing and ageing population inevitably mean that difficult decisions have to be made. Of course it will be costly to vaccinate even up to only the five-year-old age group, but when one considers the loss of life, the cost of treating cases such as Charlie’s—which one healthcare professional put at £30,000 to £40,000—and the suffering of children such as Charlie, along with the heartache, anxiety and distress of the parents, the cost of the vaccination suddenly starts to look very cheap indeed.

As you know, Mr Pritchard, I am not one to present problems without trying to find a solution for Government, so let me suggest another source of funding: the millions of pounds spent on trying to persuade adults who, despite years and years of warnings about the dangers of smoking, nevertheless continue to do so. If they have not stopped by now, will they? Those adults have a choice and they choose to continue to smoke. Some of the millions spent on increasingly ineffective stop-smoking campaigns could be spent on children, who have no choice.

5.30 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I echo a feeling of sympathy for my hon. Friend the Minister, because in a sense she is the meat in the sandwich. Time after time she has to answer such debates, but, as she and the House know—the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) certainly knows this, because he had an Adjournment debate on 7 July 2014 on this subject—there has been an ongoing campaign on this for a long time in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) is right that meningitis B is a terrible disease that—as other hon. Members have said—comes on suddenly and, at least in the early stages, is often not recognised by health professionals, let alone parents. More publicity should be given to the disease so that people are aware of what to look for. Given that only yesterday I heard a public health advertisement to encourage parents to get their babies vaccinated against MMR, I am not sure why we should not have such a publicity campaign for meningitis B.

The Bexsero vaccine was first licenced by the European Medicines Agency on 1 January 2013. The Minister wrote to me in April 2014 and said that it would be
rolled out for children under two months, with a one-off catch-up programme for children born between 1 May 2015 and 30 June 2015. I use that illustratively, because at that stage we did not know when the vaccine was to be introduced. The Minister will say that by 2017 all children under two years will be covered, but if the vaccine had been rolled out at the time of my Adjournment debate, in which we were urging the Minister to do that for all children under one, more children would have been covered. In that debate she said:

“Children aged less than five years are most affected by MenB...the peak of the disease is in infants aged 6 to 12 months.”

She went on to say that

“MenB is fatal for about one in 10 of those who develop meningitis...With early diagnosis and treatment, most people can make a full recovery”.

That is true. She also said:

“Incidence has been decreasing in recent years...but it is unpredictable and it could rise again quickly.”—[Official Report, 7 July 2014, Vol. 584, c. 137.]

The disease has an unfortunate habit of falling and rising in incidence, so it could very well start rising again. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation set up a working party in 2013—I think in June—to look at vaccinating all children under one year. What has happened to that working party? Have we got the results yet?

This is an unfortunate issue, because as many hon. Members will know—particularly those who have had young children more recently than when my two were youngsters—we often have to take young children to the surgery anyway, so the costs to the NHS of administering the vaccine would be minuscule: just the cost of the drug. There is also a unit cost issue—if GlaxoSmithKline had to make more of the vaccines, presumably the price would come down. I urge the Minister to consider the anxiety that the disease causes and the vast number of people who signed the petition. It was the largest petition ever for such a debate, and I pay great tribute to the House for changing its procedures to introduce such interactive debates so that we can consider the concerns of large numbers of constituents on such issues. I originally got involved in the meningitis B campaign after my constituents, Dr and Mrs Turner, contacted me about their granddaughter, who sadly died from the disease, but it obviously concerns large numbers of constituents.

We should not consider this vaccine as just an issue of cost. We know that the drug is safe. It has been licensed since 1 January 2013 and in the United States, the student cohort at many universities received the vaccine at least two years ago, and it was also trialled in adolescents at a university in this country. It therefore appears to be safe, although the JCVI wants to look at that issue. I say as gently as possible to the Minister that we should not let this be purely an issue of cost. If we have a drug that works—we know it is effective—and it is simply an issue of cost, we should at least consider rolling it out to all babies under one year old and preferably to all children under five.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for the drug’s safety. We just heard an agonising story from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) about Charlie and his experience, so does he agree that the cost and suffering of those who survive men B should be factored into the consideration of a catch-up scheme?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I entirely agree. I will ask the Minister to clarify this, because when I sat down she said sotto voce that it is one year, but my information is that, from when it started, it was for all those under two months of age on 1 September 2015, with a one-off catch-up programme for babies born between 1 May 2015 and 30 June 2015—those who were three or four months of age when the programme was launched. Therefore, while by now it may have nearly spread to one year, that was not the case when it was introduced. We should consider rolling it out definitely to those who are one year old today and preferably to those a little older as well.

I turn to the Department of Health’s cost-effectiveness methodology for immunisation programmes and procurement—the so-called CEMIPP, which is a dreadful acronym. The Minister will tell us that that looks at the life-cost issues, but those who contract meningitis and suffer long-term effects face not just the £30,000 to £40,000 of costs my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned, but considerable lifelong costs afterwards. The discounting rates, as hon. Friends have said, are particularly mean in that respect, so to look at the issue in the round we must look seriously at the cost to the public purse of not vaccinating. That route could show us more clearly that a roll-out to a larger cohort would be cost-effective.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Meningitis Now is headquartered in my constituency. To follow on from my hon. Friend’s point, should we not think that prevention is better than cure? That should be the overall strapline to the debate.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is right. I pay tribute to the charity based in his constituency and to the other meningitis charity, because they have been campaigning for many years on meningitis B and all the other strains.

The point about rolling out the vaccine to the cohorts—I urge the Minister to go further than that—is that my understanding is that once someone is vaccinated for meningitis B with Bexsero, they are covered for life. Therefore, if more cohorts are covered by the roll-out, more of the population will be covered and the entire population will become less susceptible.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My question follows on nicely from the point made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) in his intervention about the long-term costs. I first came across this issue at a reception held by Meningitis Now. I commend that charity and the Meningitis Research Foundation for their excellent work. In terms of special educational needs, long-term costs can come in when a child reaches 12 or 13 and it becomes apparent that they are not developing at the same rate as other children. All sorts of educational implications should be factored into the long-term costs.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I could not agree more. That is why the CEMIPP group study should look at not only the medical costs but the educational costs, the
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I agree with the vast majority of what the hon. Gentleman says. In actual fact, it was not possible to trial Bexsero in humans because this is such a rare condition, and therefore we do not yet know whether the immunity will be for life.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. The benefit of these debates is that we always have a professional on hand who can give us the last word on the subject. My sister is a GP and would no doubt have given me that same advice.

I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate. This is a tragic disease with tragic consequences. I urge the Minister to go further, and faster in rolling out a good, safe vaccine that will give immunity to a larger section of the population.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Normally I would call a Member from the Opposition Benches at this point. It would be Hywel Williams in this case, but he has not been here for one hour of the debate, for reasons that he has explained to me. I have some discretion, but I think it is only fair that I call now Peter Heaton-Jones, who has been here for the whole debate, and then Dr Sarah Wollaston, who was in the main Chamber for the health statement and is Chair of the Select Committee on Health.

5.42 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) and the Petitions Committee on securing this incredibly important debate. I also pay tribute to the many families and charities whose tireless work has been instrumental in bringing us to this stage.

Two months ago, I was visited at my surgery in the village of Braunton in North Devon by my constituents Anthony and Jodie Cross. Mr and Mrs Cross told me about their daughters, Millie and Lydia, who both contracted meningitis B as young children. Millie was seven months old when she suffered from the disease. She went to hospital and was successfully treated, but on the day she returned home from hospital, her sister Lydia, who was nearly three, became ill. As the illness tragically developed, both of Lydia’s legs were badly damaged by septicemia and had to be amputated below the knee.

That was nearly 12 years ago. Lydia has gone on to become a remarkable young woman and, with her family, a doughty and brave campaigner. Nothing illustrates that better than Lydia’s own words. She wrote an article for my local newspaper, the North Devon Journal, in May 2014, when she was just 13 years of age. Her words summed up better than I could what a remarkable young woman she is and how she has fought this disease so bravely. She says,

“I became a double below knee amputee when I was two due to meningitis and septicaemia. Sometimes having a disability is really hard but then other times it doesn’t really bother me. People may not realise how everyday things that they take for granted are much harder for me to do. I love all sports but I do get upset when I can’t participate because my legs really hurt, or I have sores where they’ve rubbed. I started to really enjoy blade running but due to infections and needing the bones trimmed in my legs, I haven’t been able to do it for months now. Hopefully, soon though, I can get back to training with the North Devon Athletics Club...I can then get my blades altered with new sockets and really train and focus on hopefully going to the next Paralympics in Rio, where I’d like to compete in the 100 metres (fingers crossed). I’m desperate to get back to doing it again. It’s really annoying when you have the determination to do something but your ‘disability’ stops you.”

Even though I’m only 13, I’ve been able to have the most amazing opportunities, that I’m sure I wouldn’t have had if I hadn’t become an amputee. But the one I’m most proud of is being the youngest patron for Help For Heroes, which is such a huge honour. I’ve met many of our wounded heroes who have lost far more than me...and...are my inspiration and friends. Even though I’m a teenager and an amputee which makes me ‘different’, I still consider myself very lucky and I am definitely very happy. I’ve got an amazing group of friends. They treat me just as Lydia (their mad friend, not a girl who’s an amputee) and I love that. I’m happier when people don’t treat me differently because I’m only missing the bottom part of my legs and I’m just the same as any other teenager (loud, annoying, always sleeping in and very untidy)...

I thought it was worth reading that quite extraordinary article to the House at some length, because it sums up better than I could why we are here today.

Clearly, this is a matter of huge public interest and concern. When Mr and Mrs Cross came to see me, they told me about the growing petition seeking an extension of the men B vaccine to all children up to the age of 11. Today, that petition has in excess of 820,000 signatures—the most received by any petition since the new process was launched. I agree with hon. Members that it is good that we have changed our procedures in the House to allow such a petition to be debated in this way.

In considering the matter today, it is of course important to put the medical and scientific evidence front and centre. We should base our decision on that and that alone. Our decision must be evidence-based, which is why I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend the Member for Bath that we should ask the JCVI to conduct a thorough review of the medical evidence. It is an important principle that Ministers should not make what amount to clinical decisions. Most Ministers—including, most MPs—are not scientists or doctors, although for there are notable and extremely respected exceptions to that rule in the Chamber today, to whom we have listened very carefully indeed. We must take account of the

[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]
This Government have shown that they are willing to act on this issue. As we have heard, a men B immunisation programme for infants under the age of one was introduced in September 2015, in line with the JCVI’s recommendations. In addition, the Government have requested that the JCVI research the evidence for extending the men B vaccination programme up to the age of two. Those are both welcome steps, and I hope they show that we are pushing on an at least partially open door and that the Government are willing to listen. I know that the Minister is listening today, and I look forward to hearing her summing-up.

The elephant in the room is the cost, which has been referred to, and it cannot be ignored. There is only so much money available in the Department of Health—I made that very point two weeks ago in a debate in the House on the need for compensation for those affected by the contaminated blood scandal.

Mrs Helen Grant: On cost, does my hon. Friend agree that the earliest possible safe introduction—“safe” being the important word—of a competing product to Bexsero could help patient access by reducing market prices and increasing availability?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was much taken by comments that two of my hon. Friends made about cost. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) made a powerful point in suggesting that we should be looking elsewhere for contributions towards the funding—it should come from those who, frankly, have decided to do harm to themselves rather than from small children who are in no way to blame for the position in which they find themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said—I wrote this down, because I thought it was telling—that we should consider very carefully the cost of not vaccinating, and I am sure the Minister will have taken that important point on board.

Cost is an issue to consider, which is why it is important that we look at the scientific evidence and carefully take on board what the experts from the JCVI and elsewhere say about this issue, as I know we will. We need to get this matter dealt with soon, because time is of the essence. Families are being affected as we speak, in the same tragic way as, in North Devon, Mr and Mrs Cross and their daughters Millie and Lydia have been. Their bravery, selflessness and hard work in pushing this issue forward, along with that of many other families and campaigners, is the reason why we are here today. I say to the Minister that we should listen to them, and we must not let them down.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), and I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for missing his opening statement, because of a statement in the main Chamber. I start by thanking all the families who gave evidence to the Petitions Committee and the Health Committee. Through their very brave and dignified testimony, they have done more to raise awareness and save lives than any Government-led awareness campaign could possibly hope to achieve.

It is wonderful to be in a debate in which we are airing the positive benefits of vaccination, which has undoubtedly been one of the greatest achievements of modern science. We stand on the brink of eradicating polio from the world, and it is worth pausing to thank all those who have been involved in the development of vaccination over the years.

Neil Carmichael: At this point, I would like to salute Dr Edward Jenner, who worked on a smallpox vaccination and was based in my constituency. That underlines the importance of vaccination, and that work then is directly linked to the work of Meningitis Now.

Dr Wollaston: an Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure. He was referring to fire services in Philadelphia, of course, but the principle still stands.

In paying tribute to all who have brought us to where we are today, we should remind ourselves that vaccination is becoming increasingly complex to develop. Bexsero is being developed through reverse antigen mining and is extraordinarily expensive. That is why we have to consider cost-effectiveness, because in a system where finances are limited, what might be displaced if a new intervention is funded? In other words, we in this House and beyond have a responsibility to ensure that the money we spend can save as many lives as possible, and to consider that in the round.

That is why it is important to take account of the work of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation in making its incredibly difficult decisions and judgments. It is absolutely important that we allow the JCVI to carry out its work without undue political interference. The role of this House is, of course, to raise awareness and to hold the Government to account for the way in which—and the framework under which—the JCVI operates. However, our role must never be to lean directly on members of that committee in the very difficult decisions that they make. I pay tribute to the JCVI—to Professor Andrew Pollard and his team—for their work. Their decisions are extraordinarily difficult, and they need to apply the science with a combination of judgment and sensitivity. It is absolutely right that we regularly review the criteria that they are able to take into account.

I thank the Minister for her letter today confirming that the cost-effectiveness methodology for immunisation programmes and procurements working group, or CEMIPP—it may need a catchier title—is going to publish its work in full. Perhaps she will say whether she has now received that report. It is absolutely important that the principle of transparency applies, so that we can all be clear about the decision-making process.

I support Members who have said that we should review the so-called discounting rate if it means that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) has pointed out, by the time someone is in their 20s, effectively no account is taken...
of them. It clearly seems reasonable that we apply the same principle that is applied to public health decision making in the NICE methodology, with its lower discount rate, so that we can take full account of that situation. It is also right for the House to reflect on views beyond this place by thinking, for example, about the social costs. I do not wish to repeat the many important points that have been made about that today.

The JCVI's independence is absolutely vital. We in this House are not in a position to make judgments about the effectiveness and safety of vaccination. We have to rely on experts, and we are very grateful to them for their work. However, one thing that we have to do is hold the Secretary of State to account for implementing the decisions of the JCVI in a timely manner and for the time that it takes to carry out the negotiations on the cost of vaccines.

I would like to make a further point, which I do not think Members have brought up today. The level of variation in the roll-out of existing vaccinations needs to be looked at. During the Health Committee's current inquiry into public health, we have been hearing evidence about the difficulty that public health professionals and directors of public health have in being able to access the data and information that they need to tell them where the gaps are in the roll-out of vaccination. Perhaps the Minister will update the House on where we are in that regard, because it clearly cannot make sense that artificial barriers have sprung up between those who are responsible for implementing the programme and those who are delivering it on the ground. It would be helpful to have an update on that issue.

It is also absolutely right that the House holds the Minister to account on what is being done to follow up the work that is happening on sepsis. As she will know, early diagnosis is critical. Although we want to focus on the number of cases that we can prevent, we cannot prevent them all, so we must also focus on early diagnosis and intervention and on ensuring that we have the right pathways in hospitals, so that the time it takes from the moment someone enters a hospital until they receive life-saving antibiotic therapy is kept to a minimum. Perhaps the Minister will update us on that.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I hesitate to intervene on my hon. Friend, especially as she is such an expert on this subject, but as I understand it, Bexsero was licensed by the European Medicines Agency on 1 January 2013. It was not introduced in this country until more than two and a half years later, and people will have died of the disease in the interim. Does my hon. Friend not think that is too long a process when the argument is not about the safety of the drug but purely about the price? Something needs to change. The negotiation with the drugs companies needs to be done in a different way.

Dr Wollaston: I agree that there needs to be a better and faster procedure for negotiating about cost, but we cannot get away from cost, because, as I mentioned, cost-effectiveness is not an abstract concept. It means asking could we save more lives by spending the same amount of money differently? If the cost of the drug is exorbitantly high, would it be better to invest the money in, for example, early diagnosis and intervention? Those complex decisions should not be made by politicians. Politicians and the public should be part of the process that sets the guidelines and advises the committee, but it is not for this House to make those decisions, although I absolutely agree that of course it would be better if the negotiations could be done more quickly.

I end where I began, by paying tribute to the very brave families for the evidence that they gave. I hope that the Minister will do everything in her power to ensure that we reach decisions as quickly and as fairly as possible.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am glad of the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing it. I am grateful for the somewhat unexpected opportunity to make a brief contribution. I should explain my late arrival: I was detained because I had another, long-standing engagement. I was able to leave because I was in the fortunate position of being the chairman and so could curtail discussion in order to attend this debate.

An overwhelming case has been made on this matter by the petitioners, but also, importantly for us as Members, by our constituents in the campaigns carried out locally. My constituent Janice Roberts has been instrumental in raising the issue locally and in raising awareness among other families. She has combined that with being a champion for local families. We are all very grateful to her for the work that she has done.

An hon. Member referred earlier to being a parent of some standing. I am a new parent, with a three-month-old daughter and a son of two and a half; and I think I can imagine the pain and anguish that parents face with this appalling and terrible illness. As a new parent, I live in fear of what might happen to my child. For me and other parents, cost is obviously not an issue where our own children are concerned, but in the real world, of course, cost is an issue. Inflation is higher in the health service than in the rest of the country, whether one wants to use the retail prices index or the consumer prices index, but in the face of the pain and anguish and the illness of little children, cost just has to take a back seat. From what we have heard, and from what I had already read, this drug is safe. The cost should not be an issue. Every child should have this vaccine, and I am very glad to add my voice to that call.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I apologise to the Chamber for being late; that was due to the health statement earlier. I, too, begin by paying tribute to the families who attended the combined Petitions and Health Committees last month. Their bravery in going through their experience again was incredible, and it was obviously very moving for us to listen to.

Funnily enough, this is World Immunisation Week, so the debate could not have timed any better. Just think of the lethal diseases and conditions that we have tackled across the world because of immunisation. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) referred to polio; we have not beaten that yet, but we are on the way.
Meningitis is an inflammation of the meninges, the covering of the brain, and that can happen with other diseases, not just meningitis B or any of the meningococcal diseases, but they are the most serious; they are the ones that result in the biggest harm. There is A, B, C, W and Y. When I was a younger doctor, which was a wee while ago, meningitis C was the big concern. It was very common in teenagers as well as in children, and there was always a big peak when people went off to university, but in 1999 the vaccine for that was introduced. It was given to those right up to the age of 18, and 90% of those cases are now prevented, which is a real transformation.

That leaves meningitis B, which is the most lethal type and affects people very quickly. We have heard that from the families and from hon. Members in the debate. There are not many conditions whereby someone will go from being slightly off-colour to either death or permanent disability in less than 12 hours. Having worked in a paediatric hospital and dealt with children with meningitis, I can tell hon. Members that for a doctor, it is terrifying. As was talked about in the Committee, it is not that doctors think, “Och, no, it won’t be that; I’ll ignore it.” It is simply that it is so hard to pick out that child. When they are a little bit hingy, as we would say in Scotland—a little bit off—it is not obvious, but there are signs that people should be looking for.

As the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said, do not wait for the rash. I was delighted to see in the Meningitis Now advice that that is written in big red letters: “Don’t wait for a rash”. Do not wait for the rash if the child is quiet, not reacting normally and very feverish. As a doctor, what I would say is of real concern is cold hands and feet. If a child has a fever, yet has cold hands and feet, that to me is a sign of septicaemia—a sign that the blood supply to the extremities is beginning to shut down. That should be a warning sign long before we get to the rash. Reading the testimony produced by the families and the petitions group is absolutely heartbreaking. In case after case, the first warning sign that the parents or the medical professionals recognised was that horrible rash.

It is important that we take account of the long-term disability. One in 10 of these children will not survive. One in three of them will be left with a severe disability. That includes brain damage, cognitive and sensory impairment and, as we have heard, limb amputation. That is horrific to think of in little children. I can tell hon. Members as a doctor that this impinges on doctors as well. If someone has seen a child and not spotted meningitis, or seen a child and watched them just slip through their fingers, that is absolutely horrific. Meningitis moves so fast that vaccination has always been the holy grail. We now have it, but we probably have not rolled it out widely enough, because of the cost-benefit analysis.

I will echo the hon. Member for Totnes: there is no question but that the decision should not be made in this House. It is not a political decision; it must be made in the cold light of evidence of benefit, but that is not just cost-benefit; it is also risk-benefit. We spend a lot of our time being lobbied by constituents who are against vaccination. Think of the saga we have been through with the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine in the last decade, and here we are with a movie reigniting all of that.

There was no trial with Bexsero, so we are still gathering the data through this year. I am talking about the efficacy, safety, side effects and, crucially, as I mentioned earlier, whether people have permanent protection. We do not know that yet, but questions on those points have to be answered, so it is crucial that the body responsible is the JCVI. On my reading, the key problem has been in the discounting. Of course if people invest money in any treatment, they want a quick return. That is what the City of London would look for as well. But we are talking about preventing things—preventing damage that will be with someone for their whole life. A child’s life is written off, before they are 28, as really not having any additional value in being saved. A discounting of 3.5% means that that value is gone at that age, even though we have perhaps saved 70 years of life. In particular, if the child never got ill in the first place, we would have saved a disabled life; we would have saved a life of suffering, and the cost to society and the family of looking after a child who perhaps faces incredible disabilities and suffering.

Every year, that life is discounted at 3.5% until we reach zero, yet we accept that public health measures, such as smoking cessation, take a long time to give us a return. Having seen the results of people smoking, I am not quite ready to say that we should give up on those public health measures. We need people to stop smoking as that will save us money in the long term. However, we should be using the same rate, because if we were discounting at 1.5% a year, the catch-up up to the age of five would have been considered cost-effective. It is not that the rate should not be down to the JCVI or that it should not be based on proper medical evidence. The issue is the tool that was given by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, based on the Treasury figure of 3.5%, although appraisal committees can consider anything between zero and 6%. The key thing is to ask for that evidence to be looked at—specifically the long-term costs of major disability—and to look at the impact on the decisions of using that lower discount rate.

The other thing mentioned was a study of adolescents. In meningitis C, we were particularly after the adolescents. Babies do not carry meningococcal meningitis; teenagers do. When we vaccinate little children, it is for the individual protection of that child. The protection that is given by teenagers is herd immunity. When they stop carrying it, babies will catch it less. We do not know whether that will happen with Bexsero as it is such a different vaccine. As the hon. Member for Totnes mentioned, the whole structure is totally different. Normally, we are looking at the sugars on the surface of bacteria. Bexsero was done through genomics—identifying protein to create antigens and antibodies. It is so expensive because it has been done in a totally different and novel way.

We need to do a study on adolescents. There seem to have been a couple of years of talking about doing it, yet we have not even started or laid out the terms and parameters. It is really important that we answer the questions with evidence, not just by thinking that we would quite like to splash the vaccine around. The case for extending the catch-up to five years is stronger as half the cases will happen before the age of two and the majority will happen before the age of five. The cost burden for a child who requires 24/7 care for their entire life—particularly when they are older and their parents
are no longer looking after them—including the burden on their family, friends and society, is enormous. I find it hard to believe that it would not be cost-effective to prevent that.

For me, as a doctor, vaccination is almost the only way. The one thing I do not recognise in the cost-effectiveness balance is the talk about peace of mind. As we explored with families in Committee hearings, peace of mind caused some of the problem, because some parents thought, “My child is vaccinated against meningitis.” We cannot cast that up. A simple change in the discounting method and the inclusion of long-term social care costs are the most important things.

Even if we roll the vaccination out, we must remember that there are other types of meningitis, and that there is more than one strain of meningitis B. We need to get that great little Meningitis Now card out to families and parents as widely as possible, but we also need to get this message to doctors: do not wait for the rash. Look at the child, listen to the parents, and, as I said earlier, think about cold hands and feet. We have the potential to stop the damage of this absolutely horrific disease, and I hope that we take the issue back to the JCVI.

6.14 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, as it was to serve under that of Mr Pritchard earlier. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for opening the debate in such an eloquent and detailed fashion. The way he set out the terms of the debate is a credit to him. It was really getting to the bottom of a very important issue with, a particular drug can be assessed, it is guess-ology, or a wet finger in the air, to it. Unless the Department of Health will not be following that timetable, will the Minister confirm that the funding needed to carry out the study will be made available? I have seen a reasonable timetable for the review period that could be made as a direct consequence of prevention early on in that five-year forward view. Meningitis B is one instance where the case for prevention is very strong indeed. The ongoing cost to the NHS of a patient who survives meningitis can run into millions of pounds in the worst cases.

The UK is leading the world in the fight against meningitis. Our immunisation and surveillance programmes are world-class, and everybody involved in them should be proud of the lives that have been saved and the lifelong disabilities that have been prevented over the years. However, as I will explain, we still have a long way to go. The joint work of the Petitions Committee and the Health Committee has been instrumental in really getting to the bottom of an issue that has been trundling along for far too long.

The notion of Committees taking evidence on matters raised in e-petitions is quite new, and it is right that scrutiny work is guided by the public. That was recognised by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who chairs the Petitions Committee. That the Petitions Committee is proactive with other Committees of the House will be of great importance for the future work of not just the Petitions Committee, but the other Select Committees of the House of Commons. I hope that in this instance, this work will be of some comfort to the many hundreds of thousands of people across the country who are signing petitions on a variety of issues. Indeed, I checked just before the debate and 1,240 people in my constituency signed the petition before it closed. Almost exactly the same number signed it in the constituency of the Chair of the Petitions Committee, and a similar number—1,311—signed it in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath. I am sure that the Minister appreciates the depth of feeling on the matter right across the country.

I will get into the detail, because the debate is not as clearcut as many of us would like. Indeed, very few issues in health are simple. There is always more than one side to consider, and I appreciate the merits of the Government’s case. The Minister will argue that the Government are rightly following the recommendations of the JCVI, which the Opposition agree is correct in principle, but not, having looked at this in a bit more detail, necessarily in this instance. As we have already heard, the JCVI recommended an adolescent carriage study—this was more than two years ago—to determine what bacteria young people are carrying, and my understanding is that that study has not yet started. It takes a considerable amount of time for such a study to collect usable data, so will the Minister confirm that the funding needed to carry out the study will be made available? I have seen a reasonable timetable for the work set out by Meningitis Now and the Meningitis Research Foundation. If the Department of Health will not be following that timetable, will the Minister confirm when an adolescent carriage study will begin? Has she ensured that there are sufficient supplies of the vaccine to carry out the study?

Health economics, which other Members have mentioned, frustrates me a little because there is a bit of guess-ology, or a wet finger in the air, to it. Unless the lifetime cost and benefits of, and all the associated issues with, a particular drug can be assessed, it is
difficult to assess the true costs and benefits of a particular treatment. I do not think that lifetime costs are adequately considered when looking at the cost-effectiveness of drugs and treatments. Indeed, that point was raised in the Procedure Committee’s final evidence session. Professor Andrew Pollard, chair of the JCVI, suggested that the JCVI was concerned that it “might be underestimating” the lifetime costs—that point was eloquently put today by the hon. Member for The Cotswolds. Dr Mary Ramsay, head of immunisation, hepatitis and blood safety at Public Health England, pointed out that social costs, such as out-of-pocket expenses, are excluded from the JCVI formula. Likewise, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, the peace-of-mind benefits are difficult to measure, but they are also left out of the formula.

Will the Minister assure Members here today that the working group has considered how to reform the JCVI framework so that some of the health gains for children are adequately represented, and so that prevention is prioritised in the formula? I understand that the JCVI agreed to review the impact of the vaccination programme within two years of its decision. I hope that, in light of the exceptionally strong public interest in this issue, the JCVI will use that review to reassess the case for extending the vaccination to all children. The current cost-effectiveness framework used to assess vaccines tends to be a little unfair when it comes to relatively rare but severe diseases in children, and I accept that changes to those procedures do not come quickly, but that is no excuse for the unnecessary and bureaucratic delays that we saw in the introduction of the vaccine for the under-ones. I hope to see promising results this autumn, showing that the vaccine works in a mainstream programme.

Finally, if the JCVI were to make a recommendation to extend the reach of the meningitis B vaccine, I would not hesitate strongly to encourage Ministers to extend the vaccination’s coverage at the earliest opportunity. The principle of quasi-independence for the JCVI is important, and it should be defended, as we have heard from other hon. Members today, but that is not to say that its procedures and remit should not be continually re-evaluated to ensure that it takes the right factors into account. I hope the Minister will listen extremely carefully to all the arguments that have been raised on both sides of the Chamber in this debate and will see the strength of public opinion on this issue as genuine and real. Given that she has a considerable amount of time in which to respond, I am sure that we will get a thorough and full reply to all the questions put by hon. Members today. I am sure that the petitioners watching the debate, both here and through online forums, will be interested in what she has to say.

6.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in this important debate. As others did, I start by offering my condolences to the family of Faye Burdett, whose tragic death sparked such interest in the e-petition by offering my condolences to the family of Faye Burdett, spoken in this important debate. As others did, I start

I have listened to the many hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon and, like everyone in the Chamber, I have been moved by the stories we have heard of how both meningitis and septicaemia have affected families and, in some cases, have tragically changed their lives forever. As has been made clear, meningococcal meningitis—the infection and inflammation of the lining of the brain—and meningococcal septicaemia, or blood poisoning, which for simplicity I will refer to as meningitis, are very serious infections that can be severely disabling and even fatal, as has been movingly and, in some cases, starkly demonstrated by hon. Members today. It is right that we should have robust arrangements in place to protect against this disease. In fact, we are the only country in the world with a vaccination programme for all the major causes of meningitis, and it is clear from the strength of feeling today that hon. Members fully support the meningitis and other world-class vaccination programmes that we have in place to protect individuals, particularly children, and the community as a whole by vaccinating against preventable diseases.

For 35 years successive Governments have based decisions on vaccination programmes on independent expert advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, and it will help to answer one or two points that have been raised if I clarify the JCVI’s legal basis. Since 1 April 2009, the Health Protection (Vaccination) Regulations 2009 have placed a duty on the Secretary of State for Health in England “to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the recommendation of the JCVI is implemented” where certain conditions are met, including that the recommendation is “in response to a question referred to the JCVI by the Secretary of State” and that it is “based on an assessment which demonstrates cost-effectiveness”. That is the basis on which the JCVI was constructed and under which it operates.

At the recommendation of the JCVI, as the House knows, we introduced in September 2015 a men B programme, using the vaccine Bexsero, for babies born on or after 1 July 2015. The babies receive a dose of vaccine at two months, with a further dose at four months and a booster at 12 months. To ensure that we have protected as many infants born in 2015 as possible from men B before the usual winter peak in cases, we also offered the vaccine to babies born in May and June 2015 as part of a one-off catch-up programme, which was possible because the vaccinations could take place when the babies were due to attend their routine immunisation appointments at three and four months.

By May 2016, all infants under one will have become eligible for the men B vaccine, and by May 2017 all children under two will have become eligible for vaccination, which clarifies the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Errewash (Maggie Throup) and, in particular, for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). Obviously, much of today’s debate has focused on extending the men B vaccination programme, and hon. Members and those who signed the e-petition want us to go further, which I absolutely understand. The term “meningitis” strikes fear into the heart of any parent. Public Health England surveys parental attitudes, and its surveys regularly show that meningitis is the disease that parents fear the
most. When we hear sad stories and see utterly heart-breaking pictures of children such as Faye, of course it adds to parents’ fear and worry. They want what is best for their children, which includes protecting them from meningitis if there is a means available to do so.

The Government feel the same, which is why we became the first country in the world to introduce a programme using Bexsero. However, although meningitis is a much-feared disease, it is now much rarer, thanks in large part to the success of this country’s immunisation programmes. Cases are currently at their lowest numbers in more than two decades. To give the House an example drawn on by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who spoke for the Scottish National party, cases of meningitis C have dropped from a peak of around 900 in 1998-99 to about 30 cases in 2014-15. Very few children will get meningitis, and thankfully, deaths are uncommon, although no less tragic.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire also mentioned teenagers. As I have enough time, I will draw the House’s attention to the men ACWY programme that we have introduced. Men W is the strain of meningitis that has increased; cases have been increasing since 2009. There were about 50 cases in 2012-13, about 100 in 2013-14 and around 180 in 2014-15. We rapidly introduced a vaccination programme this year as part of an emergency response to control the national outbreak of group W meningococcal disease. Provisional data show men ACWY vaccine uptake at around 34% in the urgent catch-up cohort aged 17 to 18 in 2014-15. I say that to enlist the help of hon. Members when we try to increase awareness of the men W campaign again this year. We need any help that can be given in publicising it. As I remarked with one colleague before the debate, it is considerably harder to get teenagers to the GP than small infants. It is an important campaign involving a very dangerous strain of meningitis that we must continue to bear down on.

However, the petition is about men B. It calls for the men B programme to be extended to children up to 11 years, although several hon. Members have suggested that up to five years may be a compromise. I fully understand why parents and the public want the extension, but as we have begun to explore in this debate, it is not a simple matter; I hope that hon. Members agree. Some of the reasons for that have been teased out, and I will say a little more about them.

Any Government must make the best use of the resources that they have to ensure that they deliver the maximum health benefit to the population. The greatest burden of meningitis B falls on the under-ones, who will die from the disease if they catch it and there is no vaccine available. The program has been a huge success: deaths have fallen from around 900 in 1998-99 to about 30 cases in 2014-15. Very few children will get meningitis, and thankfully, deaths are uncommon, although no less tragic.

The JCVI also keeps the eligibility criteria under review. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Ben Howlett), who led the debate on behalf of the petitioners, drew out that point, as did others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who led the debate on behalf of the committee. As members of the committee, I hope that hon. Members agree. Some of the reasons for that have been teased out, and I will say a little more about them.

Any Government must make the best use of the resources that they have to ensure that they deliver the maximum health benefit to the population. The greatest burden of meningitis B falls on the under-ones, who have therefore been our focus, on expert advice. As we have heard, such judgments are based on NICE’s rules on cost-effectiveness, which have helped successive generations of Ministers to make difficult decisions that are none the less fair and justifiable and reflect, as the Chair of the Health Committee said, the many challenges across our healthcare system.

I have spoken in detail to Professor Andy Pollard, the chair of the JCVI, to understand what process the committeeworks through when considering a men B vaccination and to be assured that the committee’s recommendation is robust. I have been reassured that the programme we have is the right one, targeting the group of children at highest risk of disease and death. Professor Pollard confirmed that a catch-up programme for one to four-year-olds would not be cost-effective at a realistic vaccine price. Also, the disease is so rare that a programme for those aged five to 11 that a programme for that age group would not be cost-effective, and the JCVI could not recommend it.

Dr Whitford: Is it not the case that the JCVI did a cost-effectiveness analysis using a 1.5% discount, which is the same as in public health, and that at that level a catch-up programme for one to five-year-olds would be cost-effective?

Jane Ellison: I am coming to that point, but I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

As it stands, on the evidence and advice that I have received, I cannot support extending the men B vaccination programme to older children, but I emphasise that the JCVI keeps under review the evidence relating to all vaccination programmes, and I know that it will consider all the points made in this important debate. If the committee’s advice changes, I will consider it as a priority. The JCVI also keeps the eligibility criteria under review. I wrote to the chair on 17 March this year, following the evidence session with parents, asking the committee to review the cost-effectiveness evidence for one to two-year-olds, which Professor Pollard mentioned in his evidence to the committee. I await formal advice on that. Again, if the JCVI’s advice changes, I will consider it as a priority.

Many of the contributions made by hon. Members in this debate have queried whether the cost-effectiveness methodology used by our experts is right for immunisation programmes. The shadow Minister drew out that point, as did others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who led the debate on behalf of the committee. As members of the committee, I hope that hon. Members agree. Some of the reasons for that have been teased out, and I will say a little more about them.

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As the Chair of the Health Committee said, it is about exactly how the impact of the larger group would bed down on the impact of the disease in smaller children. I am grateful to the House for commissioning the second, wider study following on from the preliminary study now under way on strains.

I recognise that Members have concerns—again, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned this issue—about how long the research is taking. I have had extensive discussions about that, because like hon. Members, I want quick answers. However, things are sometimes difficult to weigh in the balance. Robust scientific studies on which long-lasting and important decisions can be taken take time. My scientific advisers have told me that this is a particularly complex study, and that a previous study had inconclusive findings. We want to get this one right and ensure that we have a definitive answer. I am hopeful that this study could start in December 2017. The House has my complete assurance that we will always go with as much speed as we can while maintaining important robustness, so that we reach answers on which evidence-based policies can be made.

Much has been made about the importance of raising awareness and ensuring quick treatment. As many have said, no matter what the nature of the vaccination programme, there will still be cases, and we need to bear that in mind. Many Members have spoken of the reassurance that vaccinations offer and how they set minds at rest; it came out particularly in some of the evidence sessions. Although it is important that it reassures parents, I take this opportunity to underline and stress that vaccination is not a silver bullet. Even with a vaccination programme up to the age of 11, there would still be men B cases in under-11s, as we think that the vaccine covers only about three quarters of all men B strains and no vaccine is 100% effective.

A number of people have made the point, including the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire in an earlier intervention, about understanding the impact of the programme. No other country has introduced a free intervention, about understanding the impact of the larger group would bed down on the impact of the disease in smaller children. As the Chair of the Health Committee said, it is about exactly how the impact of the larger group would bed down on the impact of the disease in smaller children. I am grateful to the House for commissioning the second, wider study following on from the preliminary study now under way on strains.

In response to points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire, I will say that we should have some indication later in 2016 of how effective the vaccine is, how long the vaccine has been. However, establishing an accurate measure of how effective the vaccine is, how long the protection lasts and what proportion of strains it will prevent will take many years of detailed observation by Public Health England, and that clearly will feed into the second, wider study following on from the preliminary study now under way on strains.

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Mr Winnick: I go back to what the Minister said a few moments ago. Of course there is no guarantee with vaccination; everyone recognises that. However, my constituents—no doubt she listened when I spoke about my constituents who tragically lost their child—strongly feel that if Mason, their seven-year-old boy who died, had been vaccinated against this disease, he would have lived. To a large extent, that is the essence of the petition, the debate today and the rest of it. To repeat myself, everyone recognises that there is no guarantee, but there is a question of saving lives.

Jane Ellison: Of course, and I have tried to reflect on that important point. Nevertheless, raising awareness and ensuring the quick treatment of meningitis will always remain very important for that reason, so parents and healthcare professionals need to remain alert to the signs and symptoms of the disease, as was brought out in the moving speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) when he talked about the attentiveness of Charlie’s mum as she monitored his symptoms.

Let me tell the House a little about what we are doing to raise awareness among healthcare professionals. Public Health England produces a range of training materials for immunisers, which includes information on the various programmes. It also collaborates with the charities in this area to support their work to improve healthcare worker knowledge, including through the development and distribution of resources aimed at each type of healthcare professional. It runs teaching and training events, and cascades briefing notes through networks. NHS England also does work to provide tools to help GPs to recognise meningitis. A great deal of work is going on in this area, but of course there is always a need to do more.

I turn to the issue of raising awareness among parents, because that is where we can do more. I announce to the House today that I have asked Public Health England to develop a national awareness campaign that will focus on the dangerous infections that parents worry about the most, including meningitis, septicaemia and sepsis. The campaign will focus on the symptoms that parents need to look out for. To get that right, we will work with the appropriate experts and charities, and of course more details will be available in due course. I will look to keep the relevant Committees up to date with that, but it is my intention that this information should be rolled out before the peak of cases in the winter.

Ben Howlett: Will the Minister also confirm that she will work with the Department for Education on helping those in the teaching professions and nurseries to identify the different conditions, so that we break down the silo type of response that sometimes prevents these sorts of conversations from being had more freely?

Jane Ellison: I have only had initial conversations with Public Health England about the shape of the campaign, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the officials and the other people working on this campaign will look very carefully at what has been said today, and at some of the ideas that hon. Friends and other Members have put forward, and of course they will take all those points into account.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I fear that I am becoming the bane of the Minister’s life over this issue, so I apologise, but I am grateful to her for giving way. One of the issues that I raised in my speech was the unit cost. As I understand it from her reply today, she does not think that there is a case yet for rolling vaccination out to children under five. Would she undertake to keep this matter under review, and would she also undertake to
ensure that the JCVI, or Department of Health officials, will continue to have discussions with GlaxoSmithKline on what the drop in the unit cost might be if all these extra vaccinations were given to under-fives?

**Jane Ellison:** I can assure the whole House that the JCVI keeps that under constant review. It is not something that is occasionally dusted off and looked at every four or five years. The committee looks at all the factors that go into making the relevant decisions. When the factors that contribute to its decision making change, it looks into them. I have already given the House the assurance that the JCVI will keep that under careful review. The Select Committees heard directly from Professor Pollard and had that assurance from him. However, I will draw the JCVI’s attention to the concerns raised in this debate and the huge level of interest in the matter in the House and among the wider public.

As came out in the evidence that the JCVI gave to the Health Committee and the Petitions Committee, under the current cost-effectiveness criteria, the meningitis B vaccination programme was only just cost-effective even for infants on JCVI’s final analysis, but we did not shy away from introducing it because we know how devastating meningitis can be and how important protecting children from it is to parents. That is why we became the first country to have a programme of using Bexsero. Many other countries have asked experts to consider meningitis B vaccine programmes, but because the cost-effectiveness is so borderline, to date only Ireland has recommended a programme. I understand that it will start in the autumn, using the same criteria as the UK’s programme. We are leading the way in protecting our children from meningitis.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I want to reiterate Members’ thanks. I appreciate the fact that so many Members have expressed their thanks to Professor Pollard and the JCVI for the complex and important work that they do. That also goes for the many clinical experts who give us their expertise on which to make these enormously difficult decisions.

**Dr Wollaston:** I am intervening because the Minister mentioned that she is drawing her remarks to a close. Can she comment on the issue I raised about the variation in roll-out and the communication issues for public health directors in being able to assess the variation in their areas?

**Jane Ellison:** I am not able to give my hon. Friend an answer today. If she does not mind, I will write to her about that. I have had a conversation about that with the public health director in my own borough, so I am aware of some of the frustrations that have been expressed. If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will write to her with more detail rather than give a response off the top of my head—her question deserves a better answer.

I want to put on the record my thanks to the meningitis charities that work tirelessly to support families affected by this terrible disease and have done so much to advance their cause. Many of them have circulated their 10-point action plan. I have touched on most of those points and indicated how the Government are responding.

Like other Members, I recognise the courage and dignity that, as has rightly been said, Mr and Mrs Burdett and the other families affected by meningitis in such a tragic way have shown over recent weeks. Nothing I can say today can make up for their loss, but I have listened very carefully to the evidence that they have bravely given to the Select Committees, and particularly the emphasis that they have put on raising awareness, which they have done so much about. I hope it is some comfort to them to know that not only their own efforts in bearing testimony but the new awareness campaign, alongside our vaccination programmes, will save lives in future.
Fixed Odds Betting Terminals

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered fixed-odds betting terminals.

Fixed odds betting terminals are a big issue, and a big crowd of hon. and right. hon. Members are here to speak about them. There is a lot of concern in the House about the issue. There are probably some hon. Members here today—perhaps not so many—who will not be speaking with the same level of concern as me, but Opposition Members intend to take the issue further in their speeches today.

Fixed odds betting terminals are touch-screen roulette machines found in betting shops across the whole United Kingdom. Gamblers can play casino-style games with a maximum stake of £100, which can be wagered every 20 seconds. That is a possible total of £300 a minute. We have more than 35,000 fixed odds betting terminals in the United Kingdom’s bookmakers. FOBTs are disproportionately found in the poorer parts of the United Kingdom and generate some £1.7 billion of revenue for bookmakers. Campaigners have labelled the machines the crack cocaine of gambling, and that is what they are. The issue is of great importance.

Bookmakers have a powerful lobby and powerful friends. They have kept arguing that we need more evidence, despite the obvious case for regulation, in order to protect their huge profits made at the expense of the vulnerable. We are here to speak for the vulnerable, for legislative change and for better protection.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is bringing forward the debate with his characteristic compassion. Does he agree that it is a matter of social justice that we address this issue? Those affected are not just those who are addicted, but their families, and in particular their children. It is primarily for them that many of us are here today.

Jim Shannon: As always, I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention—she is an hon. Friend, too. She speaks with heart and compassion, and she speaks for me as much as everyone else here.

Our Prime Minister told Parliament more than 12 months ago that FOBTs are a serious issue, and that he would act as soon as there was more evidence. Since then, two tragic cases of suicide have been linked to the terminals in Northern Ireland?

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): There is evidence that the terminals have been used for money laundering. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the involvement of paramilitary organisations in money laundering through the terminals in Northern Ireland?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There is evidence of that, and I will give examples shortly. I am sure others will, too. Whenever there is misuse and a dirty laundering system, that has to be addressed.

More than half the UK population plays the national lottery, and they lost £7.2 billion last year. That compares with the less than 4% of the population who play FOBTs, who lost £1.6 billion. The unemployed are twice as likely to play the machines as someone in work. The demographic that bookmakers target with FOBTs are also the least likely to have access to bank accounts, debit cards and credit, and thus have restricted access to remote gambling sites. Bookmakers and the gambling associations are clearly targeting those who are vulnerable to start with, but who are perhaps in some difficulties with money, too.

Bookmakers are using the cover of account-based play, which was instigated by the Government, to provide cash top-up cards that facilitate access to their online sites; the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) mentioned such sites in his intervention. The gambling lobby says that we need more evidence, but it is clear that the evidence is out there. It is comprehensive, and it consistently lines up on the right side of the argument: we need to protect the vulnerable and enact regulation. I hope that, arising from this debate, we will have a chance to enact regulation that will filter out from this House to the whole United Kingdom, including Scotland and Northern Ireland.
FOBTs are useful for money laundering, as the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) said. The machines have a few filters, but the money launderers know them and work within the limits. Supervision is low and closed circuit television is poor, so it is a safe way to money launder. Low-level drug dealers clean cash in case they are pulled over by the police. Generally, they are younger lads with smaller amounts of cash. In one West Yorkshire case, the police uncovered £18,000 of FOBT tickets being held by one drug dealer. The machines are used for underworld criminal activities by those whose thoughts are nothing but criminal and outside the law.

Using the proceeds of crime to fund a gambling addiction, or cleaning the cash obtained from a crime, is common. The most common use of FOBTs since they landed on the high street is for getting rid of dyed notes obtained during robberies on armoured vans, cash machines and so on. The notes are sprayed with an irremovable dye that is an immediate alert as to their origins. They are therefore not exchangeable. However, they are still identified as legitimate currency by note accepters on gaming machines. The machine with the highest cash transaction capability and ticket pay-out facility would be the preferred option for laundering, and that is the fixed odds betting terminal.

The bookies and the suppliers adapted the software controlling ticket pay-outs to identify where less than 40% of the cash put in is wagered—that is where people either put cash in a FOBT and then print a ticket straight out, or stake a minimal amount of the total cash inserted—so that staff are alerted when people cash those tickets. Launderers have adapted to that by using minimal-risk wagering. The bookies are now making it easier for criminals by allowing them to put cash winnings on to a pre-paid credit card. They are not just hiding the cash, but making it electronic. Never ever think that the criminals and evildoers have not got ideas as to how to get around the law, how to work it to their advantage and how to launder some of that dirty money.

Following on from weaknesses in money laundering policies at Ladbrokes in 2013, Paddy Power was recently the subject of a high-profile money laundering investigation. That investigation resulted in the Gambling Commission reprimanding Paddy Power and imposing a £280,000 penalty; there were also serious failures in social responsibility. The Government are considering including betting shops in the European Union's fourth money laundering directive. That would require the identification of customers transacting over £1,500 in a 24-hour period. The bookmakers are lobbying to be excluded from that, despite recommendations that they should be included first being made in 2001 in the Budd report.

The lack of FOBT regulation is a huge issue that cannot be ignored, and I am keen to ensure that the debate highlights it. Gambling the world over has evolved into a consistent structure, with the hardest gambling reserved to highly regulated venues such as casinos, where customers go with the knowledge and expectation of experiencing a harder gambling environment. Casinos have very high levels of player supervision and therefore protection. Players tend to be occasional visitors, and the casinos tend to be viewed as a destination leisure venue with more than just gambling on offer.

The Gambling Act 1968 put in place a regulatory permit for gambling. This set out that high-stakes gambling should take place in highly regulated and highly supervised environments such as casinos, and low-supervision environments should have lower stakes and require lower levels of supervision. Those principles were reaffirmed in the Gambling Act 2005 by Sir Alan Budd. Other countries follow this model. The UK is alone in offering very-high-stakes gambling of £100 on Britain's high streets in the low-supervision, easily accessible environment of a bookmaker. Little or no monitoring and little or no supervision means vulnerable people can be taken advantage of. The regulation of fixed odds betting terminals is out of kilter with the principles of gambling regulation. They offer very-high-stakes gambling in an unregulated environment.

The only material restriction is that bookmakers are allowed four fixed odds betting terminal machines per shop. The result of this is that bookmakers have opened multiple betting shop branches in close proximity. That is a concern. When we look at the streets of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we sometimes wonder whether we are in a gambler's paradise—if there is such a place—because betting shops seem to be prevalent everywhere.

The bookmaker Paddy Power has focused its branches in areas with high immigrant populations. We have seen a 43% increase nationally in the number of betting shops located in town centres.

I seek a lesser number in the shops, and fewer shops as well. We agree on many things, but we do not agree on this topic. The opinion that I express will win: ComRes did a survey of MPs seeking their opinion, and of the MPs who responded, seven out of 10 want FOBTs regulated. They want a reduction in the number of machines and shops. It was quite clear. If a private Member's Bill is brought before the House—some in this Chamber are of a mind to do that—we can tackle the problem.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that reducing the maximum stake to £2, which is opposed by betting shops, would be a good way forward?

The regulation of FOBTs is out of kilter, as I have said. The only material restriction is the four machines per shop. We have seen an increase nationally in the number of betting shops in town centres, and last year the Government stepped in and imposed a £50 staking threshold on fixed odds betting terminals, above which players are required to identify themselves to staff or sign up for a loyalty card. The objective of this measure is to help players stay in control. I suggest that that has not happened. The measure is non-evidence-based and
the Department for Culture, Media and Sport failed to quantify what impact it would have on players other than the £17 million reduction—1%—in bookmaker revenue from the machines. Secondary research based on the British gambling prevalence survey 2010 estimates that up to 40% of B2 revenue comes from at-risk and pathologically addicted players—higher than all other combined gambling activities—so the Government predicted very little impact. There is also evidence that bookmakers are using the player registration as a mechanism to market FOBTs further.

An evaluation of the DCMS assessment of the £50 measure so far, carried out by Landman Economics, highlighted issues with the quality of the data provided by the bookmakers; it also noted that DCMS could not assess changes in staking, mentioned the absence of a pilot scheme so that the measure could be evaluated better, and noted that the evaluation omitted key questions that it is important to consider when looking at the success or failure of the £50 regulations. For example, the question why fixed odds betting terminal machine players might wish to remain anonymous is not discussed. Despite the Government measure, players are still able to stake up to £100 per spin, and it appears that bookmakers are using the change as an opportunity to further market products to vulnerable gamblers. Even £50 is still materially out of kilter in the normal gambling world.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Does he agree that the issue is also about making sure that players can make a genuinely informed choice? If a sign was required to be displayed that said, “A machine of this type made on average £825 a week in profit for its owners in 2012”, would people be inclined to gamble on it? In short, it would be a bet not worth having.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his wise words.

I am conscious that many people want to speak, Sir Alan. I gave you an undertaking that I would not speak for too long, but I want to set the scene, and then I will give other Members an opportunity to participate.

The Government must take urgent action to regulate fixed odds betting terminals and reduce the stake that can be gambled from £100. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) referred to £2; I think that many in this House would be happy with that. This is the only way effectively to tackle the growing problems that these machines are inflicting on our communities and on those who can least afford it. The Minister responsible for gambling has said that the Government want to reduce the stake for FOBTs, so let us hear what the reduction will be. A substantially lower stake might wish to remain anonymous is not discussed. Despite the Government measure, players are still able to stake up to £100 per spin, and it appears that bookmakers are using the change as an opportunity to further market products to vulnerable gamblers. Even £50 is still materially out of kilter in the normal gambling world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Eleven people have put their name down to speak in this debate. The subject is popular—or, depending on your perspective, unpopular. Many people want to speak. I will have to call the Front-Bench speakers at about 10.30 am, so that means approximately four minutes each for everyone else. Since Jim started the debate, people who have put their name down to speak have been bobbing up and down. That is unfair of them, because they can make their points in their four minutes. Perhaps Members will restrict themselves. Those who have not been able to write in to put their name down to speak can intervene to make their points. I ask speakers to be fair to one another, and to restrict their contributions to four minutes or under.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If it helps, Sir Alan, the Front-Bench speakers will be happy to take 10 minutes to allow Back Benchers more time.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): I would like to endorse that, Sir Alan.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): That is very kind of you. We will review that, depending on how Members progress.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. May I declare my registered interests? I have received hospitality from bookmakers and racing; along with your good self, Sir Alan, I am joint chairman of the all-party group on racing and bloodstock; and I have the Cheltenham racecourse in my constituency.

It is from the horse-racing point of view that I come to this debate, because bookmakers very largely finance horse-racing through the betting levy and through media rights. If we lose too many bookmakers we will lose horse-racing, there is absolutely no question about that. There are two very good racecourses in Northern Ireland, which I have visited a number of times. We also see the spectacle of the grand national, the Derby, Royal Ascot and, in my own constituency, the Cheltenham gold cup.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is beginning to make an interesting point about the connection between the old type of bookmakers, with sports betting and horse-racing, and the prevalence of high street bookmakers, but will he accept that there is
clustering? He argues that doing away with bookmakers will affect the horse-racing industry, but does he not see a line of bookmakers all next to each other one side of the road, and another line on the opposite side of the road? There is a clustering effect.

Mr Robertson: I will come to that in a moment, but I just wanted to establish where I am coming from on this issue. There is a link between bookmaking and horse-racing, and if we lose one, without doubt we will lose the other. I want that to be very clear. There are far fewer betting shops than there used to be. We hear about the proliferation of bookmaking shops, but there are something like half the number there used to be. It is important to recognise that, while certainly acknowledging the issues raised by the hon. Member for Strangford.

You have asked us to take very little time each, Sir Alan, and I am happy to comply with that. I hope that the Government will continue with their evidence-based approach. I am not convinced that there has been an increase in the number of problem gamblers. There are people with addictive natures who will be addicted to something, whether that is alcohol, drugs or gambling, but we are discussing only one form of gambling, and many other forms are available.

Any Member could use their mobile phone to empty their entire bank account into a betting account and lose all that money within a minute or two. I mention that to draw attention to whether it would be fair to place restrictions on one kind of gambling when so many other forms are available, including the national lottery. I have linked horse-racing to bookmaking, and I also want to link the national lottery to the many good causes it supports. Billions of pounds have been spent on good causes thanks to the national lottery. I have some news for Members: that money is taken not from the millions of pounds that are won but from the money that people lose on the national lottery each and every week.

I hope we can get a measure of proportion into this debate. The Government should take seriously the important points and concerns raised by the hon. Member for Strangford, but I ask them to continue with their evidence-based approach and to remember that the sport of horse-racing depends on the actions taken by my right hon. Friend the Minister and the Government.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman is of course the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, of which I am very proud to be a member. He chairs us well.

The hon. Gentleman has called for an evidence-based approach to be taken before the Government do anything, and he mentioned race courses in Northern Ireland. Can he produce any shred of evidence that those who go to the horse-racing in Northern Ireland, or anywhere in the United Kingdom, are the same people who play on fixed odds betting terminals? Where is the evidence for that connection?

Mr Robertson: That is not quite the point I was making. The situation is a lot worse now, but five years ago PricewaterhouseCoopers produced a report that said that up to 95 shops in Northern Ireland, which represents around 30% of the total there, would close if fixed odds betting terminals were banned. The hon. Lady is not calling for them to be banned, but that shows the scale of the problem. Some 975 jobs would be lost, costing £18 million per annum throughout Northern Ireland. The knock-on effect for the betting industry and therefore for horse-racing would be huge, because it is the machines that tend to keep the shops going. I am sorry that I did not explain that earlier, but that is my point. Fixed odds betting terminals are far rarer in Northern Ireland, where there are fewer than two per shop, than in Great Britain, where the number is nearer to four, so I am not convinced that the problem is greater in Northern Ireland. That does not mean that there is no problem, but if there is one I do not think it is of the same scale.

Sir Alan, you have indicated to me that I should draw my remarks to a close, so I repeat to the Government: please continue to take an evidence-based approach, and please remember that the sport of horse-racing depends on bookmaking.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. May I again ask Members to be more succinct in their addresses? We have already run over the suggested time limit at an early point in our proceedings.

9.55 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I declare an interest as the newly elected chair of the all-party group on fixed odds betting terminals. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) was also very keen for it to take place.

Huge amounts are being lost in fixed odds betting machines by those who can least afford it. In 2014-15, gamblers lost £2 million in my constituency alone. There are 20 licensed betting shops in the area, which means that that £2 million was lost on 80 FOBTs in Swansea alone—£25,000 on each machine. As many Members will point out, there are 35,000 FOBTs located in bookmakers throughout the UK, on which gamblers can play casino-style games with a £100 maximum stake every 20 seconds—that is £300 a minute. We know that there is a link with problem gambling: four out of five FOBT gamblers exhibit problem gambling behaviour at stakes in excess of £13 a spin, compared with one in five at stakes of £2 and under.

Not only do FOBTs provide hard, high-stakes gambling on British high streets, but many bookmakers have only one member of staff on duty. Bookmakers’ shops often suffer high levels of crime and violence, and a single member of staff is expected to manage the premises, supervise the gambling, memorise scores of faces to enforce a self-exclusion scheme, and carry on their other duties. It is ludicrous.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the difference between where gambling was 15 years ago and where it is now is that there used to be a pause for reflection between, for example, greyhound
races and horse races? Gamblers would think about whether they were going to continue to spend their money. With fixed odds betting terminals, there is no pause for reflection, which tends to be where problem gambling comes in.

Carolyn Harris: FOBTs have been called the “crack cocaine of gambling”, and what the hon. Gentleman says reinforces that idea. Betting shop staff are not in a position to intervene when punters, as they like to be called, exhibit signs of problem gambling. They have no training to deal with it. Every year, 7,000 FOBTs are smashed up by irate customers and there are 10,000 calls to the police, despite the fact that bookmakers discourage staff from reporting such crimes.

As was mentioned earlier, FOBTs are used for money laundering. I recently asked the Treasury to look into the problem. The machines have few filters and the money launderers know how to work within the limits. Supervision is low and CCTV is poor, so it is a safe environment—a haven—for money launderers. Regulations were introduced last year to require players to open an account in a bookmaker if they want to stake more than £50. In my experience, that opens people up to encouraging them back into the bookmakers to spend money that they do not have. Some people get around the stake limit by gambling between £40 and £50, while others use two machines simultaneously.

Before FOBTs were introduced, bookmakers were a relatively benign part of the social fabric. In fact, I would say they were welcome—everybody liked a flutter on a Saturday afternoon. Since the introduction of FOBTs, bookmakers have become a major problem, with rising crime levels. The introduction of FOBTs is the only variable that has changed. The ComRes survey that has been mentioned showed that seven out of 10 MPs from all parties agree with me and others that FOBTs are a dangerous pastime.

The Government are due to launch their triennial review, so now is the time to look carefully at the problem. The machines have few filters and the money launderers know how to work within the limits. Supervision is low and CCTV is poor, so it is a safe environment—a haven—for money launderers. Regulations were introduced last year to require players to open an account in a bookmaker if they want to stake more than £50. In my experience, that opens people up to encouraging them back into the bookmakers to spend money that they do not have. Some people get around the stake limit by gambling between £40 and £50, while others use two machines simultaneously.

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The Government are due to launch their triennial review, so now is the time to look carefully at the damage that these machines are doing. The Gambling Commission has said that, if the stake were being set now, it would advise against £100 as a precautionary measure and would advocate a £2 level. There is a wealth of evidence about the harm that these machines cause. There have even been two tragic suicides: Ryan Myers from Liverpool and Lee Murphy from Aberdeenshire took their own lives as a consequence of their addiction to these dreadful machines.

Bookmakers argue that reducing the stakes would have an economic impact. A report by NERA Economic Consulting assessed the claims of shop closures and job losses. It concluded that “cutting the stake on these machines would reduce the numbers of bookmakers by about 800, primarily where the clusters have developed”—there are often four or five bookmakers in a close-knit area—with “just 5 to 10 per cent fewer shops than before the introduction of B2 machines in 2000.”

Moreover, it found that the move “would create a net positive 2,000 high street jobs as money returned to the more labour-intensive and productive high street shops.”

Limiting the stakes would benefit traditional horse-racing, as money would return to over-the-counter betting and bookies would return to their traditional role as a valued part of the high street. The horse-racing industry would also benefit from an increased levy. It would be a win-win: a win for the high street and a win for the bookies as they returned to being bookmakers. There would be reduced harm, fewer deaths and more jobs. I ask the Government to look at these machines and to take Members’ thoughts on board.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. I again draw Members’ attention to the fact that we are overrunning. The time limit has been voluntary up to now, but we need to be fair to one another, and if people persist in overrunning I will have to impose one.

10.1 am

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly pointed out, the size of the stake—up to £100—and the very short cycle make FOBTs a particularly aggressive form of gambling that encourages fast repeat visits. FOBTs now account for almost half of betting shops’ turnover in the UK as a whole. Given that shops are limited to only four terminals per site, the way to make more from that money spinner is to open additional branches. The result has been that betting shops have proliferated, particularly in the Chinatown area of my constituency. Local authorities are hamstrung by the “aim to permit” guidance under which they review premises’ licence applications for betting shops.

The Soho Society and the London Chinatown Chinese Association have become increasingly alarmed. Betting shops have been pushing for later opening hours and more branches to target people—particularly members of the Chinese community in my constituency, who work until the early hours in the area’s busy restaurant scene. Many of those people are particularly vulnerable to becoming problem gamblers.

Some 12 months ago, the Government accepted that FOBTs are a serious cause for concern and said that more evidence would be gathered on their negative effects. Unfortunately, there is still no sign of a definitive review. Several key questions need to be answered. Should £100 stake gaming machines be allowed in ambient gambling environments such as betting shops? Do those machines exacerbate problem gambling in betting shops? Would cutting the stake protect those who are vulnerable?

The regulator has a statutory duty to act to protect the vulnerable. It has suggested that a precautionary approach could be applied to reduce the stake. Campaigners against FOBTs want the maximum to be reduced from £100 to £2, in line with all other category B machines. I support that suggestion.

Gambling the world over has evolved within a fairly sensible, consistent structure. The hardest gambling is reserved to highly regulated venues such as casinos—my constituency has many—to which customers go with the expectation of experiencing a much harder gambling environment. Casinos have very high levels of player supervision and protection. Players tend to be occasional
visitors, and casinos tend to be viewed as destination leisure venues that have more than just gambling on offer.

The Gaming Act 1968 put in place a regulatory pyramid. At the top, harder gambling was reserved to more strictly regulated venues. The lowest level of supervision was for soft gambling at seaside arcades, for example. The middle tier—the general, high street, ambient gambling, which we are discussing today—was expected to be fairly soft gambling with lower levels of player supervision. It is not, in my view, suitable for the kind of hard FOBT games that we see today.

B2 gaming machines are totally inappropriate for high streets across the country at the current level of stake. Until their advent, bookmakers had few issues with crime and attacks on staff. Since their introduction, police call-outs to gambling premises have rocketed, as frustrated users carry out damage to machines.

I understand that the instinct of this Government—a Conservative Government—is not to give in to nanny state urges. I make that sort of argument fairly regularly. However, it seems odd that at the selfsame time as we are imposing a sugar tax and ever more draconian measures against smokers, we are allowing these high-stake gambling machines to proliferate in a loosely regulated environment. I ask the Minister to work with responsible operators in the gambling industry, of whom there are very many, to reduce the FOBT stake.

10.5 am

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak today. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. I consider myself lucky to represent one of the best race courses in the country—Haydock Park—and I endorse the point made by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) about bookies’ contribution to the survival and success of horse-racing.

There are 14 betting shops in my constituency, which employ 67 people. They contribute hundreds of thousands of pounds in business rates and tax and a total of more than £1.3 million to the local economy. Those jobs and that money are important.

Emotions can run high when we talk about fixed odds betting terminals. I have seen—no doubt, like other hon. Members—the devastation that addiction, whether to alcohol, tobacco, drugs or gambling, can cause. One of my very good friends, a man widely known in sporting and media circles in Ireland—the Armagh Gaelic footballer Oisín McConville—has written extensively about his struggles with gambling. I ask the Minister to believe me when I say that I know.

I knew problem gamblers when I worked in a bookies at the age of 14. Before the internet, cashing-in, betting exchanges and FOBTs, we took people’s money over the counter and stamped their docket. Bookies did not open on a Sunday, and there was no champions league football, no in-play betting, very limited evening racing and no FOBTs.

The reality for those who have developed a problem is that people now have a multitude of gambling opportunities, including online gambling, spread betting, casinos, the lottery or betting shops. The vast majority of people can control their gambling and view it as a leisure pursuit. That is demonstrated by the fact that problem gambling levels in the UK have remained constant for the past 30 years at about 0.5% of the adult population.

A veritable litany of academic research and evidence shows that problem gambling is not limited to one product or type of gambling. Many experts conclude that problem gambling is a complex issue. Focusing on one element of gambling alone will not give a better prediction of problem gambling or decrease the rates of gambling-related harm. I therefore ask that we look at the wider problems of gambling and, as ever, focus on the evidence and facts.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman is talking about the range of gambling options that exist. Problem gamblers are attracted to all of them. Does he recognise that many firms provide all of them? As he seems to be saying, those firms depend on FOBTs; otherwise they would go out of business.

Conor McGinn: I am very clear that there should be no carte blanche for any part of the gambling or gaming industry. Regulation is important. Let us look at access to gambling and the amount that people can wager, and let us find ways of protecting those who are susceptible to developing a problem, but let us do it fairly and in the interest of good public policy.

Let us ensure that those with gambling addictions get the help and support they need to overcome their problems. We must ensure that the industry meets its obligations in that regard. Let us also acknowledge that having a flutter is a treasured and enjoyable national pastime, and that the vast majority of the millions of people who have a bet do so occasionally and in moderation—me included.

10.9 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Alan.

Fixed odds betting terminals are entirely legal. Some claim that people become addicted to gambling but, unfortunately for those who advance the argument, that is simply not supported by the evidence. There is no objective evidence from gambling prevalence surveys or Government health surveys that the level of problem gambling in this country is rising. The inconvenient truth is that the level of problem gambling has remained constant at about 0.5% of the population for the past 13 years. Crucially, that level has not increased since the terminals were first introduced.

The FOBTs are already heavily regulated. Every aspect of their operation is controlled: they must be licensed; the maximum stake is controlled by Government; and the maximum pay-out is controlled. The fact is that gambling is available in many forms. There is no control over how much anyone may stake, say, on a five-furlong flat race, which is over in less than a minute. There is no control over how many scratchcards a 16-year-old may buy.

Graham Jones: The hon. Gentleman seems to be making a principled argument that we should not even have a £100 limit on FOBTs. He is asking why we should we have that—if someone can bet £1,000, or
£10,000, on a horse race, or can walk into a casino and put x amount on whatever, what is the point in having a £100 maximum stake on a FOBT? Clearly, his argument is to remove the maximum stake and for people to have the freedom to stake as much as they want.

Mr Nuttall: The fact is that very few people bet £100 a stake—only about one in 100 customers even stake over £50. The average stake on a machine is £5.13.

As I was saying, there is no control over how many games of bingo someone may play, and there is no control over how much people may spend on betting on their mobile phone. Betting shops, arguably, are the safest place to gamble responsibly.

Mark Field: I have some sympathy with the nanny state argument. As my hon. Friend knows, we have had discussions about that in many different areas of public policy. Does he not recognise, however, that there is an element of responsibility here? Without doubt, no self-respecting newsagent would be selling dozens and dozens of scratchcards to a 16-year-old; the newsagent would take responsibility there and then. A lot of things are regulated, but in this sort of area the Government need to find a balance. As I said in my contribution, it seems to me that what is happening in many of our betting shops should be regulated at a higher level than might be expected for a seaside arcade.

Mr Nuttall: In answer to the point about scratchcards, there is nothing to stop people going into 10 different shops and buying as many scratchcards as they want. I am not suggesting that they would buy them all from the same shop.

I will make two final points. First, it is generally accepted, and it has been mentioned in the debate this morning, that the FOBT machines make a profit of about £1,000 a week—the figure given earlier was a little more than £800 a week. Given that the shops are open for about 90 hours a week, on average, that works out at a profit of about £11 an hour. So the question is: do they think such a level of hourly profit is fair? If not, what hourly rate do they think is fair?

Secondly, it is argued that the FOBTs are used for money laundering. That argument has been advanced again this morning. Unfortunately, however, it has been advanced by exactly the same people who argue that people are losing £300 a minute on the machines. Which is it? Are people losing £300 a minute, in which case that is not a good way to launder money, or are the machines being used for money-laundering purposes? Clearly, they cannot both be true.

We should protect the freedom of the individuals who want an occasional flutter, and allow them to do so.

10.13 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan.

As a member of the newly formed APG on fixed odds betting terminals, I am pleased that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) secured this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for forming the APG, and I congratulate her on being elected as its chair.

I am pleased with my local council, Rochdale, which neighbours the constituency of the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall). I was interested to hear what he had to say about problem gambling in Bury, because it is certainly not supported by his local newspaper, The Bury Times, which has highlighted the problems caused by FOBTs in Bury. Last September, however, my local authority, Rochdale Council, formally supported the campaign to have the maximum FOBT stake reduced from £100 to £2.

In the Metropolitan Borough of Rochdale, which encompasses my constituency and the Rochdale constituency, 140 FOBTs are estimated to be spread across 35 betting shops. The amount spent on the machines locally is staggering. According to data compiled by the Campaign for Fairer Gambling, residents of the borough gambled up to £152 million on FOBTs in 2013, which equates to £721 by every man, woman and child in the population—excluding residents aged under 18, who legally are not supposed to be gambling, that is nearly £950 per adult resident. By comparison with the 2012 figures, the research also seems to indicate that the local problem is getting worse. Between 2012 and 2013, the amount spent per resident increased by 112%, representing a massive drain on a borough facing significant challenges.

The gambling industry has introduced a range of voluntary measures to protect gamblers, such as gambling being able to self-exclude themselves from betting premises, or the introduction of personal limits on the amount of money to be gambled during a single session. Given the vulnerable nature of those who tend to use FOBTs on a frequent basis, however, an approach that is more robust than self-regulation would be preferable.

On local licensing obligations, the Gambling Act 2005 requires local licensing authorities to “aim to permit” gambling, subject to licences complying with three licensing objectives: keeping crime out of gambling; ensuring that gambling is fair and open; and protecting children and vulnerable people. As a consequence, betting shops are required to obtain a licence from their local authority. FOBTs were previously restricted to the highly regulated casino environment but, as we have heard, they are now permitted in betting shops. For that reason, the licensing section of local councils has a role to play in ensuring that local betting shops comply with the relevant legislation.

I am pleased that Rochdale Council voted formally to support the campaign, and I believe that to be the action of a responsible council. I hope that others will follow suit.

10.17 am

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. Many of us have probably applied for a similar debate, and for a Glasgow Member the issue is particularly pertinent. In 2014, The Evening Times of Glasgow found that the city had the highest proliferation of FOBTs—puggies, as they are known colloquially—at one for every 2,458 adults, with
losses of £30 million per year. Only Liverpool came anywhere close to matching the Glasgow figure. It is not a statistic that I am proud of.

In my constituency the number of betting shops is particularly high, and they are in a concentrated area. It has been suggested that the disproportionate impact of fixed odds betting terminals on poorer and more vulnerable communities is due to the massive overprovision of bookmakers in such areas. Some streets in the east end of Glasgow have as many as four bookmakers on them, within a few hundred yards of each other, and with multiple FOBT units in each shop. In parts of my constituency, the high street is dominated by fast food shops, payday loan shops and bookmakers, and their proximity to each other is no coincidence.

Areas with a higher density of gambling machines are therefore more likely to be poorer areas, with lower than average economic activity and more people in lower-paid jobs, which means that the machines have a higher impact on people in those communities. I might have taken this incorrectly, but I take issue with the idea that people in such areas have more addictive personalities than those in more affluent areas. This is about proliferation, availability, the absence of hope, and the desire for control. Gambling has a massive impact on the lives and families of problem gamblers, often leaving families in debt, desperate, and more dependent on council and Government services. A report by Glasgow City Council on the impact of FOBTs found significant evidence of clustering of betting shops on many local high streets and other retail centres in Glasgow. Despite a period of unprecedented growth in online gambling, the number of betting shops has remained consistent and floor space continues to increase.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the idea that the poor pay in betting shops so that the more affluent can go horse-racing does not seem to me a reason to urge caution on the Government about taking action.

Mr Laurence Robertson: I did not say that.

Natalie McGarry: Evidence from the Scottish health survey suggests that as many as one in 20 betting shop customers—[Interuption] Would the hon. Gentleman like to intervene instead of speaking from a sedentary position? I would be happy to take an intervention.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. What she said was not remotely close to any point I made.

Natalie McGarry: That was an interpretational issue, then. I am glad to have my interpretation corrected, because what I said was what came across to me, and perhaps to others in the Chamber.

Evidence from the Scottish health survey suggests that as many as one in 20 betting shop customers may be problem gamblers. The addictive nature of the machines can and does devastate the lives of many people, especially those from poorer communities. The Government need to step in and do more to help those struggling with addiction, and they need to seek out preventive measures.

What is of most concern is the fact that many of the most popular games on fixed odds betting terminals are categorised as B2 casino content and are not subject to the same restrictions on stakes and prizes as traditional slot machine games. With vulnerable people already at risk, the Government must take action and reconsider the B2 classification.

Graham Jones: I am fascinated by the hon. Lady's argument. She is a former member of the Scottish National party—I do not know whether she is still a member. The point was made to the Smith commission that Scotland wanted full devolution of powers over FOBTs, yet the party tabled no amendments to the Scotland Bill on the issue. It said nothing about it, and not one Scottish MP spoke about the matter during the passage of the Bill. For the SNP to criticise the Government is simply duplicitious.

Natalie McGarry: I admit that I find myself extremely disappointed that the hon. Gentleman makes a political point on an issue of great importance for people across the UK. Amendments were tabled on fixed odds betting terminals, but unfortunately, because of the constriction on the time given to the Bill, they could not be brought forward.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Natalie McGarry: No, I am sorry. There is a more important point to be made about the impact of fixed odds betting terminals on vulnerable communities, and I will thank the hon. Gentleman to sit down so that others can get to speak.

I urge the Government to consider the evidence from communities such as mine, and to take action to stop fixed odds betting terminals blighting people in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. We still have six more Members wanting to speak. Unless hon. Members play fair with each other, they will not all get to speak.

10.22 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. I want to mention my membership of the newly established all-party group.

There is no doubt that fixed odds betting terminals are causing concern, and indeed misery, across the country. Many people believe that they are having a negative impact on society, and there is a widespread view that the maximum stake of £100 is far too high. No other country in the developed world has £100-stake machines other than in highly supervised casino environments. Addiction to these high-stakes machines is blighting people's lives. It is of huge concern to me when I read reports that the number of betting shops is twice as high in the poorest areas of the UK. In Wales, more than £60 million vanished into fixed odds betting terminals last year, and there are 50 of them in the communities that I represent.
I have heard it said several times that fixed odds betting terminals are the crack cocaine of gambling, and that view has come from those engaged in support and counselling services—the very people who witness at first hand the misery caused, and who deal with the consequences of gambling addiction. There has been a significant rise in the amount of money gambled in fixed odds betting terminals in recent years, from £1.3 billion in 2010-11 to £1.6 billion in 2013-14, according to the Gambling Commission. That is not a light-hearted flutter. Punters are able to stake £300 per minute, or £18,000 an hour, and huge losses are quickly racked up. Gambling is a major cause of indebtedness, and commentators have indicated that betting on FOBTs alone equates to £675 for every Welsh adult each year.

It is time for the Government to commit themselves to tackling the issue seriously, and to reduce the maximum stake on the terminals. The starting point can be the review of stakes and prizes, which I believe is long overdue. The Government have stalled so far, and they must now signal that they are committed to taking action. There also is concern in many communities about betting shops clustering together on the high street, as we have heard. Many councils across England and Wales have called for the highest stake on fixed odds betting terminals to be cut to £2. They also want more local power to tackle some of the issues involved, as current planning and gambling laws are failing to protect our towns and high streets. I support that call from local government, as I believe that councils have the most awareness of the issues being created in their areas and should have more of a role in dealing with them, in partnership with communities.

Last year the Welsh Assembly passed a motion noting that “the growth in online gambling and fixed odds betting terminals has turned gambling in the UK into a multi-billion pound industry”, and urging the Welsh Government to “engage with the UK Government to discuss the devolution of greater powers” to tackle the issue.

Fixed odds betting terminals have allowed betting shops to introduce low staffing by pushing the money on to machines, so there is little or no interaction with anyone behind the counter. Figures show an increase in the number of times police have been called to betting shops over the past few years. We have all heard about individuals who easily become addicted, and about those who have lost their jobs and homes, and in some cases their families, as a result. I am sure that many hon. Members have read case studies in which people have testified clearly that the introduction of fixed odds betting terminals was a major factor in their addiction.

The consequence of doing nothing is unthinkable. The Government need to take decisive action, and I look forward to hearing today the Minister’s clear commitment outlining what the Government intend to do about the situation.

10.26 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and setting out an extremely detailed position. I declare an interest, having worked in addiction services as a psychologist for a number of years.

It is true that gambling has been a problem in society for many years. However, problem gamblers have told me that the fact that it is possible to gamble at all hours of the day and night exacerbates their difficulties. The description of fixed odds betting terminals as the crack cocaine of gambling has already been referred to. Patients have described addiction to those machines to me: the loss of large sums of money—hundreds of pounds in an instant—and the insufferable pain that relapses of such magnitude cause to families and children, who can become impoverished because of debt and instability.

Gambling, like many other addictions, also causes people to engage in behaviour that they might not otherwise. Those who have had periods of problem gambling have spoken about stealing from society and from their families to support their habit. That has an impact on social services and the criminal justice system.

The machines we are discussing are among the most addictive set-ups, because they involve repetitive behaviour, random reward and very high stakes, so problem gamblers are soon chasing their tail and trying to recoup money they have lost. The availability of the machines, virtually on the high street, is a cause for grave concern. People who are vulnerable to gambling addiction describe seeing them everywhere, finding it difficult to abstain, and relapsing even if they pop out to the shops for bread and milk.

I would argue that debt causes depression and mental health problems, and we have heard that at worst it can cause suicide. Those issues have an impact on the health service. Other types of gambling have been mentioned, such as the national lottery, but I have had discourse with patients who have stated that betting on the lottery is not as addictive, because they have to wait some time to get the result. The issue with these machines is their instantaneous and repetitive nature.

I will not speak for too long, because I wish everyone to be able to speak. I have significant concerns about the availability of these machines, the number of them in shops and the number of shops that have them, the level of the stakes and the level of supervision of vulnerable individuals. I ask the Minister to look at that.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Cameron: I cannot give way, because I want others to have the chance to speak.

I support a responsible gambling industry. We all like to have a flutter occasionally or pop into a casino on a night out—very occasionally, I add—but I urge the Minister to act. We need a balance. Vulnerable individuals are being gravely affected by these machines, and we need to address that through independent research and by developing safe and responsible policy.

10.31 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. May I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for leading the all-party group on this important issue?
A lot of ground has been covered in the debate, and I will not repeat other Members’ points. There is a pattern of bookmakers clustering in towns with high levels of deprivation. I speak from the perspective of Oldham, which the Office for National Statistics recently announced as the most deprived town in England. We see massive clustering there of not only bookmakers but payday loan shops, logbook loan shops and pawnbrokers. There is a cycle of people hoping they are going to win, losing and then pawning gold or something from their house to get more money, which they feed back into the machines.

I do not accept at all that the arguments on this issue are conflicted. It is true that these machines are being used for money laundering. In fact, during the course of this debate, constituents have sent me messages on Twitter in which they name bookmakers in Oldham that are quite open about the fact that these terminals are used for money laundering. Let’s face it, if someone wants to find a way of cleaning money, losing 10% of it through one of these machines is not a bad transactional cost.

The poorest in society are paying the price. In 2014, Oldhamers fed £29 million into 100 terminals, losing an estimated £5.5 million. That is money from the pockets of the people who can least afford it. I believe in people being able to make adult choices about these things, but we have seen that the bookmakers cannot be trusted to monitor and support people who have problems. I will give one example. In Chadderton precinct, I can be stood at the door of one Ladbrokes—a bookmakers that has four fixed odds betting terminals, which is the maximum it is allowed—and you, Sir Alan, can be stood as close as we are now, at the other Ladbrokes across the precinct, which has the same number of terminals. Bookmakers know the rules and will seek a way around them. Any sense that we can trust bookmakers, which are there to make money, to look after people who are falling into trouble and have problems is wrong. I do not trust them one bit.

We need proper and fair regulation that strikes a balance between treating people like adults and letting them make a conscious decision to spend the money they earn however they choose, and ensuring there are proper restrictions where bookmakers are taking liberties. I do not believe that the Local Government Association and the 100-odd local authorities that are supporting the proposals made under the fantastic leadership of Newham Council are wrong. They know their communities, and they are asking for more Government action and local accountability and support. That is the least we can do to address this very real modern problem.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I was delighted recently to be elected the vice-chair of the new all-party parliamentary group on FOBTs. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. We have witnessed today the common agreement among most in this Chamber that there is a particular problem with fixed odds betting terminals, which leads those who are vulnerable and seduced by the promise of easy money into all sorts of difficulty.

In my constituency and the neighbouring constituency, there are 135 FOBTs in bookmakers, where gamblers racked up losses of more than £5 million in the year to 2015. Those are two constituencies with some of the deepest pockets of poverty and deprivation in the entire United Kingdom, and they host 37 betting shops. That spend of more than £5 million is set to increase, and campaigners have expressed deep concern.

This problem affects some of the most vulnerable people in communities right across Scotland and the United Kingdom. People who struggle with gambling are drawn in by the glamour, the glitter and the promise of easy wins for the hollow thrill that these machines offer. They promise so much and deliver so little. We have heard today that vulnerable players are gambling as much as £100 in 20 seconds. Who can afford to sustain such losses without facing huge difficulties? It is no wonder that FOBTs are called the crack cocaine of the gambling world.

So far, the approach of the gambling industry has been about self-exclusion, but we know that that does not work. Research has shown there were around 22,000 self-exclusions in 2012-13, but more than two thirds of those who self-excluded cancelled the exclusion after the minimum period expired. As the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has pointed out, this is an issue of social justice. It is clear that the particular danger of these machines is that so much money can be lost so quickly. We cannot continue to stand aside and watch this problem develop. The casino industry has said in evidence to the Scottish Parliament that these machines are a hard form of gambling and are completely unsuitable, as we have heard today, for the unsupervised environment of a bookmakers shop.

We know that more research needs to be done to inform policy. We need play to be safe and enjoyable. The Responsible Gambling Trust has said there should be further studies so that we can target problem gamblers for machines in arcades and bingo halls—environments that have far higher levels of supervision than bookies. High-stakes gambling should take place only in highly supervised and regulated environments such as casinos. Our lax approach to FOBTs makes no sense, and it sticks out like a sore thumb compared with the equivalent regulations that apply in other European countries.

The Government promised to review stakes and prizes, but to date, they have failed to do so. The longer they prevaricate on this, the greater the damage that will be done to individuals, families, communities and, indeed, our economy. It is time for the Government to get their act together. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House and with colleagues in the new all-party parliamentary group to ensure that that happens.
using informed research. It is time the Government looked at the recommendations from the Responsible Gambling Trust on these machines.

We have heard today about inconvenient truths, and I would like to point out one such truth. We have all seen areas—usually ones with socially disadvantaged communities—that have bookie after bookie on each street corner. Despite what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, 55 of the most deprived boroughs in the United Kingdom have more than twice as many betting shops as those in the most affluent areas. That is an inconvenient truth. Too many local authorities feel powerless to stop that clustering, and the Scottish Government have taken action to tackle the issue through planning policy.

The betting industry has claimed that reducing the maximum stake from £100 to £2 would put betting shops at risk. It is a little known fact that like the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), I, too, once worked for betting shops—for two high street betting shops to put myself through university, working in just about every bookmakers in and around Glasgow. I can tell hon. Members categorically that there were no FOBTs at that time and that profitability for bookmakers was never an issue. There are now about four terminals in each shop.

I want to make a very important point. There has been an attempt to make political points in this debate, which is utterly inappropriate, but they have been raised and therefore must be answered. It was suggested that the Scottish National party did not table any amendments to the Scotland Bill with regard to these machines. I can tell the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who made that point, that that is utterly untrue. Perhaps he was so busy working with his Tory allies against more powers for Scotland that he missed it. The SNP tabled an amendment on 4 November 2015 to clause 45 on page 47 and it was not accepted. It is true that some power has been devolved under the Scotland Act 2016, but what the Scottish Government are not able to do with the powers is retrospectively re-examine the licences for the number of betting terminals that are already available. The way that the powers have been devolved will create confusion because there will, in effect, be a two-tier system.

We know that these machines are an issue. We know that we need to tackle it, and I ask the Minister—if one thing comes out of today’s debate—to seriously consider making the maximum stake £2 so that people can gamble with much more safety and responsibility, and so that they are less open to being preyed upon by these machines and mistaken about the riches that they offer.

10.41 am

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Alan, and I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing it; it is important and has certainly attracted a lot of support on both sides of the House.

I get a feeling of déjà vu when I come to these debates, particularly when I read the briefings from the Association of British Bookmakers—I think I could have written the opening sentence of the one I have here before I even received it. It says:

“There is no objective evidence from either past British Gambling Prevalence surveys or Government Health surveys that problem gambling levels in the UK are rising.”

We ask the question, “Is there a problem with FOBT machines?” and we get an answer to a completely different question. This has got to stop. That sort of propaganda does the industry no service whatsoever, and it is not fooling anyone.

Mark Field: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Efford: No, I will not, because of the time. I have argued consistently that if we are going to move ahead with any restrictions on FOBTs, we need to do so on the basis of evidence. People are calling for a £2 stake, but there is no evidence that that will be any safer than the existing stake.

However, in terms of the issues confronting us—as many hon. Members have said today—this is about location more than anything else. It is about the proximity of these machines to people who may be vulnerable to developing a gambling habit and to falling foul of their propensity to gamble too much by going into a betting shop and losing more money than they can afford to. There is no denying that a high proportion of these machines are in proximity to socially deprived communities, and a disproportionate amount of the money gambled in them comes from people on low incomes.

We hear the figures about the numbers of betting shops and all the rest of it, but it is clear that the trend in betting shops is for more money to come from B2 machines than from over-the-counter betting on horse-racing, dog-racing or football, as more of that sort of betting moves online. The growth in the gross gambling yield from machines has more than covered the decline in over-the-counter betting, with a combined gambling yield in 2014-15 of £3.74 billion, which is higher than in any previous year recorded by the Gambling Commission. The yield from the machines has been higher than that of over-the-counter betting every year since 2011-12 and now represents 54.2% of the combined gross gambling yield. The number of premises has been in decline since March 2014: there were 299 fewer premises on 30 September 2015 than on 31 March 2014. However, the number of B2 machines has increased year on year since records began in 2008-09 and has now reached 34,500.

We have a growing problem in our communities, given the proximity of FOBTs to locations where, I think, they do not belong. Anyone who has been to discuss these machines with me knows I loathe them. I do not think they belong in our high streets, but they are an unintended consequence of the Gambling Act 2005, and they are now there. Many businesses are predicated on the machines being there and if they were to be removed, people would lose their jobs and livelihoods, which is why we must move forward on the basis of evidence.

We are told that there is no problem, or that the problem lies elsewhere, or perhaps that the problem is not getting any worse, so we should not do anything about it—or a combination of all those arguments. However, the number of people in treatment, according to GamCare, is up by 39%, and the number of people who present problems as a result of playing FOBT roulette machines represent 26% of those who are in...
contact with GamCare. The number of calls from people addicted to FOBTs has gone up by 50% over the last five years.

I accept that there is a growing problem online. For the first time ever, the current figures show that the number of people presenting problems to GamCare from gambling online has increased over the number of people who are presenting problems from machine-related abuse. However, that can be explained by the increase in the number of people who are contacting GamCare and does not show a reduction in the problems from FOBTs. It shows an overall increase of people who are presenting with problems, and we have to address that issue going forward.

The Gambling Commission wrote to the Secretary of State in March 2015 about the conclusions of research carried out by the Responsible Gambling Trust and NatCen Social Research. It was based on people who gamble from accounts, because they can be tracked and their gambling behaviour can be followed. There were some interesting factors: 37% of the number of people who have loyalty cards or gambling accounts said that at some time, they had a problem with machine gambling—so a very high proportion are presenting with a problem.

The Gambling Commission says that the betting industry needs to increase the number of people who have accounts, so that detailed research can be carried out on what is going on with these machines. In the letter, it states:

"Consequently, we recommend encouraging operators to promote account-based play with the aim of increasing uptake significantly. If they succeed, playing anonymously might itself become a useful indicator of risk. If operators fail to make sufficient progress with promoting account-based play, then the case for making it mandatory would need very serious consideration."

Will the Minister therefore consider, in his next discussions with the betting industry, whether that should be made mandatory? If we are not making any progress, we are just not finding out what the problem is. We have the technology. We can do it and we need to make more progress in this area.

I say to the betting industry, "Make this move before it is forced on you, or you will lose the machines completely." I think that the time is coming when action will be taken to investigate money laundering—several hon. Members highlighted that this morning—and whether there is a money laundering problem.

There is concern about late-night betting and the fact that stakes on these machines tend to increase late at night. Should we review the opening hours and the rules that allow live racing from Hong Kong to be played and betting shops to stay open even later so that more people can play these machines? Should we mandate account-based play on these machines? Will the Minister support giving local authorities, once and for all, the powers they are demanding so they can control the proliferation of betting shops in our communities?

10.51 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on his passionate and thoughtful speech, which I think we all appreciated.

We have had a good, constructive and measured debate. All hon. Members who spoke took a balanced approach, and I am grateful for their informed and helpful contributions to this important debate. I appreciate that gambling is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland, so I shall concentrate on Great Britain.

I start by restating that the Government recognise the concerns around subcategory B2 gaming machines, or fixed odds betting terminals, as they are more commonly known. I assure the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members here that the Government take the issue seriously and keep it firmly under review. I appreciate the matters that have been raised and share the concerns that the hon. Gentleman highlighted. I have listened carefully to the comments made and take note of the strong views that have been expressed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on being elected to the chair of the new all-party parliamentary group on fixed odds betting terminals. I welcome its establishment and look forward to hearing from her and her group. Perhaps we can chat later about issues that we cannot cover here. I wish the group well in its work. This is a good opportunity to say that the Government are listening and looking at the whole issue, and will make strong recommendations in due course.

Mr Evennett: I cannot give way because I have so little time.

The Government are consistent in their approach to gambling legislation. Any changes in the industry must go hand in hand with enhanced player protection and a genuine commitment to social responsibility. We recognise public concern about the increased visibility of gambling and its potential harm, particularly as regards B2 gaming machines. That is why the Government introduced measures in April 2015 to end unsupervised high-stake play on those machines and gave more powers to local communities, requiring planning applications for new betting shops to be submitted to local authorities. That was a positive move to allow local authorities to make decisions in

In conclusion, I want to ask the Minister a few questions. The Government are carrying out a review of the £50 stake, which is why the triennial review has been delayed. When will the former be concluded and when will the triennial review of stakes and prizes start? What steps is he taking to investigate money laundering—several hon. Members highlighted that this morning—and whether there is a money laundering problem?
their area. The industry and the Gambling Commission introduced additional measures to further the social responsibility agenda at this time, and I will touch on that shortly.

The Government subsequently conducted an evaluation of the regulations on B2 gaming machines, which was published earlier this year. In summary, there has been a significant reduction in the number of stakes above £50 and there are indications that, as a result of these regulations, players on B2 gaming machines may now be making a more conscious choice to control their playing behaviour. In addition, the regulations led to an increase in the use of verified accounts, so the number of people able to track their play through an account and make more informed decisions as a result has increased. Although that is a positive step in the right direction, it is prudent to think carefully about what further player protection measures might be appropriate, particularly in relation to B2 gaming machines.

The coalition Government concluded the last triennial review of stakes and prizes in October 2013. They noted in their public response that the reintroduction of a triennial review system was appropriate and anticipated that the next formal review would conclude by 2016. We are aware that there is an expectation of a review this year, and we will set out our views on a review of the stakes and prizes on gaming machines in due course.

It is important to note the role of the Gambling Commission and the industry in the social responsibility agenda. The Association of British Bookmakers, the trade body representing the vast majority of high street bookmakers, introduced new measures for its members in 2014 under its code on social responsibility, which was further updated in 2015. We have made it clear to the industry that although these measures are welcome, they must be independently evaluated and built on to ensure they are fit for purpose.

The Gambling Commission updated its social responsibility provisions in its revised licence conditions and codes of practice, which were introduced in May 2015. This included requirements that customers of B2 gaming machines make an active choice on whether to set time and monetary limits to help them to control their play.

There is little time left, but I want to highlight the issues of money laundering and crime, particularly money laundering through B2 gaming machines. Crime in the gambling sector is obviously worrying, and we and the Gambling Commission are looking closely at the issue. I assure the hon. Member for Strangford and other hon. Members that the Government take the issue of money laundering in gambling very seriously indeed.

The Gambling Commission already requires operators to take measures to prevent money laundering through its licence conditions and codes of practice, and it will shortly announce its conclusions following a consultation on proposed regulatory changes to strengthen the fight against crime linked to gambling. In addition, the Treasury is planning to consult shortly on the EU’s fourth directive on money laundering, which will seek evidence about the extent of risk in certain sectors, including gambling, of money laundering practices. The combination of these measures represents the Government’s continued focus on preventing crime in gambling, including money laundering.

Time is extremely short, but I re-emphasise the fact that the Government recognise the concerns expressed. I welcome the constructive comments of the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), but time does not allow me to answer all his questions, so I will write to him with my answers. I am grateful for his constructive contribution to the debate. Much has been done, but much more needs to be done. We will certainly look at the matter carefully and monitor it to ensure there is protection and social responsibility, which, as the debate has highlighted, are so important in the gambling industry.

10.59 am

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and right hon. and hon. Members for their significant contributions. A significant proportion—higher than for any other product—of users of fixed odds betting terminals are problematic gamblers, and that has come out of this debate. Fixed odds betting terminals are the crack cocaine of gambling. They are totally addictive, destroy lives and focus on the vulnerable. What must we do? We must reduce the number of machines from four per shop to one, and we must reduce the maximum stake from £100 to £2. We must remove the table game content from fixed odds betting terminals, because the pace of the games is faster than in real casinos. We must reduce the spend frequency from 20 seconds to 60. Those are some of the things we can do.

I welcome the new all-party group on fixed odds betting terminals, and I thank hon. Members for their contributions. The Minister can be sure that Members here will return to look for change through legislation.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Lewy Body Dementia

11 am

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Could hon. Members leave quietly? We are about to start the next debate. I would be grateful if you could remove yourselves swiftly and quietly.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered awareness and recognition of dementia with Lewy bodies.

It is a pleasure to have secured this debate, under your chairmanship, Sir Alan, on dementia with Lewy bodies, or DLB as it is known, and as I will refer to it henceforth. May I start by congratulating the Minister on his very significant achievement on Sunday in completing the London marathon? Well done to him for the moneys that he raised for his charities. In the same vein, it is with some pride that I declare that I was recently appointed an ambassador for the Lewy Body Society, a charity whose mission is to raise awareness of DLB among the general public and educate those in the medical profession and decision-making positions about all aspects of the disease, as well as to support and fund research into it. For 10 years, the LBS has raised awareness, provided support and information, and funded research into DLB, which is the second most frequent cause of age-related neurodegenerative dementia. I am delighted that some of those involved in the campaign are in Parliament today.

It might be helpful if I say a little about DLB. Lewy bodies are abnormal aggregates of protein that develop inside nerve cells in Parkinson’s disease, DLB and some other disorders. They were first discovered by Dr Frederick Lewy as far back as 1912, but incredibly, despite that, DLB was virtually unknown until the late 1980s, when advances in techniques made it possible to identify Lewy bodies under a microscope.

Every case of DLB is as individual as the person living with it. Different people show different combinations of symptoms. At present, a diagnosis of DLB can be confirmed only by autopsy, but a careful clinical evaluation of the patient and their symptoms can in many cases form the basis for making a reasonably confident lifetime diagnosis. There are also technological advances in imaging and research into biomarkers that it is hoped will result in earlier and more accurate diagnoses.

The central symptom of DLB is dementia, which is defined as progressive mental decline that is serious enough to interfere with normal daily activities such as eating, washing, dressing, cooking, shopping and managing finances. Significant memory loss may not develop until later. There may also be problems with executive function in respect of attention, problem solving and spatial awareness. This can easily be mistaken for Alzheimer’s disease.

Additional symptoms that may lead to a diagnosis of probable DLB are, first, disturbances in REM—rapid eye movement—sleep. The impact of that on a family carer is terrible. The carer is unable to sleep themselves and therefore becomes unable to support the person with DLB. REM sleep is the deep sleep in which people dream. A certain amount of good, REM sleep is necessary for people to function efficiently. DLB sufferers may talk in their sleep or act out their dreams. Sometimes that is so marked that the sufferer falls off the bed.

Secondly, there is severe sensitivity to neuroleptic drugs. Sometimes people with DLB are prescribed neuroleptic—antipsychotic—drugs to help with their symptoms. That should be done only by someone experienced in the illness, as many of those drugs can be extremely harmful or even fatal to people with DLB. That problem has been recorded.

Despite the importance of correct diagnosis and treatment of DLB, the disease is often not recognised, identified or diagnosed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing a very important issue to the House. The week before last, I had a debate in this Chamber on dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, which a number of hon. Members attended. Dementia has the potential to be the defining condition of this age. Does he think that there should be more research and more partnerships between parts of Government, between universities and between businesses to find a cure for this disease? By finding a cure, we will help to ensure that diagnosis happens earlier, as it should.

Conor McGinn: The hon. Gentleman, whom I would feel comfortable referring to as my hon. Friend, makes the point with his usual eloquence, and I could not agree more. I will say a little more later about some of the research being done.

Dementia is not just about memory. The supportive symptoms of DLB are fainting, falls, problems with swallowing and continence, delusions, depression and hallucinations, including hearing, smelling or feeling things. Some people have benign or pleasant hallucinations of, for example, children or animals. A sense of the presence of someone who is not there is common in many patients. Other sufferers see frightening and disturbing things and may react to them by displaying challenging behaviours that prove very difficult for the family to manage.

More than 700,000 people in the UK have dementia. That number is projected to rise to 1 million by 2021 unless significant advances are made; indeed, the figure is expected to double in the next 20 years. As the hon. Gentleman said, the issue now touches the lives of virtually every family in the United Kingdom. It is a big issue for the NHS, but also for all local authorities and, indeed, all public services. In the UK, approximately 100,000 people are thought to suffer from DLB. At least 5% of people aged 85 or older are thought to suffer from this little known, but not uncommon, and devastating disease.

It is important to note that diagnosis rates of dementia across the country are low and incredibly varied. In the UK, less than half of people living with dementia are diagnosed, let alone differentiations being made between the types of dementia.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate to the House today. He says that diagnosis rates across the country are patchy, but will he acknowledge that there has been good progress in general with dementia diagnosis,
and that there is increasing awareness through dementia-friendly communities and so on? There is, however, a poor understanding of this type of dementia, and it is vital that we move ahead in informing the public and clinicians about not only dementia, but the various types of dementia.

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree with him and will come later to some of the issues that he raises. I come to this debate in a spirit of co-operation, recognising the good work that has been done, and looking at how we can work effectively together to continue and develop it.

It surprised me that officially there are no data on the diagnosis of DLB. There is, however, an ongoing National Institute for Health Research-funded study examining diagnosis rates of DLB in the NHS. Current findings indicate that the rates are more than 50% lower than expected, with considerable variation, again, between services. I am sure that the Minister will agree that early and accurate diagnosis is of great importance and can allow more people to have as good a quality of life as possible for as long as possible.

As always, it is the human experience of the disease that expresses fully its awfulness and tragedy. My constituent Jacqui Cannon, who is chief executive of the Lewy Body Society, told me:

“In 2007 my darling dad was diagnosed with dementia with Lewy bodies. My father had been behaving increasingly strangely for a few months and I took him to the doctors. He was fortunate that he had a GP who was responsible for GP training in Greater Manchester and who made an immediate diagnosis. He was then referred to an old age consultant, he had an appointment almost immediately due to the ability to be able to pay as a private patient. The diagnosis was confirmed. The GP used him as a case study at a GP conference to put emphasis on the importance of patient centered care. My father had other underlying health issues and the consultant liaised very closely with his other doctors. This does not happen for everyone.

Knowing what I now know; my father had all the hallmark symptoms of DLB. He had hallucinations, he was totally muddled and could not distinguish between what was on the television and what was actually going on around...We struggled to care for my father at home. I was taking over from my mother when I finished working full time...for a major...company. He was very well cared for in a local EMU unit The caring doesn’t stop at this point and I visited every day after work and missed one day in 2 years, often only arriving home at 9:00pm each day. I did a google search and The Lewy Body Society appeared, I have been involved since that point.”

One of the charity’s founders, Ashley Bayston, said:

“In 2005 my precious mother was diagnosed with dementia with Lewy bodies. She had been behaving increasingly strangely for 5 years during which my father took her to dozens of doctors before, at my father’s suggestion, neurologist 26 made a diagnosis of DLB. I have heard this story so many times in the past decade. The carer, frustrated by the doctors’ prevarication and inability to admit they don’t know, does extensive search and ends up suggesting the diagnosis.”

Ashley also uses that phrase:

“Knowing what I now know, my mother had all the hallmark symptoms of DLB. She had terrifying hallucinations, she was totally muddled”;

and she says that her mother could not tell the difference between reality and illusion. She continues:

“One time she told me that she had seen me on the telly the night before and liked my outfit. She often thought that there was a cat in the house. Years before she had lost her sense of smell and at the start of her illness suffered from severe...hypotension and constipation. By the time my mother was diagnosed she was in the final stages of DLB. Totally bedridden and helpless and in and out of consciousness. Fortunately my father was able to keep her at home tended round the clock by angel nurses who treated her with the love and respect they would give their own mothers. This is very unscientific but I do believe that it was love that kept my mother alive after the doctors wrote her off. My parents had been married for 67 years when Mum died.”

There are, however, some grounds for optimism. It should be a source of pride that the United Kingdom has played a significant role in the recognition and management of the disorder. Newcastle University is a centre of excellence in the field and the UK is a major force in understanding the disorder. Indeed, Professor Ian McKeith from Newcastle, who is internationally recognised as the world’s leading expert in DLB, is the founding president of the Lewy Body Society. That is important because the society’s objective is to bring support and expertise over and above what is offered elsewhere. Additionally, the existence of an organisation dedicated solely to DLB validates those affected by the disease and gives them a sense of community. It is difficult for people to understand this complex and frightening disease unless they have experienced its effects.

Thirty years ago, the concept of DLB simply did not exist. People with the disorder were misdiagnosed and mismanaged to the severe detriment of all concerned. However, the situation has improved significantly. Many patients are now recognised as having the condition early and accurately, and receive appropriate treatment and care, but as always, and particularly in this case, much more needs to be done.

In the previous Parliament, the Prime Minister released “Prime Minister’s challenge on dementia 2020”, a five-year plan to improve dementia care and the understanding of dementia in England. The document set out the welcome ambition for England to be “the best country in the world for dementia care and support and for people with dementia, their carers and families to live; and...the best place in the world to undertake research into dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases.”

The progress made is welcome; the £150 million Dementia Research Institute is set to be up and running by 2020. It is also welcome that more NHS and care staff have had specialist training in the development of dementia, but we are still a long way from getting to grips with the serious issue of DLB, which has often been neglected.

The National Institute for Health Research has supported some DLB research, including the DIAMOND-Lewy study on diagnostic rates and management, run jointly by the University of Cambridge and Newcastle University. However, despite the increase in funding and commitments from the Government, funding for research into DLB has been limited, and although the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issues guidance and guidelines about the management of dementia, and the Royal Collage of Nursing has done much to raise practitioner awareness, there are few specific provisions for DLB. The lack of funding available and the lack of guidance around DLB remains a concern.

The fact that DLB is not mentioned once in the entire 2020 dementia strategy means that there is a lack of funding available for the disease. The Lewy Body Society, for example, currently receives no funding from central Government. As a first step, will the Minister consider...
[Conor McGinn]

updating “Prime Minister’s challenge on dementia 2020” so that it specifically mentions DLB? Will he also incorporate plans to fund and help sufferers of DLB in the overall strategy? That would mean that the Department of Health could establish training programmes about DLB for GPs and other healthcare professionals. The NHS could then promote the message that, like cancer, dementia is a spectrum of diseases; that would make it easier to diagnose. It would also mean that research could be placed on a sustainable national footing and draw on existing expertise and experience. Recognition of DLB in the strategy will help awareness and lead to better treatment for those who suffer from it, because the more people who know, the fewer people who suffer.

The announcement that I was to become an ambassador for the Lewy Body Society received some media attention, and I received a phone call from my cousin, Patrick McGinn, whose father, my great-uncle Basil, had died some months previously. Like most of our extended family, I thought that Basil had Alzheimer’s or dementia, or was going senile or whatever particular euphemism we had occasion to use when we spoke about him. In fact, Basil had dementia with Lewy bodies. My own family has been touched by the awfulness and tragedy of the disease, and I did not know it. How many others are in a similar position, either suffering from DLB or caring for someone with it? For them and for my uncle Basil, I ask the Government for recognition to aid increased awareness of dementia with Lewy bodies, so that we can begin to help the many people affected by it.

11.18 am

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) on securing the debate and raising the important issue of awareness and recognition of dementia with Lewy bodies. I thank him for his kind personal remarks about my weekend activities, when I ran the London marathon. He is probably unaware that the Chair and I also have a sporting connection. Many years ago, we took part in a charity penalty shoot-out between English and Scottish MPs at Ibrox stadium in front of 50,000 people. That is not the normal size of crowd that the Chair or I play football before, but we enjoyed the occasion immensely. A sporting connection runs through us all.

I congratulate the hon. Member for St Helens North on his recent appointment as ambassador for the Lewy Body Society, and on the way in which he has raised the debate and brought the issue to the Chamber. As always, I thank colleagues in the House who show an interest. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Foyle (Mark Durkan) as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) for their attendance.

I agree with the hon. Member for St Helens North about Lewy body dementia touching many families. My wife’s uncle has recently been diagnosed, and I would like to thank him and all the other members of the family who are caring for her uncle as well as the staff at the care home and social services, who have also been involved. That brings home that dementia and its variants is something that many families can expect to experience. The debate is therefore timely and raises issues that are important to all of us.

The hon. Gentleman set out well some of the symptoms of DLB and issues relating to diagnosis. I cannot better that; I will not describe the symptoms because he did that extremely well. Diagnosis can be difficult. A GP can do some simple checks to see whether there is a chance that someone could have dementia and then refer them to a memory clinic or other specialist clinic if necessary. At the clinic, the person will be asked about symptoms and have a physical check-up and memory test, and they may also have blood tests and brain scans. The results of those checks and tests will give the doctor a good idea as to whether the symptoms are caused by dementia with Lewy bodies, another type of dementia or something else entirely. It is complex and, as the hon. Gentleman said, it is reckoned that perhaps 4% of all recorded dementia may be accounted for as DLB, but it may in fact account for 10% of all cases because it tends to be mistakenly diagnosed as another condition.

That brings up the question of research, which I will turn to before more general remarks about our approach to dementia generally because the hon. Gentleman raised that as a matter of some importance. The 2020 challenge sets out the aspiration to see research funding in dementia double by 2025 and relates to funding from all sources, including industry and charity. Through initiatives including Dementias Platform UK, the Dementia Research Institute, Join Dementia Research, the international drug discovery fund and the accelerated access review, we are creating a highly attractive environment for industry investment, including new targets for drug development. We also anticipate that greater public awareness achieved through the 2020 challenge and charity campaigns will lead to increased philanthropic donation to research charities.

On how particular funding is determined and which research projects are selected, funding panels made up of academic researchers, subject experts and patient and public advisers advise on decisions as to which projects should be funded within NIHR funding programmes, within the remit of each programme, determined by quality. On DLB specifically, as the hon. Gentleman said, the National Institute for Health Research funds the NIHR Newcastle biomedical research unit in Lewy body dementia, which is part of the NIHR dementia translational research collaboration, TRCD. However, other biomedical research units and centres that make up TRCD also do research in the area, including the NIHR Maudsley biomedical research unit. That accelerates the translation of dementia research from basic science to early-phase clinical trials, focusing on the three common late-onset dementias—Alzheimer’s, vascular and Lewy body dementia—and on fronto-temporal dementia with motor neurone disease.

Other major NIHR investments include improving the diagnosis and management of neurodegenerative dementia of Lewy body type in the NHS DIAMOND-Lewy study, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. The chief investigator, to whom we pay tribute, is Professor John O’Brien of the University of Newcastle. Funding for that major programme of work is just over £1.9 million, which lasts from January 2014 to December 2018, and it is expected to result in an increase in the number of dementia with Lewy bodies cases diagnosed and to improve their care considerably.
We are very keen to see NIHR research programmes and to fund high quality proposals in dementia where those are within remit. In terms of future spending, there will be announcements on the Dementia Research Institute in due course about competition for membership. The content of the scientific programme will depend partly on the composition and directorship of the DRI, which is to be determined by competition, but I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman’s specific pleas in relation to DLB are passed through into the process and go to the Minister who is primarily responsible.

Let me say a little about further recognition of dementia into which this fits, because that is important. The hon. Gentleman was gracious enough to recognise that this issue continues to be of the highest priority for the Government. It is not a party matter in any way, as he made clear. In 2015, the Prime Minister set out his vision for dementia over the next five years, with his challenge on dementia 2020. The implementation plan, which was published last month, sets out the actions that partners—including those across health and care—will take to ensure that those commitments are delivered.

An accurate diagnosis of dementia is key to helping people live well with the condition. As my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd said, more people now receive a diagnosis of dementia than ever before and it is reassuring to know that in the constituency of the hon. Member for St Helens North, 87.9% of people with dementia have received a diagnosis, which is significantly above the national average. I commend and praise the relentless efforts of those providing care and support to people with dementia. Again, he set out a moving case in relation to that.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In the context of the Prime Minister’s commitment in challenge on dementia 2020, which is very welcome, he has committed to roll out a national standard for tailored packages of post-diagnosis support. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that, when that standard emerges, it will be articulate enough to address DLB specifically?

Alistair Burt: It would be best for me to take specific requests on DLB back to the Department. I will write to the hon. Member who has taken part in the debate with a response to that in due course. I hear and understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but let me reflect and come back.

I return to those who are looking after people. The families and carers and the hundreds and thousands of health and social care staff who work tirelessly to deliver high quality, compassionate, personalised care always require and deserve a mention in any discussion of dementia and those involved.

The work we have done to improve diagnosis rates has meant that more people than ever can access the advice, care and support they need to help them, their carers and families live well with the condition. We now need to focus our efforts on reducing local variation in diagnosis rates and the care and support that people require. The diagnosis is only the start. We also need to ensure that every person diagnosed with dementia, and their carers, receive meaningful care following their diagnosis. To be clear, the needs of the person with dementia, their family and carers, should be at the heart of everything we do. We therefore want to see more consistent provision of innovative and high-quality dementia care delivered in a way that is personalised and appropriate to the specific needs of the individual. I have been fortunate enough to see at first hand some of the high-quality dementia care provided across the country and have been impressed with the culturally sensitive care and support, catering for a diverse range of dementia needs.

We also want people across England to have a greater understanding of dementia and what they can do to make a real difference to people living with the condition. I am pleased to say that there are now more than 1.5 million dementia friends in England and the Alzheimer’s Society is working to deliver an additional 3 million by 2020. I am grateful to the representative who talked to me and gave me some basic advice to help me become a dementia friend. In St Helens North there are reckoned to be over 6,500 dementia friends. Furthermore, local work such as that undertaken by the Dementia Action Alliance, the Life Story Network and National Museums Liverpool in neighbouring cities is helping support people, their families and their carers live well with dementia in their local communities.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the nature of the debate and for being so specific, mentioning the work of the Lewy Body Society. I note that when he was appointed as an ambassador to it, he was quoted as wanting “a commitment from the Department of Health to ensure that recognition for DLB is an integral part of strategies to tackle dementia.”

I assure him that we want everyone diagnosed with dementia to receive meaningful care following their diagnosis, and that very much includes those with dementia with Lewy bodies.

The fact that the hon. Gentleman has taken the trouble to raise the issue for debate, that he did so in the way in which he did and that he paid tribute to those who work in this area has done an immense amount just in this debate to raise the profile of Lewy body dementia and to secure commitment and recognition from the Department.

As a result of the debate, I will write to the hon. Gentleman with some answers to the specific questions he asked. I thank him for the way in which he did that and I hope that, through what we have said this morning, our commitment to dementia—to those suffering from it, to those who care for them and to all those involved in its research and treatment—has been made clear. This is a Parliament-wide commitment, which we all share. I am pleased to have had the chance to answer the debate.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Antibiotics: Research and Development

2.30 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered incentivising research and development of new antibiotics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in this hall, Mr Evans. I am delighted to have secured the opportunity once again to introduce a debate on the increasingly urgent issue of antibiotic resistance. I first debated this issue back in October 2014, when I discussed the wide-ranging causes of antimicrobial resistance—AMR—and our urgent need to address the problem head-on.

Today, I will focus on the most pressing elements of the issue: the need to incentivise more research and development of new antibiotics so that we have new drugs coming on stream to meet our future needs. Before I discuss the development of a new funding model for antibiotics, I will briefly explain exactly why AMR is such a pressing issue. This is far from being a problem only for the future; it came as a shock when, before my last debate, doctors in my constituency told me that patients were already experiencing the devastating effects of AMR. Across the country, we are seeing an increasing number of patients in intensive care units who have resistant infections, meaning that there is no effective treatment available. Antimicrobial-resistant infections already kill some 50,000 people every year across Europe and north America, but sadly the reality of AMR today is nothing compared with the nightmarish scenario of the future. The initial paper of Lord O’Neill’s AMR review concluded that “a continued rise in resistance by 2050 would lead to 10 million people dying every year”.

That is more than the number of people who will die of cancer, and it is double the number of people who will die of cholera, diabetes, diarrhoea, measles, tetanus and road traffic accidents combined. Some might say that AMR is the biggest threat to mankind.

We have also been warned that the secondary health effects of AMR could result in a return to the dark ages of medicine. Our national health service and other modern health systems across the world rely heavily on antibiotics. When surgery is undertaken, for example, patients are given antibiotics to reduce the risk of infection. In a world in which antibiotics do not work, surgery will become far more dangerous. Many routine procedures, such as hip operations, will become too risky for many elderly patients, depriving them of their mobility and their active lives. Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy suppress patients’ immune systems, making them more susceptible to infections. Without effective antibiotics to prevent those infections, such life-saving treatment could no longer be an option. As Jeremy Farrar, a director of the Wellcome Trust, said:

“We are sleepwalking back into a time where something as simple as a grazed knee...will start to claim lives.”

Thankfully, medical opinion is, in the vast majority of cases, that the looming global crisis can be avoided if we take action, but it must be taken sooner rather than later. It is encouraging that there have been numerous positive developments since this topic was last debated in Westminster Hall. The £20-million Fleming fund was announced in March 2015, and it will support the delivery of action plans for AMR laboratory surveillance across the world, with a particular focus on low-income countries. Just before the 2015 general election, I was delighted that the Conservative party manifesto said:

“Antibiotic resistance is a major health risk so we will continue to lead the global fight against it, taking forward the recommendations of the independent review launched by the Prime Minister”.

I promise that that will be my last reference to party politics, because this issue has the support and attention of every party in this House. AMR is such a huge issue that it transcends party politics.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate on an important subject. Before he completely passes on from party politics—I agree that this issue cuts across all party politics—does he agree that the nature of antibiotics, and the fact that we want to use them as little as possible when they are discovered or invented, drives against the free market system, in which new products and services are used as much as possible? For that reason, the Government and the public sector must take action, because to be effective, antibiotics should be used not as much as possible but as little as possible.

Julian Sturdy: I agree with the hon. Lady’s last comments. She is right that antibiotics must be used as a last resort, which is why, as I will say, the current funding model for antibiotic research is broken, and why we have to correct it.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I take the point raised by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), with which my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) has just agreed. This is also about having the right diagnostic tests to ensure that people who need antibiotics receive them while ensuring that they are no longer handed out like sweets.

Julian Sturdy: My hon. Friend is right. Later in my speech, I will discuss the model of how antibiotics are used across the country. It is chilling how antibiotics are used in different parts of the country. Testing to find out resistance to certain antibiotics is also important before any antibiotics needed are used. It is not just a matter of how we bring new antibiotics to market, which can take 15 years; it is also about how we protect our existing armoury of antibiotics to buy us time for those new antibiotics to reach the market.

The £1 billion Ross fund was announced by the Chancellor in the spending review of November 2015. Some £350 million will be spent fighting AMR by strengthening surveillance of drug resistance and laboratory capacity in developing countries, and by delivering the new global AMR innovation fund with China. In January 2016, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, 85 major pharmaceutical and biotech companies agreed to the declaration on combating antibiotic resistance, which demonstrates the industry’s willingness to take up the challenge. Earlier this month, the Chancellor addressed the issue once again by highlighting the importance of AMR at the International Monetary Fund in
Washington DC. He confirmed what the industry has long been telling us: that the reimbursement models for antibiotics are broken. I entirely agree that a global overhaul is required, and I will focus on that issue today.

Lord O’Neill has also backed proposals to change the way we develop new antibiotics for the marketplace. We all look forward to the AMR review publishing its final set of recommendations in the months ahead, and the Minister might be able to give us a firmer timescale for that review. In my previous debate on antibiotic resistance, I raised the key issues at stake in the growing challenge of this continuing problem. We know that using antibiotics inappropriately increases resistance and the risk associated with routine treatments. In the last debate on the subject, I mentioned that in India, many prescriptions are purchased over the counter to treat a wide variety of unsuitable illnesses, often with no professional diagnosis. Such practices compound the problem. However, it is greatly encouraging that many countries around the world have now woken up to the impending disaster that we could face if we simply do nothing.

As a consequence, things are starting to move forward, which must be seen as positive. However, the central challenge of getting new antibiotics on stream remains. As the Chancellor said earlier this month and as we have heard, the current funding model is no longer fit for purpose. The O’Neill report makes it clear that it typically takes about 15 years for an antibiotic to go from the initial research stage to final delivery to the marketplace. For that to happen, a large amount of money is required up front to fund the project, at a stage when the company has absolutely no idea whether the drug will succeed. Astonishingly, only about 2% of products, or one in 50 proposed new antibiotics, successfully make it to the marketplace. In the vast majority of cases, large sums of money are invested with no financial return whatever.

Although to a certain extent that is true of the manufacture of all new drugs, the problem is far worse for antibiotics. Conditions such as cancer or diabetes often closely follow demographic trends, so new drugs are also used as the medication of choice for cancer or diabetes, as they are more effective than the older prescriptions. In the case of antibiotics, however, generic products can treat infections as well as new drugs for less money, except where there is resistance. Furthermore, in the attempt to slow the development of resistance, new antibiotics are often held back and are prescribed only when everything else has failed. That is the right thing to do. The market for new antibiotics is therefore limited to a small section of patients, as new drugs are used only when existing drugs are no longer effective. They will be required as a first-line treatment only many years after their introduction, by which time their exclusive patents have often expired.

That may explain why so many pharmaceutical companies have, sadly, exited the market over the years. Of the 20 pharmaceutical companies that were the main suppliers of new antibiotics back in the 1990s, only four remain. Furthermore, only five new classes of antibiotics have been discovered in the last 15 years. Sadly, some companies are waiting for resistance to rise before they even explore the viability of investing in a new product, which is clearly not in the best interest of patient health and wellbeing, or of the future of health care as we know it. Under the current funding model, the profitability of any new drug depends entirely on...
At first glance, that might not seem surprising, but more antibiotics in December than they do in August. Prescriptions by doctors is almost double the national most. In Clacton-on-Sea, the number of antibiotic prescriptions being given is rising at an alarming rate in Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Essex are prescribing the key findings are that there is a widening gap in antibiotic prescription. For example, doctors in London prescribe earlier in an intervention.

The charity has three key missions: first, to develop a new antibiotic therapy by the early 2020s; secondly, to educate both practitioners and the public alike about the threat of AMR; and thirdly, to provide support to patients with antibiotic-resistant infection. In less than two years, ANTRUK has raised over £400,000, and it is working towards a programme of developing antibiotic resistance breakers. This technique reverses the resistance and extends the life of existing antibiotics. ANTRUK believes that is the best hope of finding a way of breaking AMR in the short term. Basically, it is a way of buying us more time to develop new antibiotic drugs.

Charities such as ANTRUK are ideally placed to work with both the Government and large pharmaceutical companies in finding a solution to AMR. However, to maximise its effectiveness, ANTRUK needs our support. Despite being a new player in the industry, it is already demonstrating the innovative ways in which it can help to inform public policy on AMR, an issue touched on earlier in an intervention.

In co-operation with an analytic database company, ANTRUK has published a heat map of England that shows how the number of antibiotic prescriptions varies across the country. I am happy to show this map to interested Members. The results are absolutely fascinating. The research demonstrates that the number of antibiotic prescriptions being given is rising at an alarming rate in some of the most hard-pressed areas of England. The key findings are that there is a widening gap in antibiotic prescription. For example, doctors in London prescribe 20% less antibiotics than doctors in the north, and doctors in the most hard-pressed coastal towns in Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Essex are prescribing the most. In Clacton-on-Sea, the number of antibiotic prescriptions by doctors is almost double the national average. Furthermore, doctors prescribe almost 60% more antibiotics in December than they do in August. At first glance, that might not seem surprising, but many illnesses treated by antibiotics are not seasonal in nature. Is this another example of the potential misuse of antibiotics? On a positive note, it appears that the number of prescriptions peaked at 3.4 million in 2012 and has since dropped by more than 5%.

Such research is absolutely vital in the fight against AMR. It demonstrates how charities can complement the vital work of Government and the large pharmaceutical companies. Consequently, I would be most grateful to the Minister if he would agree to meet me and a delegation from ANTRUK to discuss how the Government can assist it with its mission to combat AMR. A key request is for a relatively small amount of funding from the £12 billion foreign aid budget to assist ANTRUK’s work, which could have a revolutionary impact across the world, particularly in developing countries.

I have already had one such meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), who has responsibility for public health, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is also my neighbour. Sadly, he could not attend today’s debate. That meeting proved to be immensely helpful, and I hope that the Minister will agree that charities, and not just the large pharmaceutical companies, have a key role to play in the fight against AMR.

Ultimately, antibiotics are often woefully undervalued, in the sense that their price often bears no resemblance to their overall value to society. Since Dame Sally Davies published her report on the threat of AMR back in 2013, there has been an unprecedented focus on the need to change how we tackle the threat of resistance. However, this concern and the widespread discussion of the topic need to be translated into action if we are to tackle the problem head-on.

Antibiotics are the fire department of our health service, and they need a better funding model. We do not pay our firefighters only when they put out a fire; nor do we think that it is a poor return on our investment when they are not in action. Instead, we ensure that we have a well-funded fire service in place at all times, to protect us in our hour of need. It is a service that we all take for granted, and exactly the same is true of our use of antibiotics.

It is probably fair to say that whoever discovers the cure for cancer will go down in history, but the pioneer who prevents a return to the dark ages of medicine through a new antibiotic discovery will probably be forgotten. Nevertheless, the clock is now ticking, and producing positive noises without taking action is simply not an option. I hope the Minister will agree to publish a clear timetable on reforming the antibiotic funding model, and I also ask him to meet me and representatives of ANTRUK, who I know have so much to offer in furthering the process of making our next great discoveries.

I hope that the Minister will work with Departments across Government to give due consideration to the idea of allowing a greater proportion of our generous foreign aid budget to be used in this vital area of study. We have the potential to be world leaders in this field. I have heard, as other Members probably have, reports that Sweden is exploring options for changing its funding model. We must not let Sweden steal a march on us.

It was British innovation that ushered in the golden era of medical discovery. Without action, we risk squandering that legacy for future generations, who...
may not have the benefit of antibiotics as we know them today. It is absolutely right that global action is required to solve what is ultimately a global problem, as drug-resistant bacteria do not recognise national boundaries. We have the opportunity to safeguard the future of medicine as we know it. To achieve that goal, we must both set the standard and rise to the challenge, and hopefully the rest of the world will follow us.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Did I see four people standing just now? Good. I intend to call those making the winding-up speeches from 3.30 pm. If everybody else could keep to about seven minutes for their speeches, that would mean everybody would get a fair share of time.

2.57 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans, and I certainly hope to follow your request without any difficulty; I do not expect to speak for too long.

I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this debate and on his comprehensive introductory speech. As a former firefighter myself, I had to chuckle a little bit about his fire analogy. Also, in the main Chamber now, new clause 20 of the Policing and Crime Bill, which deals with the role of the fire brigade under police and crime commissioners, is being debated. So there is a little bit of continuity between the two Chambers in that regard.

I also speak as a member of the all-party group on global tuberculosis and because my previous constituency of Poplar and Canning Town had the highest TB rate in the UK and one of the highest TB rates in the world, despite being situated in central London. I congratulate Barts Health NHS Trust, which includes the Royal London hospital, as well as the local authorities of Tower Hamlets and Newham, on the work that they have done in tackling that problem and the efforts that they are making to address these issues.

I am very grateful to Dan Sharp, the policy adviser provided through the Ross fund, the Government’s aid strategy, published last November, and created the related Ross Fund. Will that be used to address AMR? I note the request by the hon. Member for York Outer to lead a delegation of pharmaceutical companies that he is associated with.

I have questions for the Minister. When will funding provided through the Ross fund be allocated? Investment in TB diagnostics, drugs and vaccines through the fund is critical, as he knows. Which Department is ultimately responsible for the commitments pledged through the Ross fund, given that the remit is cross-departmental? I assume from the Minister’s presence here today that his Department will lead.

The Government recognise the serious threat posed by TB within the frame of AMR. In addition to the Ross fund, the Government’s aid strategy included the creation of a global challenges fund. Will that be used to address AMR? Can the Minister provide further details on that? Finally, what discussions have the Government had with pharmaceutical companies on addressing the challenge of AMR? I note the request by the hon. Member for York Outer to lead a delegation of pharmaceutical companies that he is associated with. What does the Minister say about that?

The Government have provided a positive lead on this matter, and more information will be reassuring. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments and those of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and of the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), in response to contributions to the debate.

3.3 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. Like my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), I have also held a debate—an Adjournment debate—on the subject of AMR to look at the use of antibiotics in primary care. The UK, as we all know, is the envy of the
On that basis, and taking all the evidence into consideration, it is vital that the Government do whatever they can to tackle this major threat. If I may be so bold, I will suggest to the Minister that in addition to measures such as incentivising research and development of new antimicrobials, the Government should consider improving access to diagnostic tests in primary care, and focusing research and development funding on diagnostics as well as on drug development.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak to speak in this debate, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this debate on an increasingly important issue that we are more aware of today than ever before. He set out a comprehensive scene, which has been most helpful. He covered many of the issues involved, which will probably take away from other contributions, but he added to the debate, and that is the important thing.

The discovery of antibiotics revolutionised healthcare, allowing for the effective treatment of illnesses, including TB, that had previously been commonplace and frequently deadly. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to the increase in TB in his constituency, which I am aware of because of events that have taken place here in Westminster. The incidence of TB in the United Kingdom has risen sharply in certain areas, and there is a tie-in between how we address TB and HIV. It is important that we look at the bigger picture.

Pathogens have evolved to resist new drugs. Resistance has increasingly become a problem as the pace at which new antibiotics are discovered has slowed and antibiotic use, including misuse and overuse, has risen. Antimicrobial resistance presents arguably the most serious threat to global health security and is threatening to undo major gains in the control of infectious diseases. If it is left unaddressed, 300 million people will die prematurely because of AMR by 2050 and the world’s GDP will be 2% to 3.5% lower. This year, the World Health Organisation and the G20 are considering AMR, providing the UK Government with an opportunity to build on the leadership they have shown to date. The UK Government prioritised tackling drug resistance in their aid strategy published last November. They also created the related Ross fund, which they are to be congratulated on. In addition, they brought the issue to the attention of the international community by commissioning the independent review on AMR in 2014.

The Ross fund is a commitment to spend £1 billion over the next five years on research and development on infectious disease, including £315 million to fight AMR. It is jointly administered by the Department of Health and the Department for International Development. Will the Minister tell us—I am sure he will—how that will happen? Although the Government’s steps are welcome, we must ask when the funding provided through the Ross fund will be allocated, because

world when it comes to research and development into new drugs and new drug technology. Antibiotics have been widely used to treat infections for more than 60 years. Without doubt they have saved many millions of lives, as my hon. Friend said. I doubt whether there is any hon. Member who has not taken antibiotics at some time in their life. It is extensive use that has created the problem that we have today.

Although new infectious diseases have been discovered nearly every year over the past 30 years, very few new antibiotics have been developed in that time. This means that the existing pool of antibiotics are used to treat more and more infections. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer has eloquently outlined the problems in developing new antibiotics, but one of the consequences of their widespread availability and the relatively low cost of the current antibiotics is the extensive inappropriate prescribing of the drugs for conditions on which they will have no effect. That adds to the increasing resistance to these life-saving drugs.

In preparing for the debate today, I found out that treatment-resistant bacteria are responsible for approximately 25,000 deaths across Europe each year—similar to the number of deaths from road accidents. The “National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies” estimates that a widespread outbreak of a bacterial blood infection could affect 200,000 people in the UK, and if this could not be treated effectively with our existing drugs, approximately 40% of those affected could die: 80,000 people.

There is an urgent need for action to slow the spread of antimicrobial resistance. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer referred to buying time to allow for the development of new antibiotics to catch up with need. I talked about the number of deaths due to road traffic accidents. We have seen widespread campaigns for road safety, and we need more campaigns to highlight the dangers of the overuse of antibiotics.

In the UK, 74% of antibiotics are prescribed in a primary care setting, and a staggering 97% of patients who ask for antibiotics are prescribed them whether they need them or not. Studies have shown that antibiotic resistance rates are strongly related to use in primary care. They have also shown that more than half of the antibiotics used in primary care are for respiratory tract infections, most of which are either viral in nature or self-limiting.

As this debate indicates, one method of tackling antimicrobial resistance is by incentivising research and the development of new antimicrobials. My hon. Friend made an excellent case for that. That obviously takes time and a huge amount of financial investment. We should also look at the role that diagnostics can play. Diagnostic tests can often be carried out rapidly, giving results in minutes. This allows immediate diagnosis and treatment choices. Such tests also prevent the need for over-prescribing and ensure that patients have the right drugs at the right time.

A couple of years ago, the chief medical officer described the threat of antimicrobial resistance as being “just as important and deadly as climate change and international terrorism.”

[ Maggie Throup]
many of us are keen to see that happen. The hon. Member for York Outer also asked that question. Investment in TB diagnostics, drugs and vaccines through the fund is one way of making sure where the money is being spent and what the feedback is.

TB is the world’s leading infectious killer, killing some 1.5 million people every year, or 4,000 every day. TB is the biggest killer of people with HIV, as I mentioned earlier with reference to London. As the only drug-resistant infections spread through the air, multi-drug-resistant and extensively drug-resistant TB pose a serious threat to global health security. When we think about what is happening in London with TB and HIV, we should also think about what is happening in other parts of the world, where greater numbers are affected and there could be even more deaths.

Multi-drug-resistant TB—MDR-TB—is resistant to certain drugs. It can take more than 4,000 pills over a period of six months to cure someone with TB, and the drugs are often associated with severe side effects that can make treatment unbearable. As a result, patients often do not finish treatment, which increases the likelihood of drug resistance. I do not know whether any research is happening into how to make the drugs more palatable, if that is possible.

As well as treatment failure, inferior treatment and infection with resistant strains are drivers of MDR-TB. The number of cases of drug-resistant TB is increasing. There were nearly half a million new cases of MDR-TB last year and almost 200,000 deaths. One quarter of MDR-TB cases are in the WHO European region. MDR-TB requires patients to take a course of drugs over an 18 to 24-month period, including eight months of daily intravenous injections. That would be quite hard for anybody. Fewer than half of people who start treatment successfully complete the course due to the unbearable side effects, which can include permanent deafness. We have to be aware of not only what is done to treat people medically but the side effects.

The treatment of MDR-TB can cost 450 times the amount usually required to treat TB. In the UK, treatment of MDR-TB costs about £70,000, which is quite a lot of money, but if it addresses the issue, it has to be done. Due to stigma, lack of access to services and poor understanding, 3 million people—more than a third of those who fall ill with TB each year—fail to be diagnosed. MDR-TB already accounts for one third of the 700,000 annual deaths from AMR, and if it is left unaddressed, an additional 2.59 million people will die each year from the disease by 2050. It is imperative that TB is included in the AMR review’s recommendations to be published this year and considered in any international negotiations that follow. The G20 and the WHO will consider AMR this year.

I will finish with one more point—I am conscious of the suggested time for speeches, Mr Evans, but it is important that Members hear this. Although there may be a natural inclination to focus on the impact of increasing resistance to antibiotics on people, there is great work happening within the livestock industry, and particularly the poultry industry. The British Poultry Council has managed to achieve some encouraging results with its antibiotic stewardship scheme. It is the first UK livestock industry to pioneer a data collection mechanism to record antibiotic usage, which covers 90% of production across the chicken, turkey and duck sectors. It is important to record that since the scheme began monitoring overall use, it has demonstrated an encouraging downward trend. Between 2012 and 2015 production, increased by 5%, with UK poultry meat accounting for 44% of total UK meat production. The total quantity of antibiotics used by scheme members in the same period decreased by 44%. In 2012, the scheme introduced a voluntary ban on the use of third and fourth-generation cephalosporins and a commitment to reduce the use of fluoroquinolone antibiotics. In 2016, the scheme made a further commitment not to use colistin.

Those encouraging results within the poultry industry should be recognised and encouraged, but as we have seen, when it comes to antibiotics for people, we need to wake up to the issue sooner rather than later. We need the Government to commit to delivering on the Ross fund and to continuing to look for further ways in which they can help address this issue.

3.16 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this debate on an issue he has long championed. I became interested in the issue having listened to presentations by clinicians and scientists in my constituency. They made it absolutely clear that incentivising research into and the development of new antibiotics is essential not only for our generation but for future generations. Antimicrobial resistance and its consequences are happening now. The World Health Organisation has cautioned:

“A post-antibiotic era—in which common infections and minor injuries can kill—far from being an apocalyptic fantasy, is instead a very real possibility for the 21st Century.”

Last year, antimicrobial resistance was added to the Cabinet Office’s national risk register for civil emergencies. The Government rightly warned that without effective antibiotics, even minor surgery and routine operations could become high-risk procedures.

Long lead times for developing new medicines and the relatively low commercial returns on investments have unsurprisingly hampered investment in antibiotic development. In 2014, the Select Committee on Science and Technology highlighted the fact that only 22 new antibiotics have been launched since 2000. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry—I thank it for its help in preparing for this debate—points out that whereas 18 large pharmaceutical companies were actively involved in antimicrobial research and development in the 1990s, that number had fallen to four by 2010.

To ensure that new antibiotics are developed, it seems that we need a new reimbursement system, as other Members have said. Unless the environment for companies to invest in antibiotic development becomes more attractive, the problem will continue to grow. Looking at the wider field of the development of new drugs, I fear that some indicators suggest we may be going in the wrong direction. In 2010, 6% of international clinical trials were based in the UK, but the figure now stands at a mere 2%.

There are a wide range of suggestions for what we might do, including altering the regulatory framework to incentivise innovation and developing new economic models, perhaps through innovative pricing and reimbursement mechanisms to incentivise more
investment in researching new antimicrobials. There may be possibilities through the emergence of what is termed venture philanthropy, which is an exciting development for some of the big research charities.

It has to be said, however, that if there is not enough money in the system as a whole, it is hard to see a way forward. Some caution that whatever the accelerated access review brings, chronic funding shortages will continue to hamper innovation. If we add to that the changes in capital allowances that make other countries more attractive and the uncertainty over the replacement of the political fix known as the cancer drug fund, it is easy to become pessimistic.

The industry needs to think hard about the future. As the independent O’Neill review said:

“Big pharma...needs to look beyond short-term assessments of profit and loss, and act with ‘enlightened self-interest’ in tackling AMR, recognising that it has a long term commercial imperative to having effective antibiotics, as well as a moral one.”

The fact remains that the Government must position the UK as the most compelling global location to develop new treatments. Methods for doing that might include committing to, and funding, a reimbursed early access to medicines scheme; and ensuring that there are sufficient funds to continue funding some of the important schemes focused on innovation, such as the biomedical catalyst. Indeed, the World Health Organisation recommends that policy makers can help to tackle antimicrobial resistance by rewarding innovation and the development of new treatment options. A global innovation fund was one of the preliminary recommendations of the O’Neill review, and we await the final recommendations, which are due to be published this summer.

In addition to incentivising research and the development of new antibiotics to tackle antimicrobial resistance, as we have heard, the Government must focus on preventing the inappropriate prescription of antibiotics, which is causing resistance to spread. The Science and Technology Committee has said that the Government “needs to set clear responsibilities at all levels of the NHS and veterinary medicine to achieve better stewardship of the antimicrobial drugs vital in modern medicine.”

Indeed, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has warned that more than 20% of prescriptions issued for antibiotics are likely to be unnecessary. That is about 10 million prescriptions.

Another problem that is contributing to growing antimicrobial resistance is the use of antibiotics in livestock production. Other European countries have already set targets for reducing the use of antibiotics in farming, but the UK Government have not. Considering that farm animals account for almost two thirds of antibiotics used in Europe, and about 40% of those used in the UK, it is hard to overestimate the significance of that in the increasing problem.

Antimicrobial resistance is a grave threat that is only going to grow and intensify. The Government must act now to tackle the barriers to the development of new antibiotics and make the environment for researching and developing new drugs less challenging. The alternative, to go back to a world without antibiotics where almost half of people in this country died of infection, must be avoided at all costs.

3.21 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this important debate on an issue that is not well enough known or understood.

Tackling the over-consumption of antibiotics is one of the greatest health challenges of this generation. Alexander Fleming warned in 1945 that micro-organisms could develop resistance to antibiotics. Unfortunately his prediction proved to be correct. A report published by the World Health Organisation in 2014 said antibiotic resistance was now “a global threat”. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) described that threat to global security as being on a par with other, better-known threats. The US Centres for Disease Control have pointed to the emergence of “nightmare bacteria”, and Professor Dame Sally Davies has evoked parallels with the apocalypse.

The hon. Member for York Outer mentioned that antimicrobial resistance is estimated to kill more than 700,000 people globally every year—a horrifying figure to us all, I think.

A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Errewash (Maggie Throup) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), discussed the inappropriate prescription of antibiotics. The picture in Scotland reflects that in the rest of the UK. In 2014, 55,000 people—1% of the population—were taking antibiotics at any one time, and in up to 50% of cases, they were for conditions that would have got better without them.

Resistance is a natural biological phenomenon, but it is increased and accelerated by various factors, such as the misuse of medicines, poor infection control and global trade and travel. That is a particular concern with antibiotics. Many of the medical advances of recent years, such as organ transplantation and chemotherapy, need antibiotics to prevent and treat the bacterial infections that can be caused by the treatment. Without effective antibiotics, even minor surgery and routine operations could become high-risk procedures. The hon. Member for York Outer talked about a grazed knee becoming a serious condition, and I have personal experience of that, because a small cut to my knee did not respond to antibiotics, and I ended up in a serious situation, needing an operation and fairly strong antibiotics to save my leg. The situation we are talking about is a real one, and a major threat.

Inaction could mean the loss of effective antibiotics, which could undermine our ability to fight infectious diseases. The hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Strangford both talked about TB, and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse spoke of the high rates in his previous constituency. As he said, it is a devastating disease, causing 1.5 million deaths worldwide every year. Of most concern are the cases of drug-resistant TB that hon. Members have highlighted.

Action is needed at local, national and global level to improve the knowledge and understanding of antimicrobial resistance, to steward the effectiveness of existing treatments, and to stimulate the development of new antibiotics, diagnostics and therapies. The Scottish Government are taking the issue seriously. In March they announced a £4.2 million research grant to investigate the prevention and control of healthcare-associated infections, and to
research new ways to use existing antibiotics more effectively and efficiently. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the use of antibiotics in farming and mentioned that some advances had been made in reducing their use. That is certainly positive and praiseworthy.

I welcome the UK Government’s focus on AMR, including the establishment of the independent review led by Lord O’Neill to explore the surrounding economic issues, and I look forward to seeing the review, which I hope will be published next month. It is important to acknowledge that we are simultaneously dealing with a health problem and an economic problem. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has argued that it would like a clear set of actions to be taken on developing new economic models, in particular through innovative pricing, and reimbursement mechanisms incentivising more investment in the search for new antibiotics.

There are many challenges in the current antibiotic funding landscape. The hon. Member for York Outer talked about the timescale for getting new treatments to market. I think that we would all agree that 15 years is far too long, in both economic and healthcare terms. The expected returns and associated risk with antimicrobials mean that they are not competitive with other therapeutic areas. New, innovative antibiotics often have a low price, as society expects generic antibiotics for treating large numbers of patients to be economical. The hon. Member for York Outer also talked about a fixed price for antibiotics, and perhaps that could be investigated further. The hon. Member for Cambridge talked about the drop in the number of trials of new drugs in the UK. We must ask what the reason for that is. Why cannot trials be carried out in the UK? We must look at the funding for that. I would like the UK to accelerate its leading role in developing solutions to incentivise the development and management of new antibiotics; that would promote investment in antibiotics as well as their appropriate use, and reduce the risks for both the payer and the investor.

Total antibiotic prescribing, measured using daily doses, continues to increase. The Scottish Government have been encouraging everyone to play their part by reducing the unnecessary use of antibiotics, raising awareness, and pledging to be an antibiotic guardian. That campaign aims to increase knowledge of antibiotic prescribing and resistance. It has reached more than 12,000 individuals in the first six months. Those were predominantly healthcare professionals, but everyone can pledge to become an antibiotic guardian at www.antibioticguardian.com. I did it earlier today, and I hope that many hon. Members will do so, too.

The hon. Member for Erewash discussed future public engagement work and how we raise awareness of antibiotic resistance. It is essential that we educate people about when and why antibiotics are needed. That should include helping patients to understand the duration of illness and alternative treatments for common viral infections, such as colds and flu, that do not require antibiotics.

In November 2015, Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport, Shona Robison, said that the rise of drug-resistant infections must be tackled around the world. She marked European Antibiotic Awareness Day by pledging to be an antibiotic guardian. The Scottish Antimicrobial Prescribing Group and UK partners have launched their target. Is the Minister willing to sign up to be an antibiotic guardian? When does he plan to launch his public awareness campaign?

3.30 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this extremely important debate, and on the knowledgeable and measured way in which he introduced it. I also commend his ongoing efforts to bring antibiotic resistance to the House’s attention since his election in 2010. As he said, he secured a Westminster Hall debate in October 2014 in which he called for co-ordinated action to be taken to tackle this issue. Today’s debate offers a valuable opportunity to take stock of progress since then, and to redouble our efforts to ensure that the right conditions are created to incentivise the development of the next generation of antibiotics.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said that something as minor as a grazed knee could claim lives. It is difficult to comprehend how that could happen, but there is a real risk that incidents of that sort will become commonplace in future. He cited the staggering statistic that of the 20 pharmaceutical companies that were originally developing antibiotics, only four are now in operation. He highlighted the tension between the need to encourage innovation and the financial uncertainty in this area of research. He also gave some interesting facts about regional variance in antibiotic prescription, about which I would like to learn more after the debate.

It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). He discussed tuberculosis from the perspective of both a member of the all-party group on global tuberculosis and the representative of a constituency that historically had severe problems with TB. He highlighted the increasing incidence of drug-resistant TB, and raised important questions that I look forward to hearing the Minister answer.

The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) discussed the obstacles to the development of new antibiotics and the issue of inappropriate prescribing. She made a fair analogy with road deaths, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a valuable contribution. He was right to acknowledge and encourage the political leadership that is needed on this issue. He also made an important point about the side effects from treatments.

It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who brought a great deal of knowledge from his constituency and revealed the alarming statistic that the UK has gone from having 6% of the world’s clinical trials in 2010 to just 2% today. He echoed Jim O’Neill’s comments about pharmaceutical companies needing to look beyond the short term; I think we would all agree that that is an important challenge that we face. He also stated clearly that he believes that more should be done to encourage research and development in this country. We have been a leader for many years, and it would be a real shame if that position was under threat.
The debate is timely, as the Government-commissioned review on antimicrobial resistance is due to report next month. I pay tribute to the huge amount of work that Jim O’Neill and his team have undertaken. I hope that the conclusions of the review will lead to the far-reaching changes that we know are necessary, both in this country and around the world. Antibiotic resistance has been described by the World Health Organisation as the “single greatest challenge in infectious diseases today, threatening rich and poor countries alike.”

The hon. Member for York Outer referred to the future as a nightmare scenario, and the WHO has also said that if we fail to act on antimicrobial resistance, by 2050 an additional 10 million lives will be lost each year to drug-resistant strains of malaria, HIV, TB and certain bacterial infections, at a cost to the world economy of $100 trillion.

As Dame Sally Davies set out in the foreword to the “UK Five Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy 2013-2018”:

“The harsh reality is that infections are increasingly developing that cannot be treated. The rapid spread of multi-drug resistant (MDR) bacteria means that we could be close to reaching a point where we may not be able to prevent or treat everyday infections or diseases.”

Despite that, so far, drug-resistant bacteria have not had anything near sufficient attention in terms of medical research.

It is easy to forget that it was less than 100 years ago that Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin after a piece of mould contaminated a petri dish at St Mary’s hospital, and it was not until the 1940s that the true era of antibiotics began. Despite an exponential increase in the use of antibiotics and an increasing awareness of the threat posed by antimicrobial resistance, since the year 2000 just five new classes of antibiotics have been discovered, most of which are ineffective against a number of resistant strains of bacteria, including Gram-negative bacteria.

We need to take a wide variety of steps to get to grips with the problem, including, of course, looking at how we address the long-term decline of the pipeline for new antibiotics through incentivising research and development, which I will come to shortly. We must also improve our focus on disease prevention, improving surveillance over drug resistance and tackling unnecessary antibiotic consumption. I will briefly address each of those matters in turn.

First, disease prevention, particularly in hospitals and care environments, is vital if we are to tackle antimicrobial resistance. Around 300,000 people a year get an infection while being cared for by the NHS in England—that is one in every 16 people treated by the NHS. As the Royal Society for Public Health said, “it is alarming that the very place you would expect public health to be a high priority remains a breeding ground for life threatening infections.”

Despite improvements in recent years, the rate of healthcare-acquired infection in England has remained stubbornly high, while checks on compliance with hand hygiene best practice can only be described as inadequate. On 13 January, hand hygiene was the subject of a Westminster Hall debate, to which I responded on behalf of the Opposition. Will the Minister set out what additional steps have been taken since then to improve hygiene in all care settings? There is still a lot we can do to deny superbugs such as MRSA the opportunity to spread.

Secondly, we need to tackle surveillance blind spots in all parts of the world. As Jim O’Neill made clear, “if we can’t measure the growing problem of drug resistance, we can’t manage it.”

We know that the technology exists to combine rapid diagnostics with data sharing, but we need to build consensus on precisely how that will take place. I would welcome any comments from the Minister on the steps being taken to improve surveillance, both in the NHS and internationally.

Thirdly, as the Science and Technology Committee found in July 2014, there is an urgent need to tackle unnecessary antibiotic consumption in healthcare and in farming, which is one of the key causes of antibiotic resistance. The Chair of the Select Committee at the time, Andrew Miller—my predecessor as MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston—called on the Government to take “decisive and urgent action to prevent antibiotics from being given to people and animals who do not need them.”

Nearly two years on from that report, there is little evidence that such decisive and urgent action has taken place, or that all the Committee’s recommendations have been implemented. When the Minister responds, will he update us on what steps have been taken to reduce the unnecessary use of antibiotics? Although at the time of the report the Committee welcomed the launch of the O’Neill review by the Prime Minister, it cautioned against using that as an excuse or a reason to delay any progress. I hope the Minister will assure us that that has not happened.

The need to “stimulate the development of new antibiotics, rapid diagnostics and novel therapies” was one of the three strategic aims set out in the chief medical officer’s September 2013 report on the five-year antimicrobial resistance strategy. It was also one of the key recommendations of the Science and Technology Committee report. Although I welcome the renewed focus that today’s debate brings, I fear we are no closer to a solution than we were two and a half years ago. The barriers that existed to the development of new drugs have still not been addressed. I hope that today’s debate, and the final report of Jim O’Neill’s review, will provide the catalyst needed for meaningful action finally to be taken. As the hon. Member for York Outer said, a firm timetable from the Minister would be helpful.

The key issue is that in other medical fields, once a new drug is developed that significantly improves on previously available drugs, it quickly becomes the standard first choice for patients once it comes to market. However, as we have heard, a new antibiotic might not become the first choice until there was resistance to previous generations of drugs. Indeed, health officials logically seek to limit prescribing a new antibiotic drug, with the goal of delaying resistance for as long as possible. By the time that a new antibiotic becomes the standard line of care, many years or even decades are likely to have elapsed, bringing it near to or beyond the end of its patent life. If a company has spent tens of millions of
pounds on its development, that would leave it unable to generate sufficient revenue and to come close to recouping its original investment. As the hon. Gentleman said, from that perspective, the system is certainly broken.

In the review, “Securing New Drugs for Future Generations: The Pipeline of Antibiotics”, Jim O’Neill suggests a number of interventions to tackle the systematic issues that prevent the development of new antibiotics. He says that those interventions, which require political leadership at a global level, have the potential radically to overhaul the antibiotics pipeline. Will the Minister assure us that the Government will do everything they can to secure an international consensus? We have been told by report after report over the past decade how important tackling antimicrobial resistance is. I am sure Members from all parties will agree that it is time we started to put those findings into action. If the Government do the right thing and take action, they will have our full support.

Members have talked about the challenges, which are on a par with climate change, global terrorism and various other apocalyptic scenarios. It is a sad fact that generally our constituents talk about these issues only when they become everyday concerns. If that happens with antimicrobial resistance, we will have failed. We are all committed to ensuring that that does not happen; we certainly have a duty to do so.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Evans. I believe we are expecting a vote, so my speech may be interrupted. I shall crack on, awaiting the bell.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing the debate and on the tenacity with which he has raised this issue in the House in recent years. It is a great opportunity to have this debate today, when so much is going on this week in London on international health leadership. My hon. Friend’s speech and the informed and constructive comments that he and others have made highlight how seriously this issue is taken throughout the House. Last Monday we had more than 60 Members of Parliament in this Chamber. The fact that we have a dozen today does not suggest that there is any less interest; many Members are tied up in other debates. I know that Members from all parties are concerned about this issue.

The debate is timely, because it coincides with a two-day international summit on antimicrobial resistance convened by the Wellcome Trust in London, which brings together a global gathering of scientists and policy makers to explore key areas for action. I thank the Wellcome Trust for its leadership. My hon. Friend’s speech and the informed and constructive comments that he and others have made highlight how seriously this issue is taken throughout the House. Last Monday we had more than 60 Members of Parliament in this Chamber. The fact that we have a dozen today does not suggest that there is any less interest; many Members are tied up in other debates. I know that Members from all parties are concerned about this issue.

The debate is timely, because it coincides with a two-day international summit on antimicrobial resistance convened by the Wellcome Trust in London, which brings together a global gathering of scientists and policy makers to explore key areas for action. I thank the Wellcome Trust and pay tribute to it for its leadership. In so many areas of public policy, it has put its money on the issue. O’Neill and his team, as others have done, for their work on the issue.

I will set out the context of the debate, as a number of other hon. Members have done. Antibiotics play a crucial role not just in human health but in animal health and welfare—my hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for agricultural causes—and so are of great strategic interest in the wider field of biosecurity. We have seen the impact of diseases in domestic and agricultural poultry and in some of our tree species, and we are trying to view this issue in the wider global context of biosecurity from infectious diseases.

Jim Shannon: There have been some marvellous steps forward in addressing the use of antibiotics on poultry, as I indicated in my speech. Many people are trying to move that forward. If we take steps forward with poultry and other animals, we can transfer that work to humans too.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. As ever, Belfast University and the Northern Ireland life sciences cluster are doing good work in agriculture and in the medical space.

For the reasons that I outlined, the growth of resistance presents a genuine strategic global threat, which, as the hon. Member from throughout the House have gratefully acknowledged, the Government have taken a strategic grip of. Globally, some 700,000 people will die this year because of antimicrobial resistance. In Europe, the healthcare and societal costs of resistance are estimated to be of the order of €1.5 billion per annum. That translates into a verifiable and measurable cost to the NHS of £180 million, but it may well be an awful lot more. Meanwhile, we face an antibiotic discovery void. The golden age of discovery ended in the 1980s. We have had very few new antibiotics since then and no new class since 1987.

I had a 15-year career in the sector and spent one chunk of it starting, financing and managing a small anti-infectives company that was spun out of Hammersmith and Imperial College and used some phenomenally powerful technology to look at the genetics of how microbes reproduce. We spent a lot of money on some elegant science, but we did not produce a new anti-infective. The truth is that these bugs are very difficult targets in biomedicine. It is difficult to go after the cell wall of Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria. Their ability to reproduce and develop resistance to drugs—they are moving targets, as it were—makes it particularly difficult to design effective drugs for them.

The good news—if I may put it that way—is that we can do things that will make and are making a real difference. The chief medical officer outlined the scale of the issue and its implications for public health in her 2013 annual report. She called for urgent action at a national and international level. The UK responded by publishing our five-year antimicrobial resistance strategy, the core aims of which were to improve understanding of resistance, to ensure that existing medicines remain effective and to stimulate the development of new antibiotics, diagnostics and therapies. Three years on, we have made considerable progress. We have put the building blocks for success in place, including better data, guidance and a strengthened framework—
George Freeman: I leave Mr Evans for five minutes and he transforms into you, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship.

We are three years into our strategy and we have put building blocks in place, including better data and guidance and a strengthened framework for antimicrobial stewardship. I want to highlight one or two areas of progress. The first is surveillance. The UK has one of the most comprehensive surveillance systems in the world. We collect baseline data from which antibiotic prescribing and trends in antibiotic resistance can be monitored, and we are continuing to improve those data so that we can identify problems early and take action.

Alongside that, we have published outcome measures against which the UK will assess progress, and we have produced a range of tools and guidance to support best practice on antibiotic stewardship. We have introduced incentives for the NHS to improve the prescribing of antibiotics and the quality of data, which will be supported and enhanced by a set of AMR indicators that will provide NHS teams with local data on infections, resistance rates and prescribing, so they can set their own ambitions to take action and drive improvement locally.

Of course, it is simply not possible to look at the challenge presented by AMR without examining it from a global perspective. AMR is a global problem and no one country can tackle it alone. The UK has played and continues to play a major part, if not the major part, in raising awareness and pushing forward international commitment and action, as several colleagues throughout the House have acknowledged. We sponsored the World Health Organisation’s 2015 global action plan on AMR, we created the £265 million Fleming fund specifically to help poorer countries tackle drug resistance, and we are promoting work on AMR through the G7, the G20 and the United Nations.

The other, perhaps obvious point to make is that there is no single solution to antimicrobial resistance. We must prevent infection, conserve the antibiotics we have, develop new diagnostics and promote the development of new drugs. The UK’s strategic approach rests on those pillars, and they resonate across the world.

I turn briefly to the Jim O’Neill review. It is widely acknowledged that the systems on which drug discovery and development currently depend cannot and will not deliver the new antibiotics the world needs. Hon. Members have made that point clearly. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister established the independent review. It has run for two years and has made a comprehensive and highly informed assessment of the AMR challenge. Hon. Members will have seen some of the authoritative and readable papers the review team has published, setting out its thinking on a number of key areas, stimulating debate here and globally, and paving the way for the final report, which we all await and which is due to be published next month.

Not surprisingly, research and development has received much attention from Lord O’Neill’s team. It featured particularly in their paper on AMR and the antibiotic pipeline, which appeared in May 2015. That paper argued for the establishment of a global payer fund and an innovation fund to boost funding for blue-sky research into antibiotic drugs and diagnostics. Elsewhere in their publications, the review team identify some of the neglected areas of research that they believe such a fund could help address.

The Government’s response to the review team’s work will rightly follow the publication of its final report, which we eagerly anticipate. In line with our manifesto commitment to take forward the review team’s recommendations, that response will be positive, ambitious and timely, building on what we have already achieved. We do not intend to delay in a sector that needs urgent action.

One reason why the review team published their series of thematic papers was to stimulate international debate. The value of that approach was made very clear when the President of China came to the UK in the autumn, which led to agreement on a joint UK-China innovation fund modelled on the very proposal that Lord O’Neill set out. We have committed £50 million to that fund and are now in discussion with the Chinese on how it can be taken forward. We hope at the end of it not only to have increased financial collaboration in antimicrobial research and development, but to have brought together the best research teams from industry and academia in the search for practical solutions.

The review explored how the disincentive to antibiotic research and development presented by the absence of a viable commercial market could be tackled. Hon. Members will know that, as I have painfully experienced in the industry, there is an irony in the anti-infectives field. If a new class of anti-infectives is developed, they will tend to be used as a last line of defence, so the level of usage is quite low and patent protection is often not as significant as is required or justified by other drug discoveries. The fundamentals are not the same with anti-infective drug discovery, which is one reason why the standard model does not work as well as in other areas.

The Government are convinced of the need to look again at how we fund antibiotic development, based on Lord O’Neill’s groundbreaking work. It seems clear from that work and other studies that a global solution will be needed, although I cannot, of course, pre-empt what Lord O’Neill will recommend.

Inevitably, global solutions take some time to come to fruition, and for that reason my officials have had meetings with a number of pharmaceutical companies, including AstraZeneca, to discuss alternative approaches to reimbursement. They include the insurance model and a number of others that have been widely discussed. Progress is being made and the discussions are continuing. We do not intend to allow the potential delay in global discussions to get in the way of this country taking all the steps it can to facilitate our leadership in this space.

Meanwhile, Government investment in antimicrobial-related research here in the UK continues to grow. The Medical Research Council funds an AMR research funders forum, which we established to co-ordinate research across different funding bodies. The forum has set up a number of AMR-themed research programmes, and its members have together allocated some £36 million to them. Themes include resistant bacteria and how they interact with their hosts, and projects to speed up the development of therapies and diagnostics. At the applied end of the spectrum, the National Institute for Health Research is funding health protection research
units at Oxford and at Imperial College. An NIHR research call has led to the allocation of around £15 million in support of some 16 projects.

I want to reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer and others about the important role of charities—not just the Wellcome Trust, which leads, but in the sector in general. In my reform of the life science space, I have made a clear offer to charities to be at the top table as we set out the policy and reform landscape. Medical research charities in the UK now invest £1.4 billion in research every year, which puts them at the top table alongside the biggest pharma companies. I am determined to ensure that they have a voice in policy setting to reflect their increasing voice in the research landscape. We are especially fortunate in this country to have the Wellcome Trust, whose work this week is timely.

My hon. Friend referred to the Antibiotic Research UK charity, which has been set up in its constituency. It is very encouraging to hear about that initiative and its work and ambition. He has had meetings about it with the Minister with responsibility for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), and with the Prime Minister, and is being typically diligent in ensuring that its existence and profile are raised. He knows that I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the O’Neill report, but it is incredibly encouraging to see a charity coming forward in this space. We look forward to continuing to work with that charity and others in our response to the O’Neill report.

Antibiotic Research UK is, understandably, enthusiastic about what it has to offer. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer and other hon. Members will understand that the NIHR does not award research money by particular therapeutic area. There are good reasons for that, which I will not go into in the few moments I have left. We fund the infrastructure and are open to research bids, and I encourage that charity and others to put bids together in conjunction with industry. We stand ready to support them. I have no doubt that when we respond to the O’Neill report we will look at how we can do more to encourage and support those bids.

In the time remaining, I want to deal with some of the questions that have been asked. My hon. Friend asked whether I would meet Antibiotic Research UK. I would be delighted to do that. It would probably be sensible to do so with my hon. Friend the public health Minister after publication of the O’Neill report, but I am happy to meet them before that.

My hon. Friend made a point about the foreign aid budget. He and other observers will have noticed that in the autumn statement we announced yet more funding for the prosperity fund to go into global public health. Whether in relation to vaccines or anti-infectives, we are determined to ensure that our international development spend addresses global public health issues, and we are harnessing UK science to that end.

My hon. Friend made a point about Sweden. We are trying to strike a balance between global leadership and supporting global collaboration. My position on that, as on wider EU affairs, is that I am ambitious for the UK life sciences sector, ambitious for life sciences in Europe and ambitious for the European single market in a global race for investment. We need every collaboration network we can get.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned diagnostics, and she was absolutely right. She brings to the debate her experience and professional background. Diagnostics is very exciting, and there is some very exciting work in that field. It is fair to say that the diagnostics sector is probably ahead of the therapeutic sector on this one.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) asked about the Ross fund, as did a number of other hon. Members. It is good to hear the level of support for the fund, which is aimed at developing, testing and delivering a range of new products, including vaccines, drugs and diagnostics, to help combat the most serious infections in low-income countries. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the Ross fund with added detail in January, with a portfolio of projects and programmes led by DFID and the Department of Health. The hon. Gentleman asked which Department is responsible for that, and I can confirm that it is the Department of Health through the health research budget and portfolio, for which I am responsible.

Time is against me, but I want to deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) about clinical trials. As a result of an awful lot of hard work across the Department, led by the chief medical officer and the NIHR, we are turning the corner on trials—we got recruitment to trials in the NIHR clinical trials network up from 200,000 to 600,000 last year. We are starting to see an increase in the number of first-in-human trials globally, which is an indicator of cutting-edge clinical science, and we have reduced the rate of time to first patient recruitment. We are never complacent—there is more to do—but we are turning the corner on global trial recruitment.

I believe that 2016 is set to be a critical year for the AMR challenge. The O’Neill report is shortly to land, as is my accelerated access review. We have secured a historic science budget for capital and revenue and a series of initiatives in global public health. We are well placed to convene and pull together that international leadership and ensure that British science is leading in what is ultimately, and needs to be, a global endeavour. I look forward to Lord O’Neill’s report and to working with colleagues across Government to implement it as speedily as we can to ensure that the momentum is maintained. I want this country to lead in what must ultimately be a global effort to find models to ensure that we bring all our science to bear to generate new diagnostics and new treatments. We must prevent the appalling situation, which a number of us have discussed today, of antimicrobial resistance becoming one of the great scourges of the 21st century.
outbreaks of infection. Without antibiotics, we could have widespread outbreaks running right across the country, uncontrolled, like wildfires. As many hon. Members have said, a world without antibiotics is a very—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
People will notice the difference between the Virgin Voyager train and the Virgin Pendolino. Modern technology can make a difference; making the right choice can make a difference.

Many of the WHO recommendations complement the Government’s targets on climate change, but the right to some respite from constant noise needs to be a central feature of Government policy—part of their strategy—not a by-product or consequence of another Government policy.

My own observations are these. The Government should work with motor manufacturers to encourage all cars and vehicles to have linings that stop the doors making a noise when they are slammed shut. A simple rubber lining would make a huge difference; metal on metal makes noise. Slamming doors are even an issue in the House of Commons. Where the doors are lined, they close quietly; where they are not lined, they slam and create noise pollution.

Emergency vehicles should reduce the use of their very loud sirens after midnight. The blue flashing lights are enough to alert people to their presence in the dark. Of course discretion should be allowed. That is an issue even when walking down the streets here in Westminster. The ambulances are going out to save lives; we respect that and recognise it, and they have to get through heavy traffic. But some of the sirens are so ear-piercing compared with those of other emergency vehicles. Ambulances do seem, anecdotally, to be far louder than police vehicles. Perhaps there is a reason for that, but do the sirens need to be used after midnight when the blue lights can be seen? That is a public debate I think we should have, because it does impact on people’s lives in cities and towns up and down the country.

Perhaps we should put polite notices on public transport systems. We cannot compel people to do things, but we can encourage people, through polite notices, to set their phones to vibrate or silent, as I know you do from time to time, Mr Hollobone, when you are in the Chair. I hope that we all have our phones on silent or vibrate at time to time, Mr Hollobone, when you are in the Chair. I hope that we all have our phones on silent or vibrate at the moment.

There needs to be a national conversation about how to make the country—our cities and towns—quieter. We could even use polite notices about loud conversations on telephones, which I am sure have been an irritant to us all. I confess that I probably have had such conversations myself. I should do so less, and now that I have made this speech, I probably will. [Interruption.] I have proved my point, because the phone of one of the officials has just gone off. Although it is a nice tune and not an irritating noise, I can hardly be heard. They are making a difference.

What about urban design? The concept of green buildings and skyscrapers has been around for some time. We need to encourage that more. Many years ago, a friend of mine whom I have not seen for some time—Dr Kenneth Yeang, a Malaysian-based, but Cheltenham College and Cambridge-educated green skyscraper architect—was one of the originators of green design, by which natural air cooling, instead of costly and noisy air conditioning units, is built into the building.

Space should be designed with sound in mind, so that we reduce noise pollution. Utility companies should be made to replace manhole covers in a way that does not increase noise. Loose-fitting metal covers crack or clank every time a vehicle goes over them. As hon. Members walk down the street tonight, they might hear that same noise. Imagine being an office worker or somebody living nearby, hearing that clank every few seconds on a busy road. Very low-cost, simple measures can be put in place. These problems are a noise nightmare for many local residents and office workers in this city, and in many towns and cities around the country.

A social survey by the City of London assessed that general attitudes to noise suggested that alarms and aircraft noise are the two most common causes of noise complaints. I will not comment on aircraft noise today, as that has been done many times in this place and, no doubt, will be done again. I do not want to be drawn into the third runway debate. Nevertheless, the Government can work with the security trade bodies to seek out ways of countering noise pollution from alarms. They can also recognise and work with what aircraft manufacturers are doing to reduce noise from aircraft.

The Government—the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and other Departments—could work with car manufacturers to encourage the increased production of low-noise tyres, and the Department for Transport and the Department for Communities and Local Government could do more to work towards procuring silent road surfaces. I pay tribute to the Transport Secretary, who has done a lot in that area, but I hope the Government can do more. The silent road surface that covers some parts of the M54 in Shropshire has made a real difference to the quality of life of my constituents and those transiting through the constituency—both those inside and outside vehicles. Let us move towards that nationally, and make a national difference, not just a local one.

The Government could get London black cabs to convert to quieter vehicle models. I believe that that is in the Mayor of London’s strategy. I live in London as well as in Shropshire, and there is a big difference between a London black cab going by, accelerating, puffing out lots of diesel and making a noise, and the cars of the much criticised Uber drivers. I am not here to promote Uber, but most Uber drivers drive electric vehicles that are greener, cleaner and quieter. When they accelerate off, they can hardly be heard. They are making a difference. The cab trade in London generally needs to work towards using more environmentally friendly and quieter vehicles. That is the point of the debate.

Another example is the London Duck Tours. Has anyone seen the London Duck? It is a converted military vehicle that is so noisy and polluting. Throw on top of that the microphone of the person talking about the delights of central London, and it makes a real disruption to the lives of residents not only of central London in SW1, but of SE1, down in Vauxhall. Such things can be changed. It would not be of huge cost, but it would be of great benefit to many people.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): A website that I read stated:

“Motorcycle owners value the loud revving noise produced by their engines: this noise is part of what completes the experience of riding vehicles.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that sort of inconsiderate and selfish behaviour does not do sensible motorcyclists any good?
Mark Pritchard: I have ridden a motorbike and I like riding motorbikes, albeit mostly abroad rather than here. Although I have friends that ride motorbikes here. Modifications that make motorbikes or other motor vehicles noisier is inconsiderate, but as long as those motorbikes abide by the environmental guidelines and the manufacturer’s model, I do not have an issue with that. I am conscious of the time, so I will have to speed up.

City and town planners should noise map their cities in more detail, creating anti-noise or counter-noise policies. There should be more enforcement by local councils, DCLG and other Government Departments. The national planning policy framework should include a requirement for new home builders to factor noise abatement into their designs—for example, no wooden floors in apartment blocks unless they are on the ground floor. People walk on wooden floors without carpets and it hugely stresses people in apartment blocks.

We should introduce a quiet homes standard and a single national acoustic standard across all new home building, and encourage the Royal Institute of British Architects, working with the Institute of Acoustics, to include training modules on acoustic design in all architect training courses. Certainly all public buildings should meet a minimum noise requirement, especially schools and hospitals where, perhaps, noise pollution creates the most anxiety and disruption. Public buildings should also seek to work towards a quiet mark—the international eco-aware scheme for excellence in designing quiet buildings and products.

If central Government and local government cannot move quickly towards having quiet buildings, perhaps we could have quiet policies. That could be done in quite a short space of time. Within some of those noisy public buildings, quiet policies could be implemented and achieved much more speedily and readily. I ask the Government to do more to work with organisations such as the Noise Abatement Society and Environmental Protection UK to help to reduce noise in towns and cities. The police should do more to take action against motorcyclists or vehicle drivers who increase noise by illegally modifying their vehicles. We need to update our environmental laws and the Noise Abatement Act 1960 to recognise new generators of noise pollution, with a defined schedule for offending and common noise pollutions in cities.

Noise, not sound, is an unnecessary form of negative energy—a negative vibrating energy that reaches our ears and causes a sensation of hearing through our nervous system. It is that direct kinetic energy that can, so significantly, have an impact on the quality of life of millions of people in the country. The national nervous system is being attacked every day. Silence matters, and the Government need to recognise that there is a huge difference between sound and noise. Noise is unwanted. Sound, such as that of nature, birdsong in the morning, or even church bells—although some people do not like bells—may be wanted. However, the illegal hooting of horns and overly loud emergency sirens create stress.

Calm matters. It is possible to work towards quieter cities—but unless there is an overall national strategy led and implemented by the Government, local councils and other public bodies, it might never happen. In our increasing technological advancements, let us not shut out silence, time to think and an alternative to noise.

My call today is quite revolutionary—a vision for cultural and political change in the built environment of cities and towns—but I believe it would be almost universally popular. It would have a huge positive environmental impact and huge health benefits.

Change can come. My ambition is for London to become the quietest city in the world. It is a big vision, but a big city needs a big vision. With the Government leading, let us all work together towards quieter cities and quieter lives. The one sound that people want to hear in the city is the sound of silence.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is also a great privilege to respond to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). I pay tribute to him for raising quiet cities, a striking and original subject that has not previously come across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs desk.

Quiet cities are interesting because, as recently as the 1960s, noise was not considered within Britain’s policy framework. In fact, a man called John Connell, an earlier incarnation of my hon. Friend, made it his personal campaign to put noise on the agenda. He led a great campaign, which began by addressing the issue of noisy dustbin lids. His big thing was to introduce rubber dustbin lids, instead of metal ones. His next revolutionary move was to introduce rubber milk bottle stands, so that people were not woken in the morning by the milk being put on their doorstep. He became interested in the issue of airport noise, and he was the first great champion of what is now known as the Boris island project—he tried to get the Japanese to buy into the estuary island. He succeeded in making the British Government and British law take noise more seriously. I am sure that my hon. Friend's efforts, following that great tradition, will inspire us to look at quiet cities.

Although quiet cities have not previously been done in Britain, as my hon. Friend says, we have green cities, smart cities and slow towns. Yinchuan, in north-west China, is an example of a quiet city, as are Brisbane in Australia, and Hartford in Connecticut. Those places have tried to brand themselves around the idea of peace and silence, as has my hon. Friend. The website of Brisbane, Australia, for example, lists a series of things that are prohibited, all the way from A for air conditioners to R for refrigerators, with dogs sitting at D.

The Government are engaging with the idea, but it is a local authority lead. It is important that the idea of a smart city, a green city or, in this case, a quiet city is locally driven. It is about how an area brands itself and thinks about itself and what its values might be. Someone like my hon. Friend can inspire a city or a town to take that lead, and I know that he has been having conversations with the candidates for Mayor of London about how the idea could be part of the agenda for London. Our colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government have propagated the idea of pocket parks and green areas in cities with the idea of quiet areas, where there would be prohibitions on creating noise.
As the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) suggested in his intervention on motorcycles, there are a number of difficult balances to be struck: one person's noise is occasionally somebody else's joy; one person's noise may be somebody else's music; one person's noise may be somebody else's supercar; and one person's noise may be a vibrant city. We have to balance such things, and we have to get that balance right, which is why local leadership and local ideas will be important.

The Government have adopted a number of measures over the years to address noise, and I will tick off some of the issues that have been raised. On railway noise, there has been a massive rail grinding programme across the country, which is primarily for public safety and energy but is also significantly reducing the decibel levels created by trains. We have heard a little about laying new road surfaces, and we now have a £300 million programme, of which a significant proportion will be directed towards reducing noise and new highway roll-out. We have Euro 6 standards for engines, which will reduce the decibel levels created by individual engines. We have product standards, so when people go into a shop and buy, for example, a lawn mower, they will be able to see how many decibels that particular lawn mower emits. We have building regulations that have reduced the amount of noise emitted in the construction of hundreds of thousands of houses, as well as reducing the amount of noise heard by people inside by moving bedrooms away from the front and by installing triple glazing.

All of that reflects the common understanding in this room that noise matters. Why does noise matter? We put a value of approximately £6 billion to £7 billion a year on the damage done by noise to health and quality of life. That will remind hon. and right hon. Members of the kinds of calculations we do on air pollution, which causes some £14 billion or £15 billion a year of damage, but in fact noise is different from air pollution. Air pollution, as the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has said in a previous debate, is a silent killer; people are often barely conscious of it.

Noise pollution causes significant health damage, largely driven by the effect on sleep and the stress that comes from loss of sleep. My father was severely deaf, and I was in a meeting this morning with a man who, through driving a vehicle in the 1960s, lost 70% of his hearing. He pointed out that the NHS spends £1,000 a year buying him new hearing aids. He sees three consultants a year, and the batteries of his hearing aids have to be replaced. His productivity in the workplace has been significantly affected by the fact that he cannot hear anything in meetings. The decision in the 1960s to save £500 by not putting a silencer on that vehicle has probably cost the public purse £20,000 or £30,000 over the life of that individual. There is not only a health impact; it is irritating, distracting, frustrating and infuriating to be disturbed by noise when tranquillity is at the core of what we care about.

**Peter Dowd:** We can talk in the abstract, but in my constituency the A5036, which leads down to the docks, is very loud. About half a dozen households on that road have been trying to get Highways England to provide acoustic amelioration. Will the Minister have a word with his colleagues in the Department for Transport and try to get Highways England to pull its finger out, if possible?

**Rory Stewart:** I would be delighted to set up a meeting with transport colleagues on that issue, which I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising. That issue is a microcosm of the issues that we are facing across the country, and there is often a difficult balance to be struck. We want infrastructure, we want roads, we want railways and we want planes, but all of our infrastructure, all of our communications and all of our industrial heritage are causing noise issues.

**Mark Pritchard:** I realise that the Government and local councils cannot do everything. Local council finances are being pressed, and we know the reasons and the background, but we can encourage a change in behaviour by incentivising councils, and by rewarding new home builders by giving them recognition, such as a quiet mark or the environmental awards that they seek. Government Departments and local councils should be leading nationally on setting the standard for quiet mark awards. Does the Minister agree?

**Rory Stewart:** My hon. Friend is in tune with a whole movement. He will be aware of the Noise Abatement Society, which now runs the annual John Connell awards. I am proud to have participated in those awards for two years in a row. They are a fantastic initiative, doing exactly what my hon. Friend is pushing for. We can probably work with the Noise Abatement Society, which has a lot of innovative ideas, on taking the awards further.

We are also making a large £600 million investment in developing ultra-low emission, particularly electric, vehicles, which will make a revolutionary difference. In fact, one of the issues with electric vehicles, of which colleagues will be aware, is that some people feel that they may be becoming dangerously quiet as they move through the streets. Huge progress can be made on electric vehicles, and we have new funds available to lay quieter roads in future.

I finish with a tribute. Parliament, and Westminster Hall, is a peculiar place. It is often difficult to work out how to come up with and drive through inspiring new ideas, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the novel idea of the quiet city. I encourage cities and towns across the country to think seriously about how different towns, ranging from Yin Chuan to Hartford to Brisbane, have managed to create a culture around tranquillity, and the ways in which British towns and cities could take the lead in creating such a culture. In doing so, they would be accepting that from the very beginnings of human language, perhaps the most fundamental word—spiritually, emotionally and physically—has been the concept of peace.

**Question put and agreed to.**
Social Security (Equality)

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those leaving after the quiet cities debate please do so in complete silence?

5.10 pm  Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect of social security changes on equality.

Mr Hollobone. When the benefits system was established, it had a couple of main aims: to provide a safety net for people in work if they lost their jobs, and to provide a springboard back into employment. Surely no one could argue with those aims; they both remain relevant today. To listen to Government rhetoric, hon. Members would be forgiven for thinking that all was fine and well, but there are two other principal aims of the system that I believe should also be considered. One is surely to give comfort and dignity to those who are unable to work for themselves, and the second is to use the levers of government to reduce inequality and make ours a more equal society.

I start by asking the Minister this: is it this Government’s view that it is their role to use the tax and benefits system to achieve a more equal and less extremely divided society? Taxation can be used to raise revenue and to nudge citizens’ behaviour—through, say, taxes on alcohol, tobacco or even sugary drinks—but also to level off the harshest divides by supporting those who cannot support themselves. For all this Government’s rhetoric, the UK is at best as unequal now as it was at the start of this decade, and according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it is likely to become more unequal towards the end of the decade. Perhaps that is acceptable to the Government. If the Minister conceeds that equality is not a top priority, that is fine; we can accept his honesty and have a difference of opinion.

We have heard that the recent Budget will impact women most harshly, and there is still no fair transitional pension settlement for the 1950s women affected by pension changes. Young people are excluded from housing benefit and from the so-called national living wage—although, to be fair, as it is not actually a living wage, that is not much of an omission. Scandalously, state support for those affected by contaminated blood transfusions is being slashed. However, with your permission, Mr Hollobone, I will focus on the combined impact of changes to the benefits system on people with disabilities.

The Government have sought from the outset to justify cuts to benefits by demonising claimants, introducing a them—and-us atmosphere and creating a stark but false division between—in the Prime Minister’s words—shirkers and strivers. Or was it skivers and strivers? I cannot remember the exact words, but the sentiment is the same. Let me make it clear that I have absolutely no reason to doubt bad luck, but to compensate for it.

Scope’s extra costs commission estimates that disabled people face an average extra cost of £550 a month due to their disability. The personal independence payments system introduced to address those additional needs is failing. The extra costs are not being met, claimants are being turned down, and 60% are being reinstated on appeal, but in the meantime, their worry and debt are growing exponentially.

This week I spoke to a constituent of mine, Kevin, whose wife has kidney failure and is on dialysis, as she has been for several years. It is unclear why she has kidney failure, though it could be linked to complications at the birth of her children. She receives dialysis in the morning, has something to eat and then goes to bed and sleeps until the next day. There is no possibility that she could hold down a job, and the support that she receives from the state is essential, yet when she applied for PIP after moving over from disability living allowance, she was turned down. My constituent is appealing the decision, which of course takes months. In the meantime, she and her family are being driven further into poverty, and probably into debt.

That brings me to my next main point. When PIP was introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to replace disability living allowance, we were told that it was to ensure that benefits were focused on those who needed them most. Indeed, the impact assessment for the 2012 Act said that under PIP, the number of claimants would fall by 500,000. I understand that it was designed to deliver a 20% cut to the total cost.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Prime Minister expressed surprise and disappointment when the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), resigned this year. Does my hon. Friend not think that if the former Secretary of State believed in what he was saying about disabled people being affected, it would have been more appropriate for him to have resigned when he introduced PIP to begin with?

Christian Matheson: That certainly would have prevented a lot of heartache and difficulties for those who have been affected. My hon. Friend, who sits on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, is an expert in this area, so I will take his word for it.

On his recent appointment, the new Secretary of State immediately used the justification of focusing benefits on those who need them the most. I admit that even previous Labour Governments have used that as an excuse. However, I believe that it is a bogus argument,
...and a sham to give cover to further cuts. Why should a disabled person placed in the group of greatest need when PIP was first introduced suddenly be deemed not to be in the greatest need, just a couple of years later? Are the Government seriously suggesting that someone with a lifelong disability or chronic illness can be cured of that disability? Why is my constituent who is on dialysis with double kidney failure suddenly considered not to require PIP, when there has been no change in her condition and she has not yet received a transplant?

The situation does not only economic harm by forcing the vulnerable into even greater poverty, but psychological harm by increasing their stress, and their worry that their lives will be further impoverished by reductions. My constituent Lynda Hesketh, who is wheelchair-bound and who runs the Chester People Have Abilities group, describes to me her terror—that is her word—whenever a brown envelope drops through her letterbox; she worries that it is announcing a further cut to her support. Of course, many people with disabilities want to work and are capable of doing so, but they face cultural or physical barriers. The Government have made some progress in helping disabled people into work, but the disability employment gap has nevertheless widened slightly in recent years.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that having listened to the debate about quiet cities, we should listen to the quiet man, the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who was scathing about the current Government’s policies in this developing area?

Christian Matheson: We should listen to him. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) mentioned, it might have been more help if he had spoken up a little sooner, but none the less, better late than never. The advice that he gives is absolutely valid.

Of the 12 million people in the UK living with a disability, impairment or chronic illness, around 7 million are of working age. We know that 47% of working-age disabled people are in work, compared with almost 80% of working-age non-disabled people—a disability employment gap of more than 30%. That is important because it indicates not only the waste of the potential talent of disabled people who want to get into work but the fact that those forced off PIP and other benefits will have far less opportunity to make ends meet through their own efforts than through benefits. I welcome the Government’s determination to address those issues in the forthcoming White Paper, and I hope that the Minister might be able to give us a sneak preview today if at all possible.

I turn to employment and support allowance. The Government’s stated aim was to ensure that work became a way out of long-term illness and that benefits were focused on what a person can do as opposed to what they cannot do. That is all very laudable, of course, but again the reality was detached from the rhetoric. As the Work and Pensions Committee recognised, the focus on a return to work in such a short time was not appropriate for many claimants, and the work capability assessment failed to provide an accurate assessment of a claimant’s individual health-related employment barriers or distance from the labour market.

Through announcements by Lord Freud, the Government have now moved to make additional cash available to help disabled people return to work. That indicates that they accept that there was and remains a problem. Indeed, the Government’s intention to produce a White Paper, which I have just referred to and which is keenly if nervously awaited by disability charities and campaign groups, demonstrates that there is still a way to go.

Chester was one of the first areas to move to universal credit. We now hear that further cuts to the universal credit rate are likely to be coming down the line, to make up for the cost of the Government’s U-turn on tax credits. Such cuts will inevitably have a still further impact on those at the bottom of the pile. Indeed, from its inception, universal credit included the abolition of the severe disability premium of £61.85 a week, which was a massive and largely unpublicised cut in the benefit levels of the most severely disabled people, although, to be fair, it was mitigated by a degree of transitional protection for existing recipients. Consequently, many of the effects of the changes to universal credit are yet to be seen.

That brings me to my main point. With the combination of the changes to PIP, universal credit, ESA and other benefits, disabled people in particular are experiencing increasing insecurity and inequality. The effect on them and their friends and families is becoming tangible. We talk about the cutting of individual benefits, but when a combination of cuts falls on individuals or families, that has a greater effect. I therefore make one further request to the Minister, which is that the Government consider instituting a cumulative impact assessment to evaluate the overall combined consequences of the many different changes.

I will finish with two brief quotes. The first is somewhat truncated and is from July 2009:

“I do believe that you judge a society by the way it treats its most vulnerable… together we can create a society we are all… proud of.”

That was said by the then Leader of the Opposition, who is now our Prime Minister. Sadly, those pre-election words have come to nothing, as shown by my second quote, which is from Richard Atkinson, a disability rights adviser at DIAL House, which is Chester’s disability rights centre. He says:

“What we do know though, is that the barrage of cuts and their accompanying media offensive—orchestrated and encouraged by the government—have had a real effect on the security, self-worth and confidence of millions of disabled people. Here at DIAL West Cheshire, we see people every day who have become frightened and apologetic about their disability. They say to us, ‘I’m not one of these scroungers but…’, and they are afraid of being judged, reassessed and found wanting. I myself have MS and can’t walk well—but can and do cycle albeit on a tricycle. As well as being apprehensive about being transferred from DLA to PIP, I have had to become inured to comments like, ‘Why’s he carrying a crutch if he can cycle—to get benefits!’”

It is time for Government rhetoric and philosophy to change, to create the caring society that the Prime Minister claimed he wanted to see. It is time to treat disabled people with a dignity not currently afforded to them either in the benefits system and the process for accessing benefits or in the wider cultural context in which they live and we operate. It is time to take away
the sword of Damocles that is dangling above people who live every day with a disadvantage simply because they have been unlucky in life.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now have until 6.14 pm. When we get to the Front-Bench speeches, the recommended time limits for an hour-long debate are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for the official Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.24 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I had not intended to speak in this debate, but unfortunately my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) was called away and he has left me a pile of unreadable notes here, which was his speech. So I am sorry that I will not be able to read what he wanted to say—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): They are in Scots Gaelic.

Alison Thewliss: They could be in any language—I am not quite sure.

This opportunity to speak about the effect of social security changes on equality gives me the chance to mention something that I have mentioned several times before in the House, which is the impact on women of the proposed benefit changes, with particular reference to the two-child policy in tax credits and the rape clause that the Government have proposed. I have raised the two-child policy on several occasions; I am not sure whether I have yet raised it directly with the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, who is here today, but I am certainly yet to have an answer from the Government on it.

The two-child policy in tax credits perhaps sounds like a reasonable idea—people should not have unlimited access to benefits, and they should have the children that they can afford. However, that is not actually how life works or how families work. The policy does not really take into account the fact that someone may have had three or four children at a time when they could well afford them, but then real life gets in the way and they lose their job or their partner dies or takes ill. There is no means of recognising such a change in circumstances within the tax credit system. The system simply says that the benefit is calculated on the first two children somebody has, which, as I said, does not take into account how real life works.

With regard to equality, the policy does not take into account the impact that there might be on people of particular faith backgrounds, for whom larger families would be the norm. Those people may choose to have larger families because of their religious beliefs, and the policy has not been tested in that regard either. The Government have not done an impact assessment of the policy’s effect on people of a particular religion—be they Orthodox Jews, Catholics or Muslims—who may wish to have larger families for historical reasons. They have not taken that issue into account.

I also believe that the two-child policy does not take into account our obligations under the UN convention on the rights of the child, because it does not treat all children within a family equally. It says that the first two children in a family are somehow of greater value to the Government than the others. I believe that we should support all children within a family and make sure that each of them has enough to live on.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): On the subject of the inequality of treatment under the two-child rule, does the hon. Lady note the contrast between what is happening on tax credits and the childcare element of universal credit, which are to be limited to two children, and what is happening on childcare allowances? The latter are to be paid for as tax allowances of up to £2,000 a year, or up to 20% of £10,000 costs. They will go to better-off families, will not be limited by a two-child rule and will be bankable allowances, unlike what people will get under the childcare element of universal credit.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are a great many inconsistencies within the policy and a great many unanswered questions about it.

The rape clause puts particularly vulnerable women in an extremely difficult position, because the Government do not seem to realise that rape can happen within marriage as well as outside marriage. A woman may be in a relationship where she cannot tell the police about a rape, and no proof that she was raped can be found, but the Government somehow expect her to nip down to the benefit office and say, “Oh, this third child that I’d like to claim benefit for came about as the result of rape.” That is not something that many women would want to do, and I do not think that the issue has been fully thought through. There is also a problem if, as soon as the woman goes and claims that money, the man in the relationship, who has the power, knows that she has done so. Again, that will put her in a vulnerable position.

There is a similar situation with household payments under universal credit. The Government say that women can request split payments instead of the single household payment, but if a woman makes that request at her local Department for Work and Pensions office, the man will know it almost instantly, when the money that he is expecting does not come in. That woman will then have to suffer the consequences of that. Should she then leave that abusive relationship, if she has more than two children the tax credits system has no means of taking that into account. The system will not see that she could do with some extra support because she has left an abusive relationship. She may be in financial hardship, and she may have to put up with working extra hours or cutting her hours to look after her children. There are no means within the system to take into account that woman’s change of circumstances.

I appeal to the Government to consider the matter more carefully. It is an issue of inequality. Women are already not being treated equally under the system, and they are being further punished by the circumstances they are in. I urge the Government to take account of the religious aspects and the impact on women of their changes to benefit policy.
JIM SHANNON (STRANGFORD) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, Mr Hollobone. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing the debate. In Northern Ireland, we are shortly to come into the PIP system, and I will make some comments about that. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places. I look forward to their comments.

When the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions took over, he said that he wanted “to start a new conversation with disabled people, their representatives”—that is us in this room, councillors, Assembly Members, Members of the Scottish Parliament and so on—as well with healthcare professionals, who are the people who know best, and employers, in order to shape future policy. He also wanted “to take time to reflect on how best we support and help transform people’s lives.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1269.]

With that in mind, the conversation started a long time ago. The Minister knows the respect I have for him and I know he is interested in this matter, and I know that we will have a full and detailed response to our concerns. I honestly believe that his concerns are our concerns too.

Most of my comments will relate to my knowledge of the system and its shortcomings. It is unfortunate that in debates such as this we sometimes have to say what is wrong with the system, but the fact is that as elected representatives, people do not necessarily come to our advice centres and say, “You’ve done a great job. Have a nice day. How’s the football?” They come in to make their complaint. We have to put serious complaints to the Minister and make him aware of what is happening.

One concern that I have about the work capability assessment for ESA—I do not know how this happens—is that some of my constituents have to fill in ESA forms up to three times a year. My goodness me, how does the Department expect someone’s health to deteriorate or get better within four months? It is illogical. The assessment has to happen between three and six months before, so why does that happen? I stand to be corrected, but I am not aware of anyone who was receiving incapacity benefit in my constituency who was not turned down automatically when they were moved to ESA. I see that happening all the time. After being turned down automatically, they go to appeal and win it. There almost seems to be a presumption that individuals should not have been getting incapacity benefit and they certainly should not get ESA. I have to express that concern.

Another thing that comes to mind is the number of claimants with serious health conditions or disabilities who are found fit for work. I have one staff member who works full time on benefits cases. The role of the advice centre in my office has changed—its role was once about housing and planning, but now benefits are right up there next to those issues. I am sure that situation is replicated in the office of every Member. One problem is the number of people who are found fit for work or placed in the wrong ESA group due to deficiencies in the descriptors used or the assessment process. How can we do better on that?

The focus on returning to work within a relatively short period of time is not appropriate for many claimants. In England, 36% of all fit for work decisions in a given week were appealed against, and 52% of those appeals were won. We cannot ignore that fact. I make these points not to be aggressive or adversarial; I am trying to raise issues in a constructive fashion. There are deficiencies in the process, and other Members will no doubt speak about them.

As the Minister knows, this matter is devolved to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly has set aside £500 million for a further series of supplementary payments to carers, people suffering from ill health and families on low incomes. We have recognised that a number of issues have to be addressed. Will the Minister give his thoughts on that? Some 50,000 people in Northern Ireland receive the mobility component of the disability living allowance, and they are worried about the impact of PIP. Honestly, I sometimes wonder whether anyone sees the emotional effect that such things have on people. If they did, they would say, “The system needs to be changed.”

DLA will end in Northern Ireland on 20 June, and PIP will take over. The same contractor that looked after the system on the UK mainland will be taking over in Northern Ireland. I say this very respectfully, but we seek an assurance that the contractor is fit for purpose, fit to do the job in Northern Ireland and fit to do the job better. How will that company be monitored?

Families that include disabled people are more likely to be in receipt of state benefits than families with no disabled people. That fact should be recorded. The Government have announced further welfare measures that will affect disabled people, including a four-year freeze on most working-age benefits, changes to tax credits and universal credit and the abolition of the work-related activity component for new ESA claims from 2017. I am trying to be constructive, but can we have some assurance for those who are disabled? They are very worried about what will happen.

In Northern Ireland, more than 200,000 people receive disability living allowance. In a population of 1.8 million, that means that one in every nine people are receiving DLA. That compares to a figure of one in 20 on the UK mainland.

MARK DURKAN: I know that the hon. Gentleman is entirely sincere in registering his concerns, but they are contradicted by the fact that his party voted in the Assembly for a legislative consent motion that endorsed all the clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 as originally tabled. He and his colleagues also voted down amendments to the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill when we proposed them in the Chamber. Those amendments would have addressed exactly these issues.

JIM SHANNON: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—at least, I think I thank him. We know how the system works. We have made some changes to the system in Northern Ireland and made some concessions. If we want to change it more, we have to pay for it. I am sure that he can tell us where the money would come from. We need to make those decisions as well, and in Northern Ireland, those decisions are made by those in government who are responsible. They must make decisions
that do not run us into debt or extra problems. We agreed to that legislation because we cannot change everything that comes across from Westminster. The things we can change we do change—I will not comment on them now.

Kevin Doherty, the chief executive of Disability Action, has said that the growing number of people in receipt of DLA should be a sign to the Government that better services are needed. He stated:

“Disability Action would strongly recommend that the Government take heed of the rise in DLA recipients and continue to implement adequate and sustainable services that enhance the lives of disabled people.”

The number of people in receipt of DLA—or PIP, as it will be from 20 June—will continue to rise, and the number is greater in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That cannot be ignored.

Some people have argued that people take advantage of the system, but from my experience, I can confirm that all those who come to my office needing help with DLA forms are genuine and deserving individuals, and DLA and PIP are intended for those people. I am honestly not aware of anyone who has come to my office who did not deserve support, and my staff work very hard to ensure that those who need it get it. I am ever mindful that we are nobody’s judge in this world. We are here to help anyone who comes to our offices, and we do that.

It is important to say that the Northern Ireland Assembly has set aside money out of its block grant, money that we all agreed to—or at least the parties with responsible minds in Government agreed to it—so that we could look after those hit by the bedroom tax or the spare room subsidy, which is completely discriminatory towards those most genuinely in need. Where did that money come from? The direct budget. We set that money aside because we are a responsible Government, which is why, looking forward to the elections on 5 May, the Democratic Unionist party can honestly say, with no fear of contradiction, that we are building a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. We are doing that through responsible governance, paying our way and looking after the vulnerable, those on low incomes and in poverty, and the disabled. We are doing our best to ensure that they are looked after. I am sure that, when they respond, the Minister and shadow Minister will accept those points.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, after whom we will be able to hear again from Christian Matheson, who can sum up the debate at the end.

5.41 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing this important debate and congratulate him on having done so. I listened with a sense of admiration to the dignified way he made his case this afternoon. I know that he is a son of the isle of Skye—and he very much conducts himself in the manner of a Highland and island gentleman, if I can put it that way.

The hon. Gentleman discussed the use of taxation to create a more equal society, which is something with which the SNP wholeheartedly agrees. He asked the Minister whether he agrees; I must say that the evidence from the Government is that they certainly do not believe in the kind of things many of us do. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has been fastidious in highlighting the rape clause. I think she did so on Budget day last year when it came up, and I congratulate her on how she has pursued that case. She also addressed the issue of support for all children.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke passionately about the failings of ESA and PIP and the percentage of people who have won their appeal. There are real questions for the Minister to answer there.

Jim Shannon: If I may make one quick point, use of food banks is up 50% in Northern Ireland. We cannot ignore that fact. Disabled people, who need money the most, are using food banks more than ever. Why is that happening?

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and agree wholeheartedly with what he said. The Government must address not only the issue of those who are on benefits using food banks, but the fact that those in work are having to rely on them as well.

As the hon. Member for City of Chester said, it is noteworthy that the Resolution Foundation said last night that inequality in the UK has been falling recently but is projected to rise over the Parliament. That is a direct consequence of the Government’s policies. It is little wonder that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said, in the letter he sent to the Prime Minister to resign as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

“I hope as the government goes forward you can look again at the balance of the cuts you have insisted upon and wonder if enough has been done to ensure ‘we are all in this together.’”

That is exactly the point. Social security should lift people out of poverty and give the disadvantaged equal opportunities. That is what the Opposition are asking for. Instead, the Government have created a system that breeds inequality and institutionalises unfairness. The relentless attacks on sick and disabled people show how callous the Tories have become. As we say in Scotland, we are far scunnered at the policies of this Government.

Jim Shannon: We use the same words in Northern Ireland.

Ian Blackford: I am glad that my friends in Northern Ireland use the same words. We use other words as well.

Families with disabled people are more likely to be in receipt of state benefits than families with no disabled people. In 2013-14, 83% of families in the UK with at least one disabled adult and no disabled children were in receipt of state support, and 38% claimed an income-related benefit. Almost 75% of families with a disabled child and no disabled adults received state support, and 37% received an income-related benefit. Some 46% of families with no disabled adults or children received state support, and 12% received an income-related benefit.
We can see exactly how those who are looking after either disabled children or disabled adults rely on the state’s support; it is necessary.

It is little wonder that there is widespread fear among those in the disabled community about their vulnerability to an assault on social security, which often provides recipients with a level of dignity that the Government seem to want to undermine. The arbitrary £30-a-week cut to ESA is a regressive measure that is part of this Government’s continued attack on disabled people. The Government continue to peddle the lie that such cuts will incentivise disabled people to work. That is a cruel and completely misjudged justification. A review conducted by the House of Lords in December 2015 found no evidence that such cuts will incentivise work, and surveys by the Disability News Service and Mencap show that cuts will force sick people backwards and further away from getting back to work. Social security should lift people out of poverty and give the disadvantaged equal opportunities. Instead, we are breeding inequality and unfairness.

The Resolution Foundation recently called universal credit “a post-code lottery on steroids” because it has continued to be cut while similar cuts to tax credits have been scrapped. Universal credit will now be less generous than the benefit that it replaces. Where someone is in the country will determine whether they are eligible for universal credit or the existing system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central has said, women have been bearing the brunt of Tory welfare cuts, as they are twice as likely as men to rely on income from social security payments. Since 2010, £26 billion has been taken away from benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions, 85% of which has been taken from women’s incomes. That disgraces all of us.

Because of the time constraints, I will cut my remarks short, but I want to refer to the different agenda that we have in Scotland. The Scottish National party has pledged to restore housing benefits to 18 to 21-year-olds, giving back to Scotland’s young people what the Tories have taken away. That will protect 2,000 unemployed single people under 21. The SNP is also committed to treating disabled people with dignity and respect. Responsibility for disability benefits will be devolved to Scotland in 2018, and the SNP has pledged to chart a different course. The SNP’s compact with disabled people will treat everyone with fairness, respect and dignity. We will abolish the bedroom tax and increase carer’s allowance. We will continue the £52 million independent living fund, which was scrapped by the Tories. We will support disabled people into employment with a £20 million fund. We will maintain disability benefits when they are devolved to Scotland, not cut them. That is the difference that a caring Government who are on the side of the people will make. The Government in London must go back to the drawing board on social security to protect the disadvantaged and build a system based on equality, dignity and respect—all currently sadly lacking.

5.48 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I sincerely congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing the debate and his excellent contribution, and all Members on their contributions on such an important topic.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) mentioned the Resolution Foundation paper that was published yesterday. I used to work on inequality and there are a variety of ways of measuring it. He was probably talking about the Gini coefficient, which has been relatively flat over the past decade or so, but other data, such as those on the extremes of wealth in the top 1% compared with the bottom 1%, vary considerably. I will look at those data in a moment, but they show inequalities that hark back to the Victorian age. In fact, the International Monetary Fund has said that income inequality is “the defining challenge of our time.”

In the UK, 40 years ago, 5% of income went to the highest 1% of earners; today, 15% does. But this issue is about not just income but wealth. If we think back a few weeks to when the Panama papers were published, they revealed the shocking extent to which the assets of the richest are kept in offshore tax havens, where tax is avoided and evaded. According to the Equality Trust, another good source of data, in the past year alone the wealth of the richest 1,000 households in the UK increased by more than £28.5 billion. Today, their combined wealth is more than that of 40% of the population, which is equivalent to 10.3 million families—so, the wealth of 1,000 families is equivalent to that of 10.3 million families. While the wealth of the richest 1% has increased by 21%, the poorest half of society saw their wealth increase by less than a third of that. I could go on, but I have set the context.

Looking over the past six years at the regressive Budgets of this Government and the previous coalition Government, we should not be surprised. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown, last month’s Budget left people on low and middle incomes proportionately worse off as a result of tax and social security changes, which is what we are discussing today. Regressive economic policies that mean that the total tax burden falls predominantly on the poorest, combined with low levels of public spending, especially on social security, are key to establishing and perpetuating inequalities. In particular, those on low incomes, the sick and the disabled have been hammered by this Government.

Since the Welfare Reform Act 2012, according to analysis by Demos and Scope, 3.7 million sick and disabled people have had approximately £28 billion in social security support cut. That does not include the cuts that we have seen to social care, access to transport and support for disabled children in schools—right across the piece, disabled people have been hammered. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which has only just been given Royal Assent, will compound the effects of those cuts. The cut of £1,500 a year for people on ESA WRAG—the work-related activity group—and the £1,700 UC equivalent who have not been found fit for work is an anathema.

There is clear evidence from the Extra Costs Commission, as we have heard, that sick and disabled people face additional costs—estimated at £500 a month—because of their condition. The effect of further cuts in support will be to plunge even more sick and disabled people into poverty. We know that 5 million sick and disabled people are already living in poverty; what we do not
know is how many more will be pushed into poverty as a result of those measures, because the Government have not assessed that. It is shameful that the Government have not done so, or even looked at the implications for people’s condition.

I am sure that the Minister will respond by saying that the Act is about incentivising sick and disabled people into work, but again we have contradictory evidence from various reports. In connection with the disability employment gap, which remains stubbornly high, only 124 employers signed up to the Disability Confident campaign—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson) indicated dissent.

Debbie Abrahams: That is the latest figure from the website. Also, last year, fewer than 37,000 disabled people received support from Access to Work, out of the 1.3 million disabled people who are fit and able to work. Much, much more needs to be done. It does not stop there. Other cuts have included the bedroom tax, cuts to supported housing through the local housing allowance and the 1% cut in housing benefit—there has only been a reprieve for the next 12 months. I could also mention other cuts and policies such as sanctions. Those are all having and will continue to have an adverse effect on the sick and disabled.

This is the first time that the Minister and I have debated since the recent change in leadership at the Department. The new Secretary of State made sympathetic overtures in his statement to the House, and I welcome the Government’s U-turn on the cut to the personal independence payment proposed in last month’s Budget, but as the Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme a couple of weeks ago showed, the PIP assessment process is clearly not fit for purpose. According to a number of my constituents—if I have time, I would like to mention a couple of them—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady does not have the time. She has already gone well over her five minutes. I know she only has a page and a half to go. If she wants to quickly go through that, that will be fine, but she will have to draw her remarks to a close pretty quickly.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful for that, Mr Hollobone. I am sorry; I thought we were finishing at 6.14 pm.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We are finishing at 6.14 pm. I have to work within the recommended time limits given to me by Mr Speaker. In an hour-long debate, the limit is five minutes for the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, five minutes for the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson and 10 minutes for the Minister. The hon. Lady has now had the same time as the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, who went over. If she can draw her remarks quickly to a close, that will be fine.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful, Mr Hollobone, and will take your comments on board.

I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to the details I have sent him in writing regarding an inquiry to investigate the qualifications, training and behaviour of assessors; just how widespread the appalling behaviour we witnessed on that Channel 4 programme is; the validity and efficacy of the assessment tools—the Royal College of Psychiatrists was dismayed at the inappropriate standards and tools being used—particularly for people with chronic, fluctuating and mental health conditions; and the performance monitoring of contracts, not only in terms of activity levels but to ensure ethical standards of practice.

I have met many sick and disabled people since I was elected in 2011. Some are barely surviving and are hanging on by their fingertips. I genuinely fear for them. Of course, we know that many have not survived and have taken their own lives or just faded away.

Governing is about choices. The revenue lost to the Exchequer every year as a result of tax fraud is equivalent to what we spend on disabled people through DLA and PIP—£16 billion. If the Government truly believe in fairness and in addressing the real inequalities in this country, they need to reflect that in their policies. They need to clamp down on tax fraud and ensure that our most vulnerable in society are looked after properly, not plunged into poverty or worse. The Government should not just talk the talk, but walk the walk.

5.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who I know is widely respected in his local community. He is very passionate about this issue and raised a number of powerful points, as did many of the other hon. Members who contributed to what has been a good, constructive debate. In true tradition, I have not brought a pre-written speech but will do my best in 10 minutes to respond to as many of the points raised as possible.

I will start with PIP. A lot of the issues raised cut across many different Ministers’ areas, so I will spend the majority of my time on the areas for which I am responsible. PIP is my area. Time and time again, hon. Members say that life would have been better under DLA. The fact is that under DLA, 16% of claimants qualified for the highest rate of benefit. Under PIP, it is 22.5%. We are getting money to those who are most in need. That figure is even more stark if we look at things such as hidden impairments, including mental health issues. Under DLA, 22% of claimants with a mental health condition would expect to get the highest rate. Under PIP, that figure is 68%.

We continue to work with stakeholder groups and those with front-line expertise in order to continue improving the PIP assessments. It is fair to say that when PIP was introduced, Ministers were often in this Chamber explaining why things were not going right, but we have now been in a settled position for about a year. Currently, someone would be looking at an average of seven weeks to get an assessment, and 13 weeks end to end. That is widely respected as a settled and positive position. To put into context the extent of the improvement, there has been a three-quarter reduction since June 2014 in the time waiting for an assessment. Improvements are ongoing. I regularly meet with stakeholder groups and policy teams and am very much engaged with them.
Not unreasonably, Members have raised the issue of high appeal rates. That was one of the very first questions I asked when I became a Minister. On day one, I said, “Clearly there is something wrong, given the high appeal rates. Everybody down tools immediately and analyse what has gone wrong.” The vast majority of successful appeals, which account for only 2% of total claimants under PIP, are due to additional late submitted evidence, either written or oral.

When we send out a communication to tell somebody that they have not qualified for the level of benefit that they perhaps thought they were entitled to, we try to set out why very clearly. In some cases, those claimants realise that they have not submitted a piece of evidence. We then give them two further opportunities to submit that evidence: one is the mandatory reconsideration, and if they are still unhappy, there is the independent appeal process. We try to be as clear as we can be.

In a utopian world we would have a big supercomputer—a former Labour Government tried their best to deliver this; unfortunately, from our perspective, that did not work—and a claimant would phone and give their national insurance number, and we would have access to all of their medical records. We would not have to rely on late submitted evidence. We are trying to improve that; we have just announced that assessors will get an additional 10 working days to help claimants gather that evidence.

I also gently remind Members that, under the DLA, 70% of claimants were given an indefinite award. That sounds good, but the reality is that the condition of one in three claimants changes significantly within 12 months. If they are on an indefinite award, they may not necessarily pick up the phone and ask for a review. We were seeing more and more people staying on a lower rate of benefit indefinitely, because that is the point at which they entered, when in fact they were entitled to a higher rate. That is another reason why we are seeing the difference between the 16% and the 22.5%.

We all support the principle of halving the disability employment gap. Giving those with a disability the opportunity to work is good for them. On my visits with stakeholder groups—particularly with young ambassadors—I say, “You are the Minister for the day. What would you like to do?” Time and again they want the same opportunities that their friends take for granted. We are making progress: 152,000 more disabled people are in work at the moment on how we can promote the scheme, particularly to small and medium-sized enterprises that are often too busy to notice Government initiatives. We then give them two further opportunities to submit that evidence: one is the mandatory reconsideration, and if they are still unhappy, there is the independent appeal process. We try to be as clear as we can be.

We have secured additional funding for access to work, which helps about 36,500 people a year; we have funding to help a further 25,000 per year. That is the Government contributing to remove barriers to help people with disabilities into work. We are doing a lot of work at the moment on how we can promote the scheme, particularly to small and medium-sized enterprises that are often too busy to notice Government initiatives. I want to see a lot more business engagement, so that they understand the importance of this. We are keen to make sure that that money is well utilised. There are further opportunities. A lot of emphasis is going into providing jobcentre staff with additional training, particularly with things such as the hidden impairment toolkits, which the stakeholder groups are helping to design.

The hon. Member for City of Chester used the phrase “waste of talent”. That is absolutely spot on. Businesses that are struggling to fill skill gaps are missing out. I say this as somebody who benefited directly from employing disabled people in my former life, when I ran my own small business. The White Paper is a real opportunity to make some of those significant differences.

Many Members have raised concerns about the ESA work capability assessment. That is not directly my responsibility, but I understand the points raised. As it stands today, typically 1% of those on ESA will come off the benefit every month. That is the same for this Government as it was for the coalition Government, and the Labour Government who introduced it in the first place. There is no way of describing that as anything other than unacceptable, and the White Paper is a real opportunity for us to look at that. I was asked if I could give a sneak preview; I genuinely cannot.

We want to work with those stakeholders. The new Secretary of State has made it very clear that they will be at the heart of what we do. I personally know from my regular meetings with them that they have fantastic policy teams. There is no point in reinventing the wheel when often they have some very good, constructive ideas. The themes that we will be building around are those localised solutions, tailored to the individual, and recognising that everybody has their own unique challenges and opportunities.

From my perspective, we need to make sure that we do not forget that we need businesses to engage. It is one thing getting the individuals looking for work to play by the rules and engage in the different work programmes, but if there are not job opportunities at the end they will continue to loop through the system, attending yet another 12-week programme, during which their enthusiasm will further wane.

Many Members touched on universal credit. Again, I think there is accepted support for the principle. It is simplified—someone would have to be a nuclear physicist to navigate the current complex array of benefits that they might or might not be entitled to. We all know through our casework that individual constituents often miss out.

However, the area that most excites me is that for the first time ever, people will have a named coach. Time and again, people are frustrated that they have to go and explain their challenges to another person, which creates further frustration and reasons not to engage. That named coach will be there to provide support, helping people to navigate not only their opportunities to get into work, but other challenges that they might have—such as accessing child care, additional support and dealing with issues such as personal debt—and signposting them through to additional training. For the first time ever, that named coach will continue to support people when they go into work. If someone goes into their first job, perhaps on the national living wage, and keeps turning up and doing the right thing, the named coach might say, “Do you want me to speak to the supervisor to see if you can get promoted to other roles?”—doing things that we would often take for granted and helping people with opportunities.

We all quote different papers with figures that suit our argument, but the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that households will be £100 billion a year better off by 2020. We have introduced the national
living wage. I know that some hon. Members will question—perhaps tongue in cheek—whether that is genuinely a national living wage, but we are anticipating it to be more than £9 by 2020. I seem to recall from my opponent’s election leaflets that he was advocating just over £8, so it is £1 higher than the Opposition proposed.

Rightly, we have been increasing the personal allowance. It will go up to £11,500 by April 2017 and will continue to rise to £12,500. We have legislated that it will then follow inflation. Living standards reached their highest ever level in 2015 after growing at their fastest rate in 14 years. Living standards have improved by 2.6% over the last year and employment has gone up by 2.4 million since the 2010 election.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I am very short of time, and I want to deal with a few more specific points that Members have raised.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) because, although we may disagree on many of the points raised, he makes very clear alternative suggestions. It is one thing to criticise the Government but, to his credit, he sets out how his party would do things differently. I have always said that I will look very closely at what our friends in Scotland do. If something works there, we will be first in the queue.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made a very powerful point—and has done so consistently for a period of time—to do with rape. Lord Freud has said that he is going to look further at that, and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for making powerful points in that area.

On the points made by hon. Members about women, I would say that tax-free childcare for working families—30 hours a week of free childcare for three and four-year-olds—will make a significant difference. Two thirds of the 2.8 million people who have directly benefited from the national living wage are women, and, on the increased personal allowance, 59% of the people who have been taken out of paying any tax at all are women. These are key issues.

There is still much more to do. My door is always open to Members who have constructive suggestions and ideas on how we can make improvements. I want finally to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); he has often taken up that opportunity and those are the sorts of things that shape the way in which the Government are helping to support the most vulnerable in society.

6.8 pm

Christian Matheson: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and all hon. Members for having taken part in the debate. I confirm to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that my grandfather was indeed from Skye, so I am a proud grandson, at least, of Skye.

I am grateful to the Minister for his response. My one concern, which I ask Members to dwell on as we close, is that the system does not take into account how real life works, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) mentioned. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the fact that he sees nobody coming into his constituency surgeries or his constituency office who is somehow a bogus claimant. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned problems in the assessment procedures and qualifications for assessment.

In thanking the Minister for his response, I ask him to ensure that the reality on the ground matches the aspirations that he has set out in his speech today, and which, as hon. Members have mentioned, often does not match the hopes that Ministers have. I am grateful to you for your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I am most grateful to hon. Members for their participation today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of social security changes on equality.

6.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 27 April 2016

[ALBERT OWEN in the Chair]

Violence against Women and Girls (Sustainable Development Goals)

9.30 am

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered violence against women and girls and the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, on this fine crisp morning. I do not need to rehearse to many Members in the Chamber the importance of the sustainable development goals. Many Members and the Minister and his Department have worked hard on refining and developing the goals. Goal 5 is to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. That is the most important goal in our efforts to combat violence against women and girls. A number of targets flow from it, directly addressing the issue. In particular, the second target under goal 5 is to “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation”.

The third target is to “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation”.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): May I suggest that we add breast ironing to that list of harmful practices? People do not know much about it, but it tries to damage the young breast to stop it developing because of a misconception that the child will then not go through puberty and develop. It is incredibly destructive. People do not know about it, in the same way that we did not know about FGM.

Mark Durkan: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. So much work has been done under the sustainable development goals. We have a target that gives examples, and we now have awareness of other things that might well have been included as examples, such as breast ironing. Her point proves that the sustainable development goals should not be seen as frozen in cold print on the page. They are meant to be an ongoing, changing, ever-improving and ever-strengthening commitment on all our parts. Remember, they are universal goals. That is one reason why we need to demarcate the sustainable development goals from the millennium development goals in terms of their universality. We want to see the infrastructure of commitment, investment and intervention underpinning the sustainable development goals.

The Minister will face many questions and hear many suggestions in this debate on assurances that he can give on behalf of the Department for International Development and the Government more widely. He is responding on behalf of DFID, but the universal goals are not just about what happens in other countries. We should be supporting and helping to foster those goals, but the goals also involve commitments and standards in our countries and jurisdictions. That is not just the responsibility of Ministers and all of us who serve in this House, but people at other levels, including devolved levels.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point that this is not just a DFID issue. These things happen in this country every day. The pressure group End Violence Against Women has pointed out that 146,000 domestic violence incidents were recorded in London in 2015. There were 5,500 rapes, 300 cases of forced marriage and honour-based violence and thousands of prostitution cases. Specialist support services for all those things are being cut. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to be looking at the issue at home, too?

Mark Durkan: Absolutely. The issues do not just happen elsewhere; they happen here, and we need to fully understand that. We also need to understand the range of interventions and support required not only to raise awareness and improve behavioural standards and expectations, but to respond better to violence against women and girls where it happens. We need to ensure that women and girls feel more empowered, more enabled, much better supported and truly vindicated and justified when they come forward to report and to tell. We have to give them that comfort and confidence.

There are huge issues that we need to address, and that is why the universality of the goals can be so important. It allows Governments and Parliaments in the developed world to make it clear to our colleagues in the developing world that this is not just about us saying that they have to catch up with us; we, too, are on a page of learning and a journey of understanding in our awareness of the issues. In that context, I acknowledge the range of briefings we have received from many different charities, non-governmental organisations and campaign groups.

I am sure many Members will have questions for the Minister, but we have to ask questions as parliamentarians about how we do our bit to ensure meaningful coherence around the range of sustainable development goals and their interpretation and application. We also need to ensure better adherence in their implementation and realisation. We therefore have to ask not only how Government will provide joined-up management and oversight of the issues, but how we as a Parliament can get better at providing joined-up scrutiny of and support for such initiatives and investments.

It will not be enough for us just to say, “The International Development Committee will be able to oversee all these things, and we are leaving domestic and sexual violence at home to the Home Affairs Committee and the Justice Committee.” We need to think about something more bespoke and dedicated. We need to recognise that though some of the goals and targets will be amenable to particular scrutiny and oversight by respective Select Committees, others will fall in the shadows between Select Committees and perhaps need a more dedicated audit mechanism to pick them up.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): My helpful advice to the hon. Gentleman is that leaving anything to the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice will leave enormous gaps, because domestic violence and sexual violence commissioning are almost exclusively done by
local government and devolved authorities. I suggest we call on the Minister to look for something that will tie everything together and not just leave domestic violence in its silos.

Mark Durkan: I am sure that the Minister will have heard that call and will ensure that others hear that call, but there are questions for us at a parliamentary level on what we do to ensure real parliamentary tracking and backing of what is happening with the goals, particularly with the vexed, serious and sometimes invisible issue of violence against women and girls.

I called this debate in response to a long lobbying campaign by ActionAid. I am just one of many MPs who responded to that fearless campaign by applying for this debate. I acknowledge the work of ActionAid and all its supporters in campaigning and the quality of the briefing it provided to us. I hope I can leave it to other Members to pick up on that in their contributions.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Will he join me in commending the state-sanctioned violence against women and girls in North Korea? Technically, that country joined in support of the SDGs last autumn, but it operates violence against women and girls as a tool of oppression. Even the UN has described it in a report as having human rights violations that “reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world”.

Those violations include sexual violence; exploitation; rape; forced abortion; human trafficking; institutional, economic and psychological violence; slavery; and torture, even until death. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK must use what limited engagement it has with North Korea—it is mainly via the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—to press for change? Also, will he join with me and other parliamentarians in putting on the record that the abused women of North Korea are not forgotten here?

Mark Durkan: Yes to all those points and questions. That is not to belittle or trivialise the seriousness of them, but as the chair of the all-party group for Sudan and South Sudan I want to address other countries’ specific issues.

I mentioned that we have received a strong briefing from ActionAid, and it has been working with Womankind Worldwide. The Minister will know everything that ActionAid is arguing for in respect of how we take forward the goal and the targets, including its work with Womankind Worldwide in advocating for a voice, choice and control fund. He knows the main argument: such a fund would take an integrated approach that would address the structural causes of gender inequality, giving women’s rights organisations the support that they need to lead the transformation of societies and economies towards an enabling environment, so that women can realise their full potential and enjoy their whole spectrum of rights.

A second objective would be to increase the quality of funding available to organisations and movements, including those led by adolescent girls, women with disabilities and LGBTI groups.

Dr Philippa Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Does he agree that, from the developmental point of view, putting more of our effort and money into helping girls and women strengthens the whole community?

Mark Durkan: Yes, it is one of the best ways of fulfilling the “leave no one behind” principle. Investments and interventions to support women and girls would be one of the best multiplier contributions that could be made towards fulfilling not only those targets and objectives, but others as well. The enablement and empowerment that comes with advancing the position of women and girls, allowing them to counter the ravages of sexual and other violence, would be one of the most transformative things. So if we want a real change multiplier in any society, we must address the position of women and girls. Our own history and social experience demonstrate that.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle on securing this important debate. Women and girls are rightly at the forefront and at the heart of DFID’s activities. I commend the Secretary of State at DFID for fighting so hard in the face of real opposition to achieve stand-alone goal 5, which is a gender equality and empowerment goal that is very important indeed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the goals are to be achieved, including goal 5, we have to turn billions into trillions in development finance? For that to happen, we have to do much more work with the private sector.

Mark Durkan: I fully accept what the hon. Lady has said. Again, that raises the question of our long-term commitment. It is great that we are able to celebrate the sustainable development goals, but we have to plan for what will be achieved by them. Making commitments is important, but making the commitments work well and developing them and growing them is even more important, and that is what we need to do.

I want to acknowledge the briefings that we have received; I hope that other hon. Members will be able to do more justice to them than I can in the time that I want to take—and the time I do not want to take—in this opening speech. We have received an important contribution from UNICEF, which has done so much in terms of the sustainable development goals and on the whole question of violence in all its forms as it affects children, particularly girls. I say that as a parliamentary champion of UNICEF.

We have also had important briefings from Christian Aid and Amnesty International. I hope other hon. Members will be able to take up some of the asks suggested in those briefings to ask the Minister about how DFID will pursue these goals alongside the others. Similarly, we have a useful contribution from the Bond SDG group, which raises the question of the parliamentary commitment to oversight of the goals, rather than simply the governmental commitment.

I told the hon. Member for Congleton that I had a country-specific issue of my own to raise as the chair of the all-party group on Sudan and South Sudan.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Before the hon. Gentleman moves on to Sudan, may I take him across the world to Afghanistan? British troops made an enormous sacrifice in terms of lives lost in Afghanistan, but they also made a tremendous contribution to rebuilding
schools for girls and women teachers to avoid the violence that had been meted out to them by the Taliban and others. In the hon. Gentleman able to update us on the status of women and girls in terms of education in Afghanistan post the withdrawal of British troops?

Mark Durkan: I am not in a position to speak authoritatively on that, but I am sure the Minister will be able to answer those points. The hon. Member for North Down has drawn attention to the issue of education and schools, an issue that the all-party group on protecting children in armed conflict, which existed in the previous Parliament, addressed. In the context of conflict and humanitarian crises, education was not always to the forefront in the immediate interventions that were planned, and DFID acknowledged that it was not so much a lower order but a later order consideration in its response to crisis and emergencies.

The points in the report, which were well supported by the charity War Child when the APPG was chaired by Fiona O'Donnell, are being taken forward now in the APPG on global education for all, working with the Global Campaign for Education. The urgency of delivering children's right to education during crisis is highlighted in the report, “Education cannot wait”. One of the points emphasised is that education investment in schools in conflict and post-conflict situations is good because it helps to save boys from falling prey to being recruited as child soldiers and then being corrupted into engagement in violence against women and girls. It also gives girls the opportunity of education and the transformative empowerment that that gives them.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in order to ensure that girls can be taught safely in Afghanistan, security is absolutely key? Will he urge the Minister to look at the situation in the federally administered tribal areas of Pakistan, the buffer zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the Pakistani army is keeping the peace, but no one is urging rather than begrudging the very good efforts that have already been made by Government. We are urging the Government because they have earned the position of leading positively on various issues internationally.

As chair of the APPG on Sudan and South Sudan, I am conscious of the report by the charity Waging Peace last November. “Rape in Darfur—A History of Predation” had nine key recommendations and some telling observations. If I may advertise, hon. Members can sign early-day motion 903, which takes points from the report, before the end of this Session.

Waging Peace stated:

“Our testimonies indicate that in Darfur the measure that works best at preventing sexual violence is the physical protection offered by the region’s United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission, UNAMID...However, it is in the immediate vicinity of the UNAMID-controlled compounds that our testimonies indicate that the worst abuses occur. Almost two-thirds of the victims report being raped upon leaving the relative safety of UNAMID-controlled zones: either to collect firewood, perform agricultural work while living in temporary accommodation near farms, or to collect personal belongings immediately following a displacement. The similarity in the accounts provided in the testimonies suggests that such attacks...have become routine.”

In the context of UNAMID, it goes on to suggest community liaison assistants on a model similar to that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The criticism of what is happening near UNAMID’s location is supported by a former spokesperson for the African Union-UN mission in Darfur, Aicha Elbasri, who has effectively turned whistleblower. She says,

“Victims of rape, systematic rape and mass rape in Darfur suffer in silence, as the use of these horrible crimes as weapons of war no longer commands international attention. But brutal attacks on the bodies and souls of women and girls continue unabated, and may have worsened in the absence of public scrutiny.”

Reports by Waging Peace go some way to redressing the balance.

I want to draw particular attention to the law in Sudan and the issue of zina, which really affects victims there. Waging Peace says:

“While we recognise that international pressure contributed to the Sudanese government amending controversial laws around rape in early 2015, the changes did not go far enough. Formerly, under Article 149 of the Sudanese Criminal Code of 1991, rape was defined as ‘zina’, meaning intercourse outside marriage, without consent. If women or girls reported a rape but could not produce the necessary evidence, including witness statements from four males confirming that the act was ‘without consent’, they would instead be charged with ‘zina’ (adultery), and face being jailed, flogged or stoned to death. The law was changed in 2015 to reflect the fact that rape involves physical or psychological coercion, but Article 62 of the country’s 1994 Evidence Act remains unchanged, meaning four male witnesses are still required in cases of this kind. This places a prohibitive burden of proof on victims of sexual violence.”

It also means that victims still fear that they, not their attackers, will be punished if they reveal what has happened to them. In the context of the renewal of dialogue between the UK and Sudan and with Governments being invited to be involved in the wider Khartoum process, as it is known, there are issues that must be addressed.

If you will allow me, Mr Owen, I want to put in a further plug. One of the key reporters of the mass rape of girls in Darfur is Eric Reeves, who will meet the all-party group on Sudan and South Sudan on 7 June, I think—certainly that week. He has called the continuing mass rape of girls in Darfur the “most heinous crime” that “generates no international outrage”. I hope that we can reflect some of that outrage.

The problem does not exist only in Sudan. A recent report by the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust—HART—addresses the issues in South Sudan. It says:

“Some 185,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) have sought refuge in UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites, while around 90 per cent of IDPs are on the run or sheltering outside PoC sites...Nearly one in every three schools in South Sudan has been destroyed, damaged, occupied or closed, impacting on the education of more than 900,000 children, including some 350,000 who have been forced out of school by the conflict.”

Elsewhere in the report is the observation:

“An adolescent girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in childbirth than complete primary school.”

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this extremely important debate. Does he...
agree that it is really important that we obtain disaggregated data on young women and girls with disability? They are doubly at risk because of their vulnerability to violence and sexual violence and because they could be left behind.

Mark Durkan: I fully concur with the hon. Lady. Her point echoes one made in a previous Westminster Hall debate. The issue is not only girls with disabilities, but indigenous people and others who might be marginalised in their society.

I want to read out one more quote from the HART report:

“The overall death toll is unknown. In Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties of Unity State alone, an estimated 1,000 civilians were killed, 1,300 women and girls were raped and 1,600 women and children were abducted from April to September 2015.”

That was not so long ago. The report is aptly titled “They are killing us loudly, but no one is listening”. This debate is an opportunity for us to show that we are listening, and hopefully we will be able to show how we will follow through on the commitments and targets in goal 5.

We must show that we are not just listening but working effectively in support of those women and girls who are confronted by violence and those who are trying to be advocates for them. Let us remember that in many areas women who are active human rights and women’s rights defenders are particularly targeted. Violence and sexual violence are used against them in so many countries. I am sure that other Members will address some of those points in their contributions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Before I call David T. C. Davies, I should say that a large number of Members have requested to speak in this debate. I do not want to enforce a time limit, but if Members limit their remarks to five minutes, everyone who has requested to speak will be able to do so.

9.55 am

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Owen. I will try to comply with your request.

I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for raising this very important issue. I became interested in the subject almost 10 years ago, when I sat on the Home Affairs Committee, which conducted an inquiry into honour killings, female genital mutilation and forced marriage. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on being one of the people who helped to bring this subject to the forefront.

Over the past 10 years, a lot of moves have been made to raise these very difficult issues, but I am still concerned that not enough action is being taken. We now have strong legislation against female genital mutilation, but I think we have had only one arrest and no convictions whatever. Around six years ago, I spent a lot of time trying to get information out of the Metropolitan police about how many investigations they had carried out. I eventually had to go to the Information Commissioner to find out that, in fact, they had done very little.

We all know that these are difficult issues to raise. There is a reluctance to raise them because of a perception that to do so is in some way racist. I do not accept that at all. I recently met some women of Islamic heritage, if I can put it like that, including Maryam Namazie, who said that one of the problems is that it is racist not to raise these issues. I have particular concerns about attitudes towards women within the Muslim community—not in general, of course, but certainly not enough is being done.

Mrs Helen Grant: Does my hon. Friend agree that to achieve our goals and to stop the type of abuse he is describing, we need an absolutely massive leap in women’s economic empowerment? Although we have made good progress, there are still far too many glass ceilings that need to be shattered.

David T. C. Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I shall mess up my speech a bit now by saying something I was going to say at the end. One of the more respected organisations in the Muslim community in the UK is the Muslim Council of Britain, yet looking at some of the organisations affiliated to it gives rise to a lot of concerns. For example, one affiliated group is the Blackburn Muslim Association—another organisation that is in receipt of public funds. My hon. Friend mentioned women in the workplace; the Blackburn Muslim Association says:

“It is not permissible for a woman to travel a distance exceeding 48 miles without a Husband or a Mahram (those men who can never marry the woman)” — in other words, a close male relative. It goes on to quote from chapter 74 of the Book of Hajj, and then ends by saying—this is all in English, by the way—that “it will not be permissible for a woman to travel individually or with a group of women except with a Mahram or her husband, and this ruling applies to any form of travel including the journey for Hajj”.

This is an organisation that is publicly funded and affiliated to allegedly one of the most moderate Muslim groups in Britain saying that a woman should not be able to travel more than 48 miles because, presumably, that is how far a woman would have been able to travel in three days in 7th-century Saudi Arabia. How on earth will we be able to integrate women in the workplace and encourage equality when there are publicly funded organisations putting out such nonsense?

Dr Huq: I completely accept the hon. Gentleman’s point. All of us elected officials in this Chamber must be wary of community leaders who command airspace and the ear of officialdom and purport to speak—I say this as, I think, the only elected Muslim woman in the room—for the faith of Islam, which is a worldwide religion. We should not give these people who speak in the name of an entire world faith the credence that they have.

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Muslim women in London recently pointed out to me that whenever we see these organisations, we always seem to be talking to the men. We are not doing nearly enough to talk to Muslim women. Presumably, there are Muslim women’s organisations, but why are they not at the forefront, and why are women not at the forefront of these other organisations? The hon. Lady is absolutely correct that we need to address that.
Very quickly—I cannot see how long I have been speaking on this clock—[Hon. Members: “Four and a half minutes.”] In that case, very, very quickly, I am extremely concerned about sharia courts, which are spreading across the UK, because sharia law in some ways advocates violence against women and allows beating. I do not suggest that that is going on in the sharia courts that we have at the moment, but unless the people running them are willing to reject that notion absolutely, I have grave concerns about allowing sharia courts to make any judgments in the UK. I am particularly concerned to learn that one High Court judge sits on those courts.

I am also concerned about the rise of the wearing of the veil and the fact that it is going on in schools. I think the veil is a symbol of violence against women. It sends out a message to women that they are property and should not be looked at, and it gives men an excuse. It almost sends out a message that a man has a right to sexually attack an uncovered woman. I know that that happens on only a minority of occasions, although there was a dreadful instance of it in Cologne. The message has to go out to all men in all communities that they have absolutely no right to attack women under any circumstances whatever. The veil gets in the way of that.

There is much more that I could say. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle again. If we cannot get things right in our own country—

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: At the Chair’s discretion, yes.

Imran Hussain: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that women have freedom of choice in exercising the right to wear a veil if they want to? The connection that he makes between attacks on women and the wearing of veils is worrying. I feel that he should retract some of those words.

David T. C. Davies: It is a right, and I would not want to take it away, but it needs to be challenged. We certainly need to challenge the reasons behind it.

Jess Phillips: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: No, it would not be fair to other people. I hope the hon. Lady gets a chance to speak later.

It is vital that we take up the issues that the hon. Member for Foyle spoke about in countries around the world, from Afghanistan to Sudan. If we cannot get things right in our country, and if we are not willing to challenge people in our country about their belief systems, we cannot expect other countries to take notice of us.

10.2 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for making such a coherent and detailed case.

Without doubt, women’s empowerment is crucial to achieving sustainable growth and development across the world, so we need to address that issue. According to the UN, more than one in three women experience physical or sexual violence, mostly from an intimate partner. As my party’s equalities spokesman, I am very happy to contribute to this debate. The hon. Gentleman referred to goal 5, on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. That is exactly what I am going to speak about, and I will give a few examples.

The Home Office has published its refreshed strategy for ending violence against women and girls, and it has said that in 2017 a service transformation fund will be launched to encourage new approaches. It is most welcome that the Government are taking this issue seriously and are taking action but, as the hon. Gentleman said in his introduction, we cannot take our eyes off the ball. As I have said previously, it is all too easy to forget those who are thousands of miles away. Sadly, nations such as ours, which have the influence to make a difference, too often turn a blind eye.

Let me give a couple of examples of where equality for women does not exist. I could give dozens if I had the time, but I do not. This is the story of a 12-year-old girl—Kakenya Ntaiya, a member of Kenya’s Maasai tribe:

“When I was 12 years old, my family organized a ceremony to transition my sisters and myself to become women...I was first because I was the oldest. I was told to open my knees, so I opened them. A woman grabbed my clitoris and cut it off. I bled. I fainted. But I am so lucky I am alive, because so many girls die from this.”

She had no idea that the ceremony would include female genital mutilation until after the woman made the cut.

The second story is of a young girl from India. While still a teenager, Monica Singh had the courage to stand up for her rights and to say no to a marriage proposal from an older man. However, she paid a very high price for claiming control of her future. After the rejection, the man tried to intimidate her into marrying him by repeatedly stalking and harassing her on her way home from school. She was just a teenager. One day, the man blocked her path completely. She said:

“Before I knew it, a bucket of acid was thrown on me...All I could feel was searing pain. Ninety per cent of my body had no skin left, and 65 per cent was permanently disfigured. I had to undergo 46 surgeries and be fed through a straw for more than a year of my life.”

When we hear such horror stories from across the world—not film stories, but stories from real life—we cannot fail to be annoyed.

When it comes to sex, no still does not mean no in some parts of the world. In Singapore and India, non-consensual sex within marriage is not a criminal offence and does not constitute rape as long as the wife is above a certain age—15 in India and 13 in Singapore. In Yemen, where child marriage is rife, there is no lower age limit for defining rape in marriage. Laws affecting people’s national identity continue to discriminate against women. In Jordan and Lebanon, a child needs a Jordanian or Lebanese father to automatically gain citizenship; their mother’s nationality is not passed on. Again, that is clear discrimination against women.

There are 46 countries that do not provide legal protection against domestic violence. In Nigeria, it is within a husband’s legal rights to beat his wife for the purpose of correcting her, as long as it does not cause grievous bodily harm. What is grievous bodily harm, if not beating one’s wife? Whether it is done gently—if
there is such a thing—or ferociously to the point of drawing blood or breaking bones, it is grievous bodily harm.

A fatwa imposed in 1990 makes Saudi Arabia the only country in the world in which women are forbidden to drive. Although a fatwa is not an official law, it is a religious declaration that carries the authority of law and imposes strict modes of behaviour. There are more female fighter jet pilots in neighbouring Jordan than women who can drive in Saudi Arabia—that is a fact. Saudi Arabia’s recent progress on women’s rights offers some hope. Saudi women were allowed to vote in municipal elections, and 19 women gained seats in local authorities—a landmark moment in the country’s recent history. We have to be mindful of the need to respect sovereignty, but the international community has to come together to address this issue and put deserved pressure on Administrations, wherever they are in the world, to abandon such blatantly sexist legislation. Sadly, that is not even the tip of the iceberg. We have barely scratched the surface, although we will do so in this debate.

I will conclude on this point, because I want to keep to my five minutes. There needs to be pressure from a co-ordinated international effort to confine such blatantly sexist laws to the history books. We must condemn practices such as FGM and acid attacks. We have a lot to do, but this House can take a stand today. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

10.7 am

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on securing this debate, and I thank the men who have come to speak. It is very important that men speak up for women; it is great to see that.

I had the pleasure of representing this country at the United Nations negotiations at which the sustainable development goals were agreed. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for International Development, who has consistently pushed for a strong and explicit commitment to empowering girls and women and achieving gender equality. The SDGs are universal, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. We have to think about what that means for us here. There is no room for complacency. I pay tribute to ActionAid for its excellent Fearless campaign, which draws attention to the fact that this phenomenon affects countries worldwide, including the UK.

According to Home Office figures, up to 3 million women and girls in our country experience rape, domestic violence, stalking and other forms of violence every year. I set up a charity in my constituency to help the help of volunteers. It was only then that I realised that domestic violence is no respecter of class or religion. It cuts across the whole community in every one of our constituencies. I also pay tribute to the fact that the popular media have done well in drawing attention to the fact that this happens everywhere, all around us and far too often.

I found it shocking that, when 18 to 25-year-olds were polled by MORI about their attitudes to violence in girl-boy relationships, one in five young men said they thought it is normal. Even more disturbingly, one in nine girls thought that violence is a normal part of girl-boy relationships. That set me on the course, with the charity, of trying to prevent that attitude from persisting in our society. We supported a charitable project called Keep Cool to teach youngsters at the top of primary school, before they move on to secondary school, that violence is not a normal part of relationships. Sadly, the funding for it no longer exists, so, through the good offices of the Minister present, I ask the Government to look at preventing the prevalence of acceptance of violence in our society.

Something that hon. Members might not know is where the phrase “rule of thumb” comes from. It has been said to come from a law of 1861 that allowed a man to beat a woman with a stick as long as it was no wider than a thumb. Luckily, it has been repealed, but it shows how accepted that was in our society, and how hard we need to continue to work to eradicate such acceptance.

The domestic violence statistics have remained stubbornly and depressingly high: sadly, two women and two children a week die as a result of domestic violence. I am using this opportunity for us to reflect on what the sustainable development goals mean for us, although of course I recognise that right around the world many women—many very poor women—are in a difficult position, in violent and abusive relationships.

On the brighter side, I commend the work of many British-registered charities in empowering women. Through Tearfund, I saw at first hand, in Bangladesh, how female garment workers are being empowered by mobile banking to return their wages to the homes and communities that they come from, without the middleman taking a cut, resulting in the transformation of those villages through solar power and sanitation, and in the opportunity for many of their siblings and families to secure an education.

As key decisions about the future funding of DFID’s key priorities approach, as part of the upcoming civil society partnership review, donor leaders such as the UK can prioritise and target resources effectively to help to end violence against women and girls. I strongly recommend that we do.

10.11 am

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on bringing the debate to the House today. He said, rightly, that we should be listening, and raising our voice. I want to highlight in the UK Parliament the continuing plight of the Nigerian female students abducted by Boko Haram. I want to talk briefly about the specificity of the crime, which is worth narrating, and, more broadly, about violence against girls, in particular in education.

Simon Schama, the historian, wrote well when he stated:

“Education, the idea of teaching our children something other than the parroting of sacred texts, has become a target.”

That is not only aimed at girls, but they are a particular focus for radical Islamists.
On the night of 14 to 15 April 2014, 276 female students were kidnapped from the government secondary school in the town of Chibok in Borno state, Nigeria. Responsibility for the kidnappings was claimed by Boko Haram, an extremist and terrorist organisation based in north-eastern Nigeria. Over the next few months, 57 of the schoolgirls managed to escape, but the 219 remaining girls are still missing and have now been away from their families for 744 days, subjected to God knows what at the hands of the terrorists. On 14 April this year, a video was obtained showing 15 of the hostages in black robes. It was the first time they had been seen since May 2014. It is widely believed that the girls, who have forcefully been denied their education, are being held as a negotiating tool.

The wonderfully brave and inspirational Malala Yousafzai, who fled the Taliban in Pakistan, which wanted to deny her an education, came to learn in the great city of Birmingham. She wrote an open letter to the parents of the missing Nigerian girls on the second anniversary of their kidnapping:

“I write this letter with a heavy heart, knowing you have endured another year separated from your daughters...As I did last year, I call on President Buhari of Nigeria—and everyone who can help rescue the Chibok girls—to act now...Parents, thank you for having the courage to send your daughters to school. My dream is that one day they will come home, finish their education and to autonomy.

The issue does not affect girls only. We have seen assaults on education by radical Islamist forces with a fear of enlightenment, autonomy and learning—a rancid assault on education and reading—which began with the Beslan school siege, when hundreds of young boys and girls were slaughtered by radical Islamists; we saw it in the assault on the school in Peshawar, Pakistan, and the butchering of young boys who wanted to learn; and we have seen it with the Chibok girls.

My message is that the UK Parliament has not forgotten the 219 missing girls. As parliamentarians, we want to give our full support to UK Ministers pressing the Nigerian Government to do everything that they can to secure the girls’ release, so that they may fulfil their rights under the United Nations to an education and to autonomy.
encouraged that through the efforts of ActionAid we are discussing the challenge today. I recognise that there is a massive task ahead. It is a huge challenge to provide safety and opportunity for women and girls around the world, but I join those in this Chamber, and the UK Government, in making a commitment to do all I can to achieve that target.

10.21 am
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Having done so several times before, I know what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on securing the debate and on a thoughtful and perhaps shocking speech. The issue of violence against women is a question of fundamental human rights, and the prominence given to women’s empowerment in the UN sustainable development goals is absolutely correct. The focus of the fifth goal for development around the globe—after poverty, food, health and education—is women. The UN recognises and acknowledges the positive effect that women’s rights, safety, gender equality and empowerment will have on all its other goals. Yet I believe that the Government have not given adequate support to women in crisis.

I want today to raise the issue facing a particular group of women, who are being let down even more than the average victim of violence in the home. Last week the investigative journalism platform “The Ferret” published a report subsequently covered in the national press, with three linked pieces focusing on Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Each contained strong case studies demonstrating how badly the system has let down women with insecure immigration status who experience domestic abuse. I want to add my voice to those of lawyers, psychologists, campaigners, journalists and leading human rights experts, including the Refugee Council, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. They are all calling on the Government to take action to stop the lives of refugee women who are fleeing domestic violence being put at risk. As the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) said, if we cannot get things right in our own country, where can we get them right?

The primary issue is that women who experience domestic violence and who have insecure immigration status are being discriminated against in access to protection and safety. By insecure immigration status, I mean women who are asylum seekers or women who have the legal right to remain but no recourse to public funds, such as women who have joined refugee husbands through family reunion. They do not have access to refuges because they cannot get housing benefit, on account of their immigration status. In some cases, lawyers are advising them to stay in violent relationships. They give that advice because Home Office guidelines state that women must be able to prove that they are experiencing violence for that to be taken into account. The Glasgow-based Legal Services Agency has a women’s project, which has supported 45 such women in the last year. Sarah Crawford, one of its lawyers, questions how women can provide proof. She says that “the amount of evidence required is overwhelming particularly for a vulnerable woman who has been abused”.

The women have a choice. They can stay and be beaten, and often raped, or they can face life literally on the streets. Are those really the only choices we can offer them? Dr Marsha Scott, chief executive of Scottish Women’s Aid and the UK’s expert on the European Women’s Lobby Observatory on Violence against Women, calls the situation a “bureaucratic form of torture,” which “re-victimises women and puts them in great danger.”

Nina Murray, of the Scottish Refugee Council, goes further: “Sooner or later someone else is going to be seriously harmed, or even killed, because we have failed to ensure that there is adequate protection there.”

To keep within the time limits on speeches, I will not speak as I planned to do about any particular women. We have all heard the stories. Some of us have worked with women in situations of the kind I have mentioned, and some may have personal experience; we know who we are talking about. The Home Office does have a policy on responding to reports of domestic abuse from women it accommodates, but campaigners have been seeking a review of that for more than two years, because it is inadequate and applies only to certain women. The Home Office has accepted the inadequacy of the policy: in February 2015 it completed a consultation with refuge organisations as well as those working on combating violence against women. The consensus among all of them was that asylum-seeking women who report domestic violence should have access to mainstream domestic abuse services—refuges and all the support that they entail. The Home Office indicated acceptance of that, but today, 14 months later, it is still considering its response.

I have some questions to ask. I realise that the Minister who is responding to the debate cannot answer them all. However, perhaps he can help us to get answers. The shocking case studies in the media report that I referred to illustrate an unacceptable safety gap for particular groups of women. How can the Government possibly justify that? How is what I have spoken about today compatible with the Home Secretary’s violence against women and girls action plan and the Government’s stated intention to ratify the Istanbul convention? Will the Minister ask the Home Secretary to lead a rapid review of the Government’s arrangements for protecting those women survivors of domestic abuse and report her conclusions swiftly to Parliament, so that what we have heard about today will not be repeated?

No woman, man or child should have to live with violence in their home. There are question marks over funding for refuges for victims of domestic violence in some parts of the UK, but there is no question about entitlement. All victims, we all agree, should be and are entitled to support and protection and the right to be protected from violence—all, that is, apart from the women I have been speaking about today. I congratulate the journalists who carried out the investigations on behalf of “The Ferret”, and in particular Karin Goodwin. They have done their profession proud. Now it is our turn in this place to do our profession proud. As soon as possible we must do something to put an end to the discrimination and to women having to live in terror in their homes.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for finishing. The Front-Bench speakers have agreed to curtail the time they will take, and there are
three other Members who want to speak. One made a request in writing and I will call him first. If Members take about three and a half minutes each, we will be able to hear them and the Front Benchers, and protect the Minister’s time.

10.27 am

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): I add my congratulations to those that have been offered to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on securing the debate. I also congratulate ActionAid on its excellent Fearless campaign, and on asking so many of us to apply for the debate and attend it. The only problem, as you have outlined, Mr Owen, is that clearly the time given to the debate is completely inadequate. It should have had at least three hours and possibly, given the importance of the issue and the number of hon. Members present, a six-hour debate in the main Chamber. That is something we may consider.

To all the ActionAid campaigners I want to say that campaigning works. I say that as a former campaigner, and it is nice to see it happening, and to see the number of people here. The turnout shows how passionately Members across the House care about the issue. There is no denying that the sustainable development goals have the power to change the world as we believe it should be changed, but that requires politicians from around the world to adopt them, take them seriously and be accountable for their progress. We in Parliament accept that, and we must work with parliamentarians and Governments around the world to achieve that change.

In the limited time I have I will briefly remind the House of the types of violence that scar humanity and the world. Violence by an intimate partner remains the most common. Global surveys suggest that half of women who die in acts of homicide are killed by their current or former husband or partner. That is a shocking statistic and I am proud to wear the white ribbon, the badge of a worldwide campaign of men standing up against violence against women. In terms of the horror of sexual violence in conflict, the fact that rape is still frequently used as a tactic of war is shocking. I pay tribute to the previous Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague of Richmond, for the work he did in making that issue a focus of the Department. We were showing global leadership on that, and we have to keep pressing it.

Female genital mutilation has been mentioned. While we have been strong on that, rightly, in this country, the reality is that between 130 million and 140 million women and girls today are believed to have undergone that horrific form of sexual abuse. Three million girls—including, shockingly, 137,000 girls here in the UK—are still at risk of it every year.

So-called honour killings remain a problem, including, I am sorry to say, in this country. That must be stamped out. I pay tribute to the amazing Karma Nirvana charity, based in Headingley, which does wonderful work. I know there was a ministerial visit to that charity recently. There are also appalling risks for women who are victims of modern slavery and trafficking. I pay tribute to the Palm Cove Society, also based in Headingley, for the work it does.

I have only managed to touch on a few things, but I hope we can debate this further, because it is clear how seriously we take this issue here.
and domestic levels. Given that response, what can we do in our Committee to ensure we hold the Government to account on that specific point? I will end my speech there, due to the time.

10.34 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am pleased to participate in this debate under your stewardship, Mr Owen. I thank the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for bringing this matter to our attention.

The level of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by men against women and girls across the world is simply staggering. Such violence does not respect national boundaries. That is not to say the extent of violence is the same in every country or that the mechanisms to tackle it are the same; that is clearly not the case. However, it is clear and unambiguous that such violence is endemic in many parts of the world. It is a daily act—it is routine in the most sickening way. For some women and girls it is virtually a way of life. It is administered by both individuals and patriarchal institutions. In some cultures, it is not simply tolerated but positively encouraged and endorsed.

The nature and extent of the violence are shocking. A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime study of global homicide revealed that 119 women are killed every day by an intimate partner or family member, and that is likely to be a significant underestimate. Between 100 million and 140 million girls and women have been subjected to female genital mutilation. As many as 70 million girls worldwide have been married before the age of 18, many of them against their will, and 150 million girls worldwide have been married before the age of 18, many of them against their will, and 150 million girls are sexually assaulted every year at or on their way to school.

Whenever and wherever violence is perpetrated by men against women and girls, in whatever fashion or form, it must be stopped. It should not and cannot be tolerated, nor should religious belief, cultural norms or expectations be used as an excuse or reason for its continuance. There must be no room for doubt or manoeuvre, no shilly-shallying and no ifs or buts. Quite simply, it must be eradicated.

We support campaigns to eradicate polio, malaria, hepatitis and many other diseases, so why not violence? Paradoxically, those in a position to help stop this violence are women themselves, but they must be empowered, encouraged and helped to do that with resources that, for example, assist women's support organisations. That is not my prescription; I am not imaginative enough to think of that, but ActionAid is. It has indicated that:

“Women’s rights organisations have long been at the forefront of the fight to end violence—from providing life-saving services, raising women’s voices, to holding governments to account for their policies and practices.”

ActionAid, which I must thank for its briefing, highlighted a study across 70 countries over four decades that found the mobilisation of independent women’s rights organisations to be the single most effective way to tackle violence.

I will finish on this. As the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman), suggested, the Government should grasp the opportunity presented by the civil society partnership review and the bilateral and multilateral reviews to put much more much-needed resource into this policy area.

10.37 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on securing this debate? This is an important issue for all of us, as evidenced by the fantastic turnout. Indeed, a number of my constituents have taken the time to write to me personally to make their feelings on this matter clear. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party.

As we have heard, one in three women and girls across the world will be victims of physical and sexual violence at some point in their lives. Such atrocities know no borders; they are committed within our communities, throughout our country and across continents each and every day. It is right therefore that the international community comes together and works in a common endeavour to eradicate violence and discrimination in all its forms and to secure equality for women and girls in every corner of the globe. The UN sustainable development goals are an opportunity for countries the world over to come together and change the course of the 21st century.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival and early departure. Will my hon. Friend welcome the commitment made by the Scottish Government, and particularly the First Minister, to women’s equality and early adoption of the sustainable development goals and the leadership that that shows?

Gavin Newlands: I do, wholeheartedly. I was going to mention that, but I have cut my speech down due to time, so I welcome that intervention.

We have an opportunity to tackle the entrenched problems that afflict our world, such as poverty, inequality and gender-based violence, and we must seize that opportunity with both hands. In addition to the one in three women who will be victims of physical and sexual violence, 150 million girls across the world will be sexually assaulted at or on their way to school each year. Each and every day, some 159 women die at the hands of a partner or family member in so-called honour killings—killed by the very people that we would expect to care for them the most. It is simply beyond comprehension.

To date, only two thirds of all countries have outlawed domestic violence and only 52 countries have explicitly criminalised rape within marriage. We live in a world where human trafficking, sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and forced and child marriages still prevail. Throughout the world, 133 million women have been victim to the abhorrent practice of FGM and, sadly, millions of women and girls will be forced into marriages with men against their will.

There is absolutely no defence for these demeaning acts or disgraceful attitudes. The fact that violence against women is more prevalent in some other countries underlines the importance of the UK fulfilling its vital part on the world stage in this matter. At every opportunity,
we must tell these countries, whether friend or foe, that violence against women and girls should never be committed and must never be condoned.

Needless to say, it is clear that the problem before us represents a significant challenge—but it is a problem that we cannot shy away from and a challenge that we must undertake to eliminate together, because behind the depressing statistics are many devastating stories, some of which we have heard today. Although the sustainable development goals cut across a diverse range of areas—from equality and education to the economy and the environment—we simply cannot succeed in a number of those areas without confronting the violence that is sadly perpetrated against women and girls throughout the world.

I am sure that Members from across the House will be pleased to hear that earlier this month, the Bulgarian Government decided that Bulgaria would be the latest state to sign the Istanbul convention. The Istanbul convention places an obligation on Governments to put appropriate measures in place to prevent violence against women in all its forms, protect victims and to prosecute perpetrators.

The UK Government signed the Istanbul convention in 2012; however, it has failed to ratify it to date. In January 2014, the Prime Minister stated that the treaty would be ratified in the “next few months”, yet here we are, almost two and a half years later, and the Government have yet to fulfil their promise. Ratifying the convention will send a strong message to the international community about the world that we seek to build and the improvements that we wish to make. The UK can—and should—lead by example on the issue of violence against women. We have been told for two years that the delay is due to an issue with extraterritoriality. In summing up, will the Minister tell us the latest on ratification and about any discussion between Home Office and Justice Ministers and their devolved counterparts?

As I stated, women and girls have an important role to play in all the sustainable development goals, because many of the 17 goals have female equality and empowerment at their heart. Therefore, ending gender-based violence and discrimination are preconditions for meeting many of the goals. Just as women have an important role to play in achieving the sustainable development goals, so too do men. White Ribbon is a global campaign that encourages men to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. The work of White Ribbon and other similar groups is invaluable and shows that men are able and willing to rise to the challenge of eradicating violence and discrimination against women and girls. That being said, Mr Owen, you, the mover of the motion and three Members against women and girls. That being said, Mr Owen, you, the mover of the motion and three Members against women and girls. That being said, Mr Owen, you, the mover of the motion and three Members against women and girls.

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Finally, I commend the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for securing this very important debate and add my thanks to ActionAid for its continuing fearless efforts in this very important area. Violence against women and girls is truly deplorable and I applaud the Government’s efforts thus far to address the issue. Hon. Members from across the House have made excellent contributions today. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to speak about them all, but I will come on to one or two during my contribution.

Let us be clear that we face a huge undertaking. Awareness of violence against women and girls has grown considerably in recent years. I welcome the Government’s efforts to increase that awareness. I also recognise that the UK has often been at the forefront of raising the issue, as a key player not only in the development of the SDG, but in the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict. However, the UN General Assembly says, and it is absolutely right, that violence against women and girls is one of the most systematic and widespread human rights violations. One in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, which is an alarming statistic. Alongside that, 150 million girls under 18 experience some form of sexual violence; 80% of trafficked people are women, with the vast majority being trafficked for sexual exploitation; and the most common victims of conflict around the world are women and girls.

The UK has identified a variety of factors that are responsible for the increasing occurrences of violence against women and girls: poor education, economic inequality, community gender biases and proximity to conflict are just a few. Conversely, better education, later marital ages, gender equality and economic autonomy for women help to reduce violence. It is therefore clear that the Government need to focus their attention on boosting protective factors while minimising risk factors. Tackling this violence needs much more than just financial assistance. Factors such as gender inequality, impunity for offenders and insufficient data create the environment in which violence can take place.

The challenge is huge, of course, and there is significant work to do for the SDGs to be achieved and for the UK to implement them. That is why I am concerned that the Government have yet to issue a single, unified action...
plan and strategy for how the SDGs, and within them, the goal of tackling violence against women and girls both at home and abroad, will be implemented by the Government. Without the publication of that strategy, there will be considerable difficulties with transparency, and not having sufficient guidelines could hinder the implementation of the measures that would have the greatest success. I note that the Select Committee on International Development is leading an inquiry into how the SDGs are being implemented and I look forward to the publication of that report, as, I am sure, does the Minister.

It is also important to mention the millennium development goals. Although they were not as extensive as the SDGs with regards to women and girls, I believe that the UK’s work on them holds considerable lessons that will be invaluable in going forward on the SDGs. We should learn those lessons and go into the SDGs a little wiser. I recognise that DFID has included analysis in its annual reports and accounts, but that is not substantial enough. I therefore press the Minister for an answer on whether the Government will issue a single authoritative report on the UK’s contribution to meeting the MDGs.

Ultimately, I have several concerns about how DFID will be able to achieve success in reducing violence against women and girls. This is a challenge on an extraordinary scale and, without measures to address inhibiting factors, we cannot make sufficient progress. I am also concerned that, without a single unified strategy on the SDGs’ implementation, DFID will not have the necessary guidelines for its work, causing the goals to suffer. The lack of strategy and unification across Government already appears to be causing difficulties, with a divergence existing between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and DFID in work to address sexual violence in conflict. I would appreciate a response from the Minister on how DFID is working with those other Departments to create a unified strategy in this area.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his time keeping. I call the Minister, who may give a minute at the end to the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate you on getting all hon. Members in. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) on creating the opportunity for so many hon. Members of both sexes and from all parts of the kingdom to come here to put on the record and reassert the priority that this House attaches to tackling this incredibly important issue.

One of my most powerful experiences as a young Member of Parliament was listening to a young mother telling me how her life had disintegrated under the weight of systematic domestic violence. It has never left me, so I am delighted that this debate has rammed home the point that violence against women and girls is one of the most systematic and widespread human rights violations worldwide.

The fact that, as we understand it, one in three women globally is beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime is totally unacceptable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) was right in saying that we must never allow that to be considered normal. It is absolutely unacceptable wherever it takes place. We continue to have a very substantive problem in the UK and there may well be safety gaps that we need to be forensic about, whether it is sexual violence, intimate partner violence, so-called honour killings, female genital mutilation, rape as a weapon of war or child marriage.

As well as being a gross violation, violence against women and girls is fundamentally an issue of human rights and it would be enough to consider it simply in that context. It has not come through in this debate, but we should also recognise that it restricts opportunity by holding people back and limiting the potential of individuals, families, communities and economies in multiple ways. Girls who experience violence are less likely to complete their education and are at increased risk of child marriage. World Bank data on the economic costs of violence against women and girls is that a loss of 1% to 2% of GDP in many countries. So tackling violence is vital if we are to protect women’s rights and address poverty. It is also vital if we are to help to deliver the global goals and to play our part as a country in helping to shape a fairer, more prosperous world. That goes completely with the grain of British values, but is absolutely in our national interest. This agenda matters enormously, and the Chamber wants to know whether the UK is pulling its weight.

I am relatively new to this agenda. I do not lead on it in DFID. The Secretary of State does that superbly with Baroness Verma. When I assess the evidence I am proud of the role we have played so far, but there is zero room for complacency. There is a case for saying that Britain has been a global leader in tackling violence against women. That leadership can be seen in the priority we attach to it in our programming at DFID. Since 2012, we have doubled the number of programmes that address violence against women and girls. We currently have 127 programmes across 29 countries. In 23 programmes where the absolute priority is to focus entirely on this agenda, the funding commitment has been £184 million of taxpayers’ money since 2010. So there has been leadership in making this a priority within programming and in our commitment to advance our knowledge through research and development, as in our world-leading research and innovation fund, which is drawing together experts across the globe to test ideas and produce rigorous evidence on how to prevent violence. That will be a global public good, helping countries get increased donors and non-governmental organisations everywhere to address violence and to get the most from every penny spent on prevention.
We have a strong agenda about leaving no one behind, so our leadership also means reaching the most vulnerable, including women and girls living with disabilities, a point that was raised earlier. To give just one example, DFID is working with the United Nations and civil society groups to improve access to justice in Zimbabwe, specifically for girls and women with disabilities who have experienced violence. This process is hard enough for survivors to go through without the additional barriers that people with a disability face.

British leadership can also be seen in our absolute determination to improve access to justice. The UK is supporting Physicians for Human Rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to help women and girls who have experienced sexual violence to access justice. One physician said that “this team work was not being done before...But they trained us together with police officers, magistrates, lawyers and now we understand that the collection of proofs regarding forensic data needed all of us to work together.”

In fact, over the last five years, UK aid has helped to improve access to justice for more than 10 million women and girls globally, which is a staggering achievement that I am very proud of.

Our leadership also means preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in humanitarian crises, not least in Sudan and South Sudan. Some people thought that policy area was too hard or not important enough to be a priority, but since 2012 we have invested around six times the previous amount in this area. For example, in the Syria response, UK support is providing specialist assistance to those affected by sexual and gender-based violence. That includes clinical care, case management and counselling. Our leadership has meant tackling issues where others were afraid to take them on, or felt they were too private a matter for a public forum—issues such as FGM, child marriage and domestic violence, both at home and overseas.

During the debate, hon. Members have pressed the Government to work more closely together. We are doing that on these issues more than ever before, including on the new Home Office-led ending violence against women and girls strategy, which brings together a set of actions in our efforts in the UK and internationally.

I am proud that we are the largest donor on female genital mutilation, investing £35 million across 17 countries over five years, alongside a £12 million programme in Sudan. Our programme to end child marriage, along with other donor support, will reach more than 2.5 million girls, giving them greater choice and control over their future. We can and should be incredibly proud of the UK’s contribution to these agendas. This is not just about spending or development programmes; it is about advocacy and using the full range of the UK’s assets to influence others to protect and to progress women’s and girls’ rights. I am delighted that cross-party this debate has recognised the work by many ministerial colleagues, not least Lord Hague and my Secretary of State, but Baroness Verma as our ministerial champion for tackling violence against women and girls and Baroness Anelay as our special representative on preventing sexual violence and conflict. Through them, we can drive action on the international stage and support it at national level.

There is British leadership not just in Government, but through our civil society networks.

Mr Robin Walker: Does the Minister agree that sustainable development goal 5 cannot be seen in isolation and that the contribution of goal 4 on education for all is crucial to reducing violence against women and girls? Will he commend the Global Campaign for Education and its Send my Friend to School and Send my Sister to School campaigns?

Mr Hurd: I agree with my hon. Friend and place on record my support for and congratulations on those campaigns, which are symptomatic of some of the powerful work by civil society to support and to challenge the Government in this respect. As a former Minister for Civil Society, I defer to no one in my admiration for that effort. We have invested in many new programmes working with grassroots women’s rights organisations in the past 18 months.

On the call for the creation of a new fund, we do not think that a new fund is the best value-for-money option. There is a strong case for supporting existing funds so they can draw on existing expertise and networks, and make the most of the economies of scale.

I want to give the last word to the sponsor of this debate. I will do my best to ensure that those who raised specific points receive substantive replies in writing. I close by placing on the record the absolute determination of the Department for International Development and the rest of the Government to sustain the leadership that Britain has shown on this agenda.
Ambulatory Care

11 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the use of ambulatory care.

I will start by referring to the NHS England publication that prompted me to call for the debate. NHS England has recently published a multi-agency quick guide and supporting information to support local health and social care systems to reduce the time that people spend in hospital. It acknowledges that people’s physical and mental ability and independence can decline in a hospital bed. For people aged 80 and over, 10 days in hospital equates to 10 years of muscle wasting. The report therefore recommends that people should seek to make decisions about their long-term care outside hospital and preferably in their own home or in a bed where their true long-term needs are understood.

The report was prepared not by the Government, but by the emergency care improvement programme of NHS England. It adds to the overwhelming clinical evidence that this approach is by far the best way of proceeding. The report goes on to say that care at home enables people to live independently and well in their preferred environment for longer. It contains checklists of questions for patients and commissioners to achieve that situation.

I am immensely encouraged by that, as it is on that basis that the number of beds has been worked out at Townlands hospital in Henley and the answer of up to 14 initially has been reached. Those beds are to be associated with the hospital, but in the care home at the side of the hospital. It is reassuring to know that we are at the forefront of current thinking and action. This approach is supported by organisations such as the Alzheimer’s Society and clinicians throughout the NHS. It is the right way to proceed and in the best interests of the whole community.

Before I continue, I should probably say what ambulatory care is, besides what I have just described. Ambulatory care is medical care provided on an out-patient basis. It includes diagnosis, observation, consultation, treatment, intervention and rehabilitation services. This care can include advanced medical technology and procedures, the costs of which should not be underestimated. Under this new care model, outlined in the NHS five year forward view, GP group practices would expand and include nurses, community health services and, in particular, social workers. Those practices would shift the majority of out-patient consultations and ambulatory care to out-of-hospital settings.

Let us consider the effects of hospitalisation. For many older persons, hospitalisation results in functional decline despite cure or repair of the condition that took them into hospital in the first place. Hospitalisation can result in complications unrelated to the problem that caused admission or to its specific treatment, for reasons that are explainable and avoidable. Age is often associated with a number of functional changes—which I am sure you and I, Mr Owen, have no experience of at this stage within a few days of hospitalisation. A high percentage of hospitalised persons over the age of 65 are incontinent within a few days of hospitalisation. A high percentage of hospitalised older persons discharged to nursing homes one year later. Only 20% of one large group of patients returned to their pre-operative functional level after a hip fracture repair.

Hospitalisation and bed rest superimpose factors such as enforced immobilisation, reduction of plasma volume, accelerated bone loss, increased closing volumes and sensory deprivation. Any of those factors may thrust vulnerable older persons into a state of irreversible functional decline, so hospitalisation is a major risk for them. I am talking particularly about the very old. For many, hospitalisation is followed by an often irreversible decline in functional status and a change in quality and style of life.

A recent US study showed that of 60 functionally independent individuals aged 75 or older who were admitted to hospital from their home for acute illness, 75% were no longer independent on discharge. That included 15% who were discharged to nursing homes.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): By intervening, I am not of course in any way suggesting that my hon. Friend needs to take the weight off his feet after that sad list of symptoms. He is rightly concentrating on the needs and degeneration of older people who go into hospital, but does he agree that ambulatory care is also important for younger people? In our local general hospital, the Horton, there is a marvellous new children’s out-patient service, which is used by both his constituents and mine. Does he agree that that is a centrally important part of the offer of that hospital, which provides acute in-patient care as well as the out-patient care on the side?

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to have a rest and to make the most of that time—as I get older, I need that. I do agree with her; she makes a very valid point. I am concentrating on older people because traditionally that is where the population who have used the hospital in Henley have come from. I think that in the past year only one was under 55. But as I said, my hon. Friend makes a very valid point.

In many cases, the decline that people experience cannot be attributed to the progression of the acute problem for which they were hospitalised in the first place. An example is pneumonia. Even if the disease is cured in a few days or, indeed, if a hip fracture repair is technically perfect and uncomplicated, the patient may never return to the same functional status as they had before they went into hospital.

According to the US study, between 30% and 60% of patients with hip fractures are discharged from the hospital to nursing homes; 20% to 30% of those persons are still residing in nursing homes one year later. Only 20% of one large group of patients returned to their pre-operative functional level after a hip fracture repair.

Many hospitalised patients have difficulty implementing their habitual strategies to avoid incontinence. The environment is unfamiliar. The path to the toilet may not be clear. The high bed may be intimidating. The bed rail becomes an absolute barrier, and the various “tethers”, such as intravenous lines, nasal oxygen lines and catheters, become restraining harnesses. About 40% to 50% of hospitalised persons over the age of 65 are incontinent within a few days of hospitalisation. A high percentage of hospitalised older persons discharged to nursing homes never return to their homes or community. In one study, 55% of persons over the age of 65 who entered nursing homes remained for more than a year. Many of the others were discharged to other hospitals...
or long-term care facilities, or simply died. The outcome for many hospitalised elders is loss of home and, ultimately, loss of place.

It is most important that relationships among physicians, nurses and other health professionals reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the whole of this process. In particular, I am a great enthusiast for the integration of the NHS with social care. That needs to move ahead very quickly to give the clinicians the responsibility for commissioning the social care that is required. Maintaining wellness and independence in the community prevents conditions deteriorating and therefore results in better health outcomes. Emergency hospital admissions are distressing.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this very important issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. Over the past five years in Northern Ireland, category A ambulance call-outs have increased by 30.9%. It is a devolved matter, but it does indicate a greater dependence on and need for ambulance responses. Does the hon. Gentleman have any thoughts about the best way to ensure that the ambulance service and ambulance staff can do better for elderly people?

**John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point.** The costs need to be offset. This is a balancing exercise within the NHS. Costs that are saved by stopping people going into hospital can be spent on the treatments and services they require to get them better. That is a far better way of working.

Emergency hospital admissions are distressing. Better management that keeps people well and out of hospital should lead to a better patient experience. The King’s Fund estimates that emergency admissions for ambulatory care-sensitive conditions could be reduced by between 8% and 18% simply by tackling variations in care and spreading existing good practice. That would result in savings of between £96 million and £238 million, which, as part of the overall management of the NHS budget, could be allocated against the provision of the often quite expensive services that provide the necessary medical investigations on the spot.

A doctor in my constituency, Dr Andrew Burnett of the Sonning Common practice, said:

“Very few of my patients want to be admitted to hospital.”

Most people, if they need to be treated or, indeed, if they are nearing the end of their life, would like that experience to be located at home. I think that probably applies to us all.

There is a particular problem in relation to dementia. I spoke to the Alzheimer’s Society, which said that people are often admitted with an acute physical illness on top of their dementia, and the combination of the two can cause their confusion to become worse. They are then taken out of familiar surroundings and placed on a hospital ward with lots of strange people, noises and smells. That can be terrifying for them and they rapidly deteriorate. The advice from the Alzheimer’s Society is to try to keep people out of hospital for as long as possible. That is why we, and the Oxfordshire medical facilities, are striving hard to develop systems to enable people with physical illnesses to be managed out of hospital.

That is one of the rationales for the new Townlands hospital in Henley, where the clinical commissioning group, along with Oxford University hospitals, Oxford Health and, indeed, the county council, are members of the ambulatory emergency care network, through which organisations can learn from one another to develop robust pathways. Some good case studies are involved in that, but time prevents me from going through them at the moment. I draw the Minister’s attention to those if he needs some examples of how ambulatory care actually works.

Another clinician, Pete McGrane of the CCG, has said:

“Patients who were recently hospitalized are not only recovering from their acute illness; they also experience a period of generalized risk for a range of adverse health events.”

There have been cases in my constituency where the health of elderly people has deteriorated following discharge, or even in hospital, due to other conditions. The relatives have sought to blame the health service for poor care. After following up on those cases, the complaints investigation has shown that it is not poor care that has exacerbated the patients’ distress and symptoms; it is a direct consequence of hospitalisation.

I went to see a hospital in Welwyn Garden City, which has no beds inside. Instead, it has beds in an adjoining care home at the side of the hospital. The place was absolutely heaving with people. I met a gentleman there called Dave. I do not have his surname, nor have I asked his permission to use his name, so we will just keep it as Dave. He could not speak highly enough of the treatment he got. He called in every day for treatment and then got on with his life at home. It revolutionised the treatment he received, which, doctors had confirmed, would otherwise have required a debilitating 56 days of medication, staying in hospital. His experience of hospital stays had shown up their disadvantages, and he pointed out that people were so much more likely to improve, as he had, and to feel better, as he did, if they could stay at home. He was clearly a great enthusiast for this type of service.

In Henley, there is one issue, above all, which I have already touched on and want to emphasise. It was helped by some papers that were forwarded to me by the Health Foundation, which said that it is undertaking “a joint research programme...monitoring how the quality of health and social care is changing over time.”

I have been very concerned by the way in which we move forward with the integration of social care and health in the county to ensure that it delivers the sort of services that are required in the full context of the patient.

I am pleased and proud that I have helped to deliver a 21st century medical facility for the people not just of Henley, but of the whole of southern Oxfordshire, and that that incorporates ambulatory care. It is clearly the way forward and it is a way forward that I am sure will work.

11.17 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer):** I thank my hon. Friends the Member for Henley (John Howell) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), both of whom have spoken with great expertise about the place that ambulatory care has within a
developing and modernising national health service. I cannot better the description that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley gave of the purpose of ambulatory care and the place it holds in his constituency, which I will turn to at the end of my speech.

For the benefit of the House and the record, I will add some examples of what ambulatory care entails for patients around the country. There is a clinical decision unit in the Royal Free hospital that provides an alternative to admission to an emergency department for patients who may benefit from an extended observation period. The James Cook University hospital has an ambulatory emergency care unit that handles nearly a quarter of all emergency admissions and manages a whole range of medical emergencies, including cardiac failure, cellulitis, diabetes and low-risk gastrointestinal bleeds.

The university hospital of Leicester has a frailty unit, which supports patients who are over 70 and need treatment for conditions such as delirium, dementia and fractures. The rapid assessment and treatment unit at Queen’s hospital in Romford has greatly reduced the time between a patient being assessed and a care plan being implemented. Those examples are in addition to the example that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley gave of Townlands in Henley.

Where ambulatory units are collocated with an emergency department, patients arriving at A&E by ambulance or as walk-ins are triaged according to clinical need and directed to the unit for treatment or tests, effectively bypassing the main emergency department. Patients identified as needing specialist treatment, tests or monitoring at the hospital, but who do not need to stay overnight, can also be referred to ambulatory units by a general practitioner. Patients with long-term conditions can be booked in for regular treatments such as dialysis.

Ambulatory care units can also focus on returning patients to their homes after treatment as quickly and safely as possible, as my hon. Friend outlined. As a result, patients are more likely to have good health outcomes because they avoid unnecessary overnight stays. He outlined beautifully the principle behind ensuring that people do not stay in bed any longer than they need to. The statistics on that developing area of academic study are stark, and he put them plainly to the House for its attention, but at their core they encompass something rather encouraging for many, although not all, patients.

The best principle is to keep on going. We have all seen that with our elderly relatives: the minute one stops prematurely or unnecessarily, one precipitates a decline in condition, rather than an improvement.

Ambulatory care is an exciting and important approach to providing patient care, just as my hon. Friend outlined, and it will be central to the development of the national health service in the years to come. It has not come about by accident. It is based on good science and academic study. We in the Department are led by the Royal College of Physicians’ acute care toolkit and NHS England’s “Safer, faster, better”, which is based on the royal college’s advice.

While ambulatory care units may vary between trusts, both the royal college and NHS England have provided guidance on what a good unit looks like, so the underlying principles that all units are built on are the same. The principles fall into three main categories. First, the units must be patient-focused, meeting the needs of patients through timely treatment and discharge, and bringing together secondary and primary care services to avoid admission where beneficial. Secondly, effective clinical decision making is key, ensuring not only that patients in ambulatory units receive the high standards of care we expect from the NHS, but that the patients who would benefit from an ambulatory setting are identified early and directed to the service. Finally, ambulatory care needs to form a coherent part of the hospital-wide health system and structure to improve the patient’s journey flow through the hospital. Gaining support from other parts of the system, including clinical commissioning groups, as in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and primary care more generally is key to ensuring that the potential benefits are realised.

Ambulatory care units work well as independent units within acute trusts, but they work best when they are part of an integrated system. That is why I am pleased to see that there is an ambulatory emergency care network, which allows trusts to share best practice and to understand how to improve their services further. The Royal College of Physicians estimates that more than 30% of patients admitted for medical, as opposed to surgical, reasons could be treated in an ambulatory setting. By treating and discharging patients on the same day, emergency admissions are reduced, leaving hospital beds available for those patients who need them the most. There is therefore an advantage not only to the patient but to the system as a whole, because we are freeing up capacity for people who really do need the beds.

Increasing the numbers of patients seen in ambulatory care also has the potential to reduce waits for patients in A&E, which in turn decreases pressure on wards and increases bed availability, providing benefits to patients in other parts of the system. A whole number of benefits therefore come from ambulatory care. My hon. Friend mentioned the urgent and emergency care review and the place that ambulatory care has in that. I turn quickly to his experience of it at Townlands, where some features are particularly impressive. The first is the way in which the service has been brought together in the rapid access care unit—I imagine it is called a RACU, but I am sure the people of Henley pronounce it with a soft C. I found the integration of that with the Orders of St John Care Trust next door exciting.

It is clear that the clinical commissioning group in my hon. Friend’s constituency has been thoughtful about commissioning the care needed, involving other providers of care and using beds only when absolutely necessary. It is an ambulatory care setting without beds, but if beds are needed, it has 11 beds on a three-year contract, purchased from the trust next door, and if that number needs to increase still further, it can procure such beds through the CCG’s usual spot purchasing arrangements. For people who are admitted to an ambulatory setting, beds are available if needed for step-up care—or for step-down care for people coming from the John Radcliffe or from other acute trusts that serve my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Ambulatory care allows for a far more subtle approach to people needing care. As my hon. Friend outlined, it provides much better patient outcomes, is better for the health system as a whole and is much more flexible, ensuring that resources go precisely where they are
needed. That opens out a much wider point, which he alluded to elegantly—I will say it rather more vulgarly than he did—namely the serious question of how we frame community services in the future. In parts of the country, we have a far older model of community service provision based on large bed capacity in community hospitals, which are much loved by their local communities, often funded in part by the local communities and in almost every instance founded by the local communities. We know, however, that in many cases they are not providing the best care for patients. It will often be a difficult transition to a better standard of care for patients, providing them with better outcomes and releasing resources for better outcomes for all patients across the health system.

By bringing the experience of Townlands hospital to the House’s attention, my hon. Friend has shown that we can be thoughtful and direct with constituents about the implications of change, and can explain carefully how improvements that might be challenging on the face of it, because it might seem that a benefit is being lost, can produce a whole series of additional benefits that enable better patient outcomes and a better distribution of resources within the system. He has allowed the House to understand how the benefits could be more widely spread across the NHS.

I turn finally to NHS England’s plans for ambulatory care. My hon. Friend will know about the vanguard sites in place across the country. Many of them involve the use of ambulatory care systems. There are many different kinds of ambulatory care settings involved in the vanguard sites, but the principle remains broadly the same: to try to identify those areas and experiences that replicate the positive experience that he, with the co-operation of his clinical commissioning group and primary care and acute trusts, has brought to Henley, and to ensure that that is tested on a system-wide basis. We can then roll that out across the rest of the country. We have 50 vanguard sites involved in one way or another in community care settings across the country, and I hope that that will inform a far wider transformation by the end of the five year forward view period, which concludes at the end of the Parliament.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I am sorry to come in at the end of the debate, but I was delayed by traffic. I congratulate my colleague from Oxfordshire, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), on securing this important debate. Does the Minister agree that in the roll-out it is important that the ability, training and qualification of home careworkers is raised, so that they can complement the changes in services?

Ben Gummer: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting and subtle point. That is absolutely the case, and that is partly why, as part of the workforce review that I instigated, we are looking at apprenticeship and nursing associate models that will help to upskill nurses and care practitioners in not just acute but community settings. The result will be an ability to provide a far better, more holistic service to patients when they turn up at an ambulatory care setting, or indeed at the John Radcliffe, or, hopefully, when they are looked after at home before that happens, and when they return from either of those places. All that taken together provides a far better service to constituents.

I welcome the approach that Members have taken in this little but important debate. If we are positive about these changes and have a will to explain them to constituents, they will quickly understand why this system is better for them. Those Members who wish to pursue a cruder campaigning method that looks purely at the number of beds provided in any one setting, based on the model inherited from 1948 rather than one relevant to 2018, will be doing their constituents a disservice. In being brave and direct with his constituents and in explaining clearly the benefits that he has endeavoured to get, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley has delivered a far better service for the people of Henley than the one they had last year. It will continue to improve throughout the course of the Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Coal-fired Power Stations

[JOAN RYAN in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of coal-fired power station sites.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank hon. Members and my hon. Friends for attending this afternoon’s debate. My hon. Friend the Minister might be wondering why he is to respond to a debate that, on face value, may seem to be within the remit of the Department of Energy and Climate Change. It is because my contribution will focus on the future of coal-fired power station sites once the plants have ceased to operate. The issue will affect all coal-fired power stations over time, as the Government have announced that they plan to phase out coal-fired energy generation by 2025, given our commitment to reducing our carbon emissions.

For many coal-fired power stations, 2025 is a long way off. Five stations across the country have announced either their closure or part-closure over the past few months. There is now a real need to consider the future of those sites. The remaining coal-fired power stations face an uncertain future, too, and I am sure that there will be hon. Members who would like to address the issue of using the existing energy generation infrastructure for biomass conversion.

Rugeley B in my Cannock Chase constituency is one of the five power stations to announce its potential closure. In February 2016, the station’s owner, Engie, announced the likely closure of the plant this summer. The potential closure has come much sooner than expected and was accelerated by deteriorating market conditions. There are various issues: the future development of the site, given its size, location, connectivity and strategic importance to the west midlands; the need for the site to be developed speedily to create new jobs, as well as to mitigate the financial impact on the local council due to the loss of business rates; and the need to consider the planning process for building combined-cycle gas turbines where power stations already exist.

I will start by setting out the story of Rugeley B to date and how we find ourselves in a situation in which the power station could potentially shut in a matter of weeks. Cannock Chase was once dominated by mines and power stations. Now, Rugeley B is the last remaining reminder of our mining heritage. At one time, Rugeley A and B were the centre of innovation in coal-fired power generation. Rugeley A was home to a dry cooling tower and was a test-bed for locating power stations in areas with no water supply. Rugeley B saw the testing of different coloured cooling towers. Ms Ryan, if you happen to pass the Rugeley B cooling towers, I encourage you to take a good look at them, as you might notice that they are made from two different colours of brick. The intention was to assess which colour blended more effectively into the countryside and landscape. To be honest, I am not sure that either achieves that aim.

A few years ago, the owner of Rugeley B considered conversion from coal to biomass. In 2013, however, it decided that conversion was not commercially viable. Like many other hon. Members, I have spoken about the benefits of biomass as a fuel for energy production.
workforce, both employees and contractors, and the supply chain. We must ensure that they all get all the support they need at this difficult time.

To give a sense of the scale of the impact, Rugeley B has 150 employees and at least the same number of contractors from across Staffordshire and the midlands; I am pleased so many Staffordshire Members are here this afternoon. Those employees and contractors have worked at the plant for decades. Others with young families have recently bought a home. There is also the wider supply chain, which goes far beyond Rugeley. The impact of the potential closure will be felt in ports and by freight services that serve the power station, and it cannot be overestimated.

The mines and the power stations have been a central part of our local community, with Rugeley B housing facilities including a sports and social club, football and cricket pitches, and even a model railway. If the plant shuts, over the coming months we must find alternatives for the various clubs that will be affected and their 2,000 members. I call on other local community facilities and groups to come forward and offer their support to those clubs and groups that will be affected, and to rehome them, at least for the short term.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am very glad that my hon. Friend has secured this debate, and I apologise for being a few minutes late. In my neighbouring constituency of Stafford, we face the prospect of losing sports pitches at Shugborough Hall and at Staffordshire University, because of its transfer up to Stoke, so there is a real crisis for sports facilities in the Rugeley and Stafford area.

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He is absolutely right: we are losing facilities, not only at the Rugeley B site but at Shugborough, a few miles up the road. We need to look at leisure provision across the area. One thing that we need to include in any kind of site development at Rugeley B is leisure facilities.

Since the announcement on Rugeley B, I have visited the site and met the owners and unions several times to discuss practical ways in which we can support all those affected. I will hold a jobs fair in Rugeley in June, and I discuss practical ways in which we can support all those affected, and to rehome them, at least for the short term.

Whether the plant closes this summer, next year, or even in a few years, it is essential that we speed up plans for Rugeley's future, and in doing so develop and implement a strategy for the site. The same is true of other coal-fired power station sites that might face closure. We need to mitigate the loss of jobs and create new employment opportunities for all those affected and for the wider economy.

The Rugeley B power station site is of national strategic importance, as it is unique in size, location and connectivity. It is a 374-acre brownfield site that could accommodate a range of different developments, including housing, commercial and industrial units, and a gas turbine; it could help to deliver much-needed homes, jobs and electricity. I will talk about each of these in a bit more detail shortly.

A taskforce that includes the district councils, the county council and the two local enterprise partnerships has been set up. It has held its first meeting to discuss ways of supporting the workforce during the consultation period and to establish strategic plans for the future use of the site if the plant closes. The site is in the heart of England, and it is incredibly well connected by road and rail links. It is close to many of the major motorways and trunk roads, including the M6, the M6 toll road, the M42, the A50, the A38—I could go on. It also sits alongside the west coast main line and has its own siding. The fact that there is an Amazon fulfilment centre on the land opposite Rugeley B demonstrates how well served the location is by various transport links.

Then there is the site's connectivity. Naturally, as a power station is situated there, the site has national grid connectivity, so there is a strong case for using the existing infrastructure and building a gas power station, which would help to create jobs for the highly skilled workforce at Rugeley B. I also understand that fibre-optic broadband runs down the railway and along nearby canals. This connectivity crossover opens up new enterprise opportunities relating to innovation and technology.

Michael Fabricant: I have been busy on my iPhone, but for good parliamentary reasons: I have just been looking up on Google Maps the exact location of the site, not that I have never been there; I have obviously made many visits to the power station. I see that, as my hon. Friend says, the site is right alongside the River Trent. As a keen narrow-boater, I suggest that she adds to her list of possibilities that of the site being a very good tourism destination for narrow-boaters in the area. As the president of the Lichfield and Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust—

Andrew Percy: Some have glory thrust upon them.

Michael Fabricant: Absolutely. As the president of the trust, I know that narrow-boating is becoming an important form of leisure.

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for his hard work in looking at Google. His name came up in conversation only the other day as I went along the canal with someone from the Canal and River Trust—

Michael Fabricant: Of which I am a member.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are also tourism opportunities, because we have not only the River Trent, but the canals and the beautiful Cannock Chase, which he referred to when talking about the views from Lichfield.

The Rugeley B power station is where roads, rail, power and technology all come together. To realise the site's economic and regeneration opportunities, we need to develop it as quickly as possible if the plant is closed. However, before the site can be redeveloped, the plant
needs to be decommissioned and demolished, the site needs to be decontaminated and infrastructure improvements need to be made, including the creation of a new access road.

As I have said, the site presents opportunities for multiple uses, and I will take each one in turn. It is no secret that we have a housing shortage, and the Government are committed to building a million homes during this Parliament. Brownfield sites such as Rugeley B present a real opportunity to deliver some of those homes without building on green-belt land. Where Rugeley A power station used to be, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), there are many new homes. Building homes on part of the Rugeley B site would help to support the Government’s plans.

To address employment losses, the regeneration of the site will need to include significant commercial development to attract enterprise and create new jobs. In my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s Budget in March, new enterprise zones were announced in the Midlands, including in Loughborough, Leicester and, as was raised in Prime Minister’s questions only today, at Brierley Hill in Dudley. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to support me in putting forward the case for creating a Rugeley enterprise zone.

As I mentioned, Rugeley was once at the centre of innovation in the power generation industry. I believe there is an opportunity for the site to be a new home of innovation. With the connectivity crossover of national grid and broadband infrastructure, there is an argument that the site could become home to data centres, which in turn could attract other businesses in the technology and innovation space.

The need to ensure that the site includes commercial development is important not only in creating jobs, but in filling in the gap in business rates that Cannock Chase District Council will face if the power station closes. The local council is set to lose £1 million in business rates, which represents 9% of its business rate income. Over time, this gap will be met by rates from the new Mill Green designer outlet village, which is due to be built in Cannock, and which is another good reason for people to visit Cannock Chase, but the short term looks really bleak for the council. The Labour-led council faced financial difficulties before the announcement about the power station, as it has a net deficit of £1.2 million. I am told that the power station’s closure could lead to the council cutting front-line services. Will my hon. Friend the Minister therefore consider supporting the request for transitional relief funding to help the council manage its short-term financial pressures?

Finally, there is the possibility of building a gas-fired power station on the site. The national grid infrastructure there means that it would be the ideal location. The development process for a new-build combined-cycle gas turbine includes obtaining a development consent order. Such an order is required when developments are categorised as nationally significant infrastructure projects. Engie, the owner of Rugeley B, has raised concerns with me about the length of time and costs associated with obtaining a DCO. It says that the timeframe is anywhere between 26 and 32 months. There are large up-front costs associated with the preparatory work required before an application can be submitted. If any information is missing from the application after it is submitted, the process stops and the applicant must begin the process from the start. The applicant does not have the option of providing further detail once the application is submitted. The ability to make minor design changes during the process is therefore limited. That can add to the timeline and costs of a new-build project and create delay in an application for a capacity contract.

We would all agree that the planning process must be robust and effective, but power station sites such as Rugeley B are brownfield sites where there would be no change of use from power generation. We need to make the process of applying for a DCO faster and more flexible for such sites. With my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield, I recently met the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and raised that issue. I am pleased that the Planning Inspectorate will hold a workshop for potential applicants before the end of June, with a view to explaining how they can use the pre-application process to ensure that applications are progressed as swiftly as possible once submitted. That said, will the Minister undertake a review of the DCO process to ensure that it is both robust and flexible, so that coal-fired power station sites can be speedily redeveloped into gas-fired power stations?

Michael Fabricant: Although this is a Treasury matter, perhaps the Minister could also comment on the funds that could be made available for building on brownfield sites containing contaminated land. Some of that power station land will be contaminated.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is the time it takes to decontaminate land, but there is also the cost associated with that.

Cannock Chase may be a resilient area, but Rugeley has big challenges ahead as it faces life after coal-fired power stations. We have adapted to the changing industrial landscape over the last few decades, and we face the same challenges again. The redevelopment of coal-fired power station sites such as Rugeley B provides an opportunity for such areas to play their part in delivering the Government’s priorities: encouraging enterprise, creating jobs, providing new homes and generating energy. When coal-fired power stations such as Rugeley B close, we need to prioritise their wholesale and speedy redevelopment. Given the strategic importance of the site to the west midlands and to the nation, will the Minister work with me to ensure that the plans for Rugeley B’s redevelopment are accelerated, so that the economic benefits of the site’s redevelopment can be realised?

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I think we will be fine for time, but I ask the Minister to allow three minutes at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to make their concluding remarks.

2.54 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) for securing this timely debate? Indeed, for Scotland it could hardly be timelier, given last month’s closure of Longannet power station in Fife. That closure ended coal-fired electricity production in Scotland completely. Longannet is a landmark that is
We often refer to the trilemma when discussing the pros and cons of UK energy policy, but the widespread closure of our coal-fired power stations presents its own trilemma. The first challenge is the clear impact the closures have on the communities in which the power stations are based. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase outlined that. She speaks passionately about the uncertainty facing her constituents who work at Rugeley and the distress that uncertainty inevitably causes locally and regionally.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed similar scenes in my constituency. Eggborough power station, which employs almost 300 people, was on the brink of closure earlier this year—it had announced a consultation on plans to close—until its new owner, the Czech group EPH, managed to secure a contract with the grid to provide extra capacity this winter. But it is just a year’s contract. It is a stay of execution; we cannot ignore the fact that a cloud still hangs over Eggborough’s future.

By contrast, Ferrybridge power station, which is right on the border of my constituency—I know it well—was not so lucky. It was forced to close earlier this year, to the detriment of the hundreds of workers based there. If that is added into the mix with the closure of Britain’s last deep coal mine at Kellingley colliery, which is also in my constituency and which closed last year, these are unquestionably very challenging times in my part of north Yorkshire.

As well as the socioeconomic impact of the closures, we need to consider the consequences for the nation’s energy security, which is the second element of the coal trilemma. At least 2.5 GW of coal closures have been announced in recent months, in addition to the 4.9 GW announced last year. That power would otherwise be supplied to millions of homes throughout the country. By losing those units, we are diminishing the resilience of our grid and its ability to absorb unforeseen risks.

Our margin of capacity, particularly when it is cold in winter, is already worryingly low. We are also significantly reducing the number of power stations that can provide ancillary services, such as system balancing, frequency response and black start, which allows us to turn the lights back on in the event of grid paralysis or partial shutdown. In the absence of coal-fired power stations, how will we procure such essential, often under-appreciated, services in future?

Because of the technical nature of this subject, I find there is a lack of understanding of the comparative capabilities of different types of power generation. Intermittent renewables, along with nuclear, are simply technologically incapable of delivering the services I have described. The lack of nuance in consideration is leading us blindly to risk our energy security.

The third element of the coal trilemma is cost. The Minister of State, Department for Energy and Climate Change, my hon. Friend the Member for Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), has rightly said on many occasions that securing electricity at the least cost to consumers is an absolute priority. We totally buy into that—it is a commitment the Conservative party made in our general election manifesto and it is one we should keep.

If we are to pursue an orderly transition away from coal, as the Government intend, it is only right that we do so in the most affordable way possible. That is why it
is so important that, when we consider which technologies to promote to fill the gap left by coal, we do so on a whole-system cost basis. Such an approach more accurately reflects the costs that intermittent generators pass on to the system because they are not available all the time.

I understand that during yesterday’s meeting of the Energy and Climate Change Committee my hon. Friend the Minister of State noted that the latest analysis her Department has commissioned on whole-system costs is currently being peer reviewed and is nearing completion. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on pushing ahead with that and urge her to make the findings available as soon as is practically possible, so that they can inform the growing debate on this incredibly important issue.

We face three key challenges associated with coal coming off the grid: the socioeconomic impact, the security of supply impact, and the cost of filling the gap. On the face of it, it seems a particularly daunting task, but I am pleased to say that it is not insurmountable. Nowhere is that more vividly illustrated than at the Drax power station in my constituency—if you think you have cooling towers in your neck of the woods, Ms Ryan, there are certainly plenty more in my part of north Yorkshire.

Many Members present will be familiar with Drax. It is the largest power station in the UK and generates approximately 8% of all the UK’s electricity. Over recent years it has gone through an incredible transformation by converting and upgrading some of its generating units to use sustainably sourced compressed wood pellets instead of coal. In doing so, it has addressed the three core issues I mentioned earlier.

On socioeconomic impact, switching from coal to biomass has helped Drax to protect and secure the 850 employees who are based at the power station. It has also created new employment opportunities across the biomass supply chain, which has attracted hundreds of millions of pounds of private investment.

On security of supply, thanks to the conversion it has already undertaken, Drax has become the UK’s single largest source of renewable electricity. Around 12% of the UK’s renewable power came from Drax in 2014. Crucially, this power is not only renewable but flexible and dispatchable, like coal or gas. It is available as and when we need it and can be ramped up or down to respond to the requirements of the grid at a moment’s notice.

On costs, as I have stated often in Westminster Hall and many times in the main Chamber, on a whole-system costs basis biomass is the cheapest and most affordable renewable technology available to us today.

Andrew Percy: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Nigel Adams: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend and neighbour, who also has the benefit of looking at the cooling towers at Drax.

Andrew Percy: I declare an interest: I live opposite the Drax power station and a small wind farm. People are taxed by the wind farm, which does not create any jobs, and very supportive of the power station, which does.

Does my hon. Friend agree that biomass makes sense, not only on a cost basis, but because the industry supports jobs in the UK in a way that some of the alternatives do not? He mentioned the many power station workers, but the whole supply chain goes all the way through our region, including to the ports, which have taken a big hit in the Humber because of the loss of coal imports. Support for biomass makes sense on so many different levels. We need Ministers to work cross-departmentally to get a proper assessment of the industry’s true value to the whole UK.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The regional impact on supply chain jobs is huge, not just for the ports, which are hugely important, but for rail as well. The wagons that Drax has commissioned to transport biomass—I had the great honour of launching them at the National Railway Museum—were built by a British company.

With respect to costs, we have to remember that it was the taxpayer who built these power stations right across the country under the Central Electricity Generating Board. We have already paid for these stations, so it makes absolute sense that we should—to use an unpopular phrase—sweat these assets as long as possible to ensure that we get the best possible value out of them for the taxpayer.

Reusing the existing infrastructure at a power station essentially eliminates the substantial grid connection costs and upgrade work that are associated with new builds, and that might have contributed to so few new stations being built. It also reflects the value that dispatchable power adds to the energy grid by balancing the system while the wind is not blowing and the sun is not shining—we all remember the problem with the grid last November.

Going from being western Europe’s largest coal-fired power station to being its biggest de-carbonisation project in less than three years has made Drax an incredible success story. The question is, then, how can we build on that success and, where possible, replicate it at other sites around the UK? It may be too late for Rugeley, but other stations could certainly benefit from conversion.

A sensible and practical solution would be to allow coal power stations to compete for Government support to convert to biomass in upcoming contract for difference auctions. The auctions could operate on a whole-system basis to allow the stations to compete on a level playing field against other renewable technologies. The biomass industry—I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on biomass—is not looking for any special treatment; it just wants the opportunity to bid on a level playing field along with other technologies.

Alternatively, funding could simply be provided through the dedicated biomass pot that already exists to support biomass conversions. That pot does not currently allow bids from those who are looking to convert, only from new station builds, which are very costly. That does not seem to make a lot of sense when we already have the infrastructure with coal power stations.

I recognise that the Minister has previously indicated that £730 million has been committed to supporting less-established technologies in the CfD process through to 2020. However, research recently completed by NERA
Economic Consulting and Imperial College London has shown that DECC could save consumers up to £2.2 billion by supporting biomass alongside offshore wind as part of a more cost-effective renewable energy mix.

In conclusion, I urge the Minister to work closely with his colleagues at DECC to consider how further biomass conversions could also be facilitated in the near future in the light of the significant benefits that I and my hon. Friends have outlined here today. Biomass is simply the quickest and most cost-effective way to get coal off the grid. As a nation we should look to promote its deployment further through additional station conversions while we still have a window of opportunity to do so.

3.10 pm

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I would like to make two or three points in response to the very fine speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). First, I congratulate her on securing this important debate and on focusing her remarks on Rugeley B power station. It is no surprise that she has been supported by our hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), and has had very vocal support from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and me, because we all recognise Rugeley’s importance to our local economy.

I know Rugeley and the power station well. In the days before satellite navigation, it provided a handy navigation device for those trying to find their way toward Rugeley. More seriously and importantly, it provided many jobs for local people, including my constituents in Tamworth. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase in her determination to hold a jobs fair to help those people who may lose their jobs in finding new gainful employment. In our part of Staffordshire, we are lucky that new jobs are being created to fill the gap that may be left by the closure of Rugeley B.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of housing and the development of housing on brownfield sites. I agree with that. In our part of the west midlands, we need to build some 88,000 new homes to cater for growing demand, and Rugeley B could provide part of the solution. I commend that thought to the Minister. She also mentioned the importance of local infrastructure and roads such as the M6, the M6 toll road and the A50. One road she did not mention that I think is important to the local infrastructure—my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase in her determination to hold a jobs fair to help those people who may lose their jobs in finding new gainful employment. In our part of Staffordshire, we are lucky that new jobs are being created to fill the gap that may be left by the closure of Rugeley B.

I hope the Minister will use all his artistry and expertise that are around, so that we do not lose them. I will conclude as I began: by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase on securing this debate. She spoke passionately and eloquently, and I trust the Minister will listen to her.

3.14 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) on securing this debate. I know that the impact of this issue on her constituency has troubled her extremely over the past few months and that it has been at the forefront of her mind.

I represent the south of the country, but I know what my hon. Friend is feeling. In Rochester and Strood, we had two power stations that closed: our oil-fired power station on the Isle of Grain in 2012, and the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station in 2013. Luckily for the Rochester and Strood constituency, we have been able to maintain the energy industry in that part of my constituency with gas-fired power stations. Obviously, that has been some solace to people who were able to transfer to the gas-fired industry. I support all my hon. Friends here who are encouraging us to look at the new energy markets for biomass and more gas. It is absolutely right that we look at how the old coal-fired power station sites can regenerate the new energy industry.

There has been discussion around the cooling towers and how they look to my hon. Friends’ constituents. We are waiting with bated breath in Rochester and Strood for the Grain chimney to be demolished at some point in the future, and I have been told by my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), whose constituency is on the other side of the river, that people in Essex will be sad to see the chimney go. As a keen yachtsman, I know the chimney of Grain is often used as a navigation mark; we all know that we are not far from the Medway when we see the old chimney of the Isle of Grain.

In my constituency, the people who have worked in the power stations for a long time feel passionate about the energy industry and their skills, which they want to keep up. It is absolutely right that we should be able to keep those skills and utilise them. We need to do whatever we can to encourage the decommissioned sites to change, but to stick with energy.

I am pleased my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase highlighted the planning process and the need to make sure it is easy for decommissioned sites to regenerate quickly, or change the power type that they produce quickly. In my constituency—this is not a bid, I promise—I would like an Isle of Grain energy island enterprise zone for my constituents, but we will leave that for another time.

Constituencies in the south of England are not unlike those in the midlands. There are a lot of similarities that I have heard about today between the constituents in Rugeley and the issues around Rugeley power station, and the issues in my constituency of Rochester and Strood. We have been lucky in the sense that we, too, have seen a fall in unemployment over the past five years. It is absolutely right that commercial sites be used for the development of new houses, but with regard to our high-tech industries, we need to use the skills and expertise that are around, so that we do not lose them.
forever. We still want to be able to create the jobs that we need in the midlands and the south around those sites.

My hon. Friend mentioned that Rugeley was strategically placed, and I can also say that about the peninsula in my constituency. We have always benefited from the energy industry because of our strategic position, and because we are able to feed into the grid and can supply energy to homes. I call on the Minister to support my hon. Friend in her calls for help in regenerating Rugeley, so that there will be a positive outcome for the constituents of Cannock Chase.

3.19 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) for obtaining a debate on this issue. Clearly, the imminent Rugeley power station closure prompted it, and I applaud her for her efforts in seeking retraining packages and jobs for staff, as well as financial aid to decontaminate the site for redevelopment. I wish her the very best in her endeavours. None the less, the Conservative Government’s commitment to a decade of austerity continues to strangle development, competition and investment in the UK’s energy sector.

There have been some excellent contributions to the debate. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase spoke extensively, passionately and eloquently about reuse of the site after demolition and decontamination. Her points were reiterated and supported by the hon. Members for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) and for Rocher and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst); but I offer words of caution, if the hon. Lady will have them. In the constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw, which neighbours mine, we have made great use of the land that was vacated following the destruction of the Ravenscraig steelworks by a similarly right-wing Conservative Government; but our experience is that enterprise zones, houses and sports and leisure facilities are no substitute for jobs. I will focus on that and related issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) recounted his experience of the site after demolition and decontamination. Her points were reiterated and supported by the hon. Members for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) and for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst); but I offer words of caution, if the hon. Lady will have them. In the constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw, which neighbours mine, we have made great use of the land that was vacated following the destruction of the Ravenscraig steelworks by a similarly right-wing Conservative Government; but our experience is that enterprise zones, houses and sports and leisure facilities are no substitute for jobs. I will focus on that and related issues.

Given that so many Staffordshire Members have spoken, I am surprised that there has been no mention of Shakespeare yet, but I am sure—[HON. MEMBERS: “Warwickshire!”] Is it Warwickshire? That is why, then, I stand corrected. It all sounds the same to me.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk mentioned, in March, Scottish Power closed the Longannet coal-fired power station. More than 200 direct jobs and more than 1,000 in the supply chain were lost. The problems and devastation that such closures cause to the families and communities that are all too often heavily reliant on such large power plants are evident to many in Scotland. Having seen the detrimental impact in Scotland, I sympathise with those affected by the Cannock Chase closure. Geographically based transmission charges were much to blame for the closure of Longannet, but the commitment of the Secretary of State for Climate Change and Energy to overseeing a consultation on ending unabated coal-fired power stations by 2025 doubtless played its part in both closures. As the Financial Times reported last November, the Secretary of State wants more gas plants to replace the coal plants.

What of the future of coal-fired power stations? That, after all, is what the debate is about. The shorter answer is that without carbon capture and storage alongside, they appear not to have a future in the UK. Carbon capture and storage, for anyone not familiar with it, is a technology that can currently capture about 90% of the carbon dioxide emissions produced by fossil fuels in electricity generation and industrial processes, preventing the carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere. It is seen as essential alongside coal-fired power stations, to enable UK and world climate change targets to be met. There are working CCS plants such as Boundary dam in Canada and numerous others in the US and Norway, but the world seeks its first large-scale operational plant to further prove the viability of that rapidly advancing technology and the opportunity to improve emissions capture to above 90%, which is the current target.

The previous UK Government created a £1 billion fund to seize the opportunity to have fully functioning CCS projects in the UK. Until last year, we were set to proceed with CCS projects at the White Rose coal-fired power station in Yorkshire—in the constituency of Selby and Ainsty, I believe—and at the gas-fired power station in Peterhead in Scotland, which I was fortunate enough to work on for Shell. The Chancellor’s cancellation of the CCS funding late last year was the latest in a long line of greener and renewable energy cuts that set us yet further back on our journey to cleaner energy.

In November 2014, the BBC reported on how changes in Government energy policy were likely to increase CO₂ emissions rather than reduce them, citing—my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk mentioned a few of these—the block on solar in the countryside, the cut to the industrial solar subsidy, cuts to solar subsidy for homes, cuts to biomass subsidy, scrapping the green deal, cutting zero-carbon homes, imposing carbon tax on renewables, blocking onshore wind, increased tax on small cars, tax breaks for the oil and gas industries, cutting zero-carbon offices and support for community energy and selling the Green Investment Bank, to name just a few changes. Ironically, those short-term savings will cost us in the long term.

The UK Committee on Climate Change told the Secretary of State that the cost of meeting the 2050 decarbonisation target will be twice as high without a carbon capture and storage programme. The CCC points out that the proposed budget to 2032 is a minimum and suggests that the Government be prepared to do more, not less, to reduce total UK domestic carbon emissions in line with the Paris agreement objectives. The committee also noted that greater decarbonisation ambition will be needed by the European Union. In short, we need to make more reductions. For that, CCS is essential, and
an urgent plan is needed for a minimum of 7 GW of clean power by 2030, together with support for industry-wide decarbonisation.

Professor Stuart Haszeldine, director of Scottish Carbon Capture and Storage, commented:

“...to stay on track in the ‘high ambition coalition’ of leading nations agreed in Paris climate talks, the UK needs to do a lot more on UK electricity, and a lot more on UK low-carbon industry and low-carbon heat. But now this government is doing a lot less.”

He went on:

“There is no sign yet that facts, unbiased scientific evidence and rationality are regarded as more important than lobbying by corporations and colleagues wishing to take the UK back to the 1960s energy mix”.

That would be a retrograde step. Professor Haszeldine said there was a choice—and it is a stark one—“between spending £40 per household in 2016 or spending £200 per household each year from 2050. We can afford it.”

The Times reported in December 2015, during the Paris climate change conference, that worldwide more than 2,400 coal-fired power stations were under construction or planned, mostly in India or China. Without CCS, that makes a mockery of the world’s climate change commitment. The UK was in prime position to have a positive effect in the ongoing reduction of the world’s coal-fired power station emissions. Given the progress made in CCS, we had the opportunity to become the world leader in large-scale CCS project design and construction, something that would have been great not only for UK businesses, but also for the world at large, as the UK would have been able to provide a substantial decrease in global CO2 emissions by providing more efficient and affordable CCS schemes, with ever-rising emissions capture figures.

We cannot discuss the future of coal-fired power stations without thinking about ethical coal mining. The UK Government’s decision to import coal, rather than investing in an export-led energy market in the UK, has had detrimental consequences on human lives and the environment. According to Government figures, nearly 4 million tonnes of Colombian coal was imported to Hunterston in North Ayrshire alone in 2013. Rogelio Ustate from the Federation of Communities Displaced by Mining in La Guajira stated:

“The coal which is used to warm your houses on cold nights is the same coal which has taken our homes from us.”

Workers face poor and dangerous working conditions in mining much of our imported coal. It is not lost on the few British miners who remain that we no longer have deep mines in the UK, as hon. Members remarked earlier. That is despite the fact that the UK has massive coal reserves to draw on, especially in Scotland. At least if we mined the coal locally it would be ethically sourced, and it would also create jobs.

I must point out the differences in policy between the UK and Scottish Governments. The UK Government have failed to provide the fiscal incentives necessary to stimulate investment in conversions of former coal-fired power stations. Despite a commitment to ending coal power by 2025, the UK Government have failed to produce the financial backing and/or incentives to enable the UK energy market to transition from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels to being the more renewables-based energy market we seek, as per our climate change targets.

The Scottish Government are concerned that the UK will continue to import energy despite the vast untapped potential of the UK’s energy market, especially in Scotland. That is especially pertinent given the potential disaster of the Government’s “all your eggs in one flawed basket” energy policy, and the French and Chinese nationalised companies at Hinkley C nuclear power station.

The Scottish Government believe that we must carry out comprehensive research into the viability of the conversion of plants to carbon capture and storage. Experts deem that prospective site planners may favour sites that are already equipped with a grid connection and immediate infrastructure. As a member of the CCS advisory committee, I concur with those findings. Industrial hubs where there is power generation, and which are linked to existing CO2, transportation and storage systems and the power grid, are deemed the most likely locations to succeed.

Dr Jenifer Baxter, the head of energy and environment at the Institute of Mechanical Engineers and the lead author of the report, “Engineering the UK Electricity Gap”, said:

“The UK is facing an electricity supply crisis. As the UK population rises and with the greater use of electricity use in transport and heating, it looks almost certain that electricity demand is going to rise...However, with little or no focus on replacing electricity demand, the retirement of the majority of the UK’s aging nuclear fleet, recent proposals to phase out coal fired power stations by 2025 and the cut in renewable energy subsidies, the UK is on course to provide even less energy than it does at the moment.”

That does not bode well for energy users.

Unless we reverse the abandonment of the cleaner renewable energy incentives for the failing Hinkley C nuclear power programme, and the Government’s rash dash for gas—fracking—this country will face an energy supply crisis. We will become ever more reliant on imported energy, despite the massive resources and skills at our disposal.

The UK Government’s decision to slash the fiscal infrastructure for carbon capture and storage has failed to facilitate matters for the coal industry in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. The Scottish Government believe that financial backing and subsidies must be put in place to give the energy market the fiscal incentives necessary to stimulate investment in coal-fired plant conversion to CCS-converted plants.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the proposed White Rose project would have been sited in my constituency. It would have created many thousands of jobs—not just construction jobs, but hundreds of ongoing jobs, too. I want to clarify a point: is it the Scottish Government’s policy to convert every single coal-fired power station into a CCS plant?

Philip Boswell: As other hon. Members said, some plants are more susceptible to conversion than others. As the hon. Gentleman said, it makes sense to sweat out the value of power stations that we have already paid for. It very much depends on the technology. We must evaluate whether power stations are fit for purpose on a case-by-case basis. The secret is to create a world-leading industry. We had the opportunity to do so through carbon capture and storage, which would have enabled us to sell CCS, develop it, increase it from 90% of emissions to 92%, 94% and 96%, and create an industry and a supply chain in the UK for exportation and exploitation around the world.
Ironically, the Chancellor said explicitly that his latest Budget was “a Budget for the next generation.” It is not, and the bleak legacy left for the next generation is nothing to be proud of—skills shortages; a lack of research, development and innovation; and the wider economic implications of the UK having an import-led energy sector. Those are the results of the Government’s complete mishandling of energy. The failure to seize the opportunity that carbon capture and storage presents to the UK and rest of the world for managing the effects of the continued use of coal-fired power will sound the death knell for coal-fired power in the UK. That missed opportunity is one more failure in the long list of the Government’s energy policy failures. It will create a toxic financial legacy, which will be a problem for future generations.

Philip Boswell

Dr Whitehead: I hope the industry will be involved in that. However, the hon. Gentleman ought to bear in mind that, although a great deal of intellectual property remains from the project that was to take place in his constituency, for example, the project itself was not at all progressed—the CCS industry in this country remains nascent, so for the industry to take on the load of developing itself to any extent over the next period seems to be quite an ask. It is therefore essential for the Government to become involved in strategising and underwriting the development of CCS. I hope that that will now be done, even if it is not at the same level of expense as in the original two projects supported by the Government.

On the future of coal-fired power stations in the UK, it is important to be clear. The proposal is to close all coal-fired power stations by 2025, which has been mentioned this afternoon. The Government have suggested that there should be a consultation leading to the closure, subject to the caveat put forward last autumn by the Secretary of State in her energy reset speech: “we’ll only proceed if we’re confident that the shift to new gas can be achieved within these timescales.” That is the caveat on the proposal to close all coal-fired power stations by 2025.

The estimate is that only something like 1% of our electricity will be supplied from coal by 2025 because of the closures of coal-fired power stations for various reasons, other than the Government saying that they should close by 2025—those reasons include the European large plant directive, the age of the plants, the running out of the plants, and the economics of running them. Therefore, those plants are likely to close by that date anyway. One way or another, we face the prospect of pretty much all coal-fired power stations in the UK being closed, and the hon. Member for Cannock Chase rightly raises the issue of what will happen to those sites. What should be done with all of them, not just Rugeley B power station?

A number of us can sympathise with the issue of what happens to a large site that is vacated in or around one’s own constituency. Recently, a Ford transit van plant located on the edge of my constituency closed, creating a 600-acre site. We need to think carefully about assistance for the people who have been displaced from the site by the closure, the different possible uses for the site, and the best use given its connections and how it is going to work in future. Those are all important considerations, and the hon. Lady is clearly alive to all the issues to do with what can be done with the Rugeley B site.

No other world car manufacturer is hovering in the wings, waiting to occupy the Ford site near my constituency and to build cars instead of the Ford Motor Company.
However, as far as Rugeley B is concerned, the hon. Lady has looked at whether it could remain, if not as a coal-fired station, then as another form of power station. That particular line of reasoning makes considerable sense. Her suggestion is also germane to the issue of our energy mix in future years: could Rugeley B be converted into a gas-fired power station?

Like the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), who I am afraid is no longer in his place, I looked at Google Maps and a large National Grid gas line runs right alongside Rugeley B power station. So the question of changing the configuration of Rugeley B from coal to gas is, in principle, very doable as far as the supply of gas to the power station is concerned. The issue would be the circumstances in which any such conversion could take place. My concern is that, in particular instances, the mechanisms in this country for encouraging the development of new gas-fired power stations, assuming that we need a number of them over coming years—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. May I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider bringing his remarks to a conclusion as we have only 14 minutes left? Thank you.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, Ms Ryan, I am about to conclude my remarks, having revealed my thoughts on the idea a gas-fired power station at Rugeley. However, before I do so, I want to spend a minute on the question whether that conversion is feasible under existing arrangements in the capacity market. At the moment, the market provides either underwriting for existing power stations to continue to supply, or the possibility of contracts for new power stations, but there does not appear to be a category within them to enable conversion to take place—certainly not in the 15-year period.

I encourage the hon. Member for Cannock Chase to talk to DECC about whether the capacity market might be amended to take account of such arrangements. A number of coal-fired power stations have been converted to gas recently in the United States, so it is technically feasible. It depends on the kind of power station. Nevertheless, it certainly makes sense—if we are to have new gas-fired power stations anyway, why not have a gas-fired power station where a coal-fired one was? We would not then have the problem of how long the gas-fired station would need to operate over the next period. If that can be done, it would be a positive addition to our fleet of power stations and might be a solution that could apply to other former coal-fired power stations.

Philip Boswell: Given that CCS technology is proven and that the hope for Government funding is not entirely lost, does the hon. Gentleman agree that Government investment in research and development and stable legislation are key to the industry confidence necessary to develop CCS in the UK?

Dr Whitehead: I agree. That is something for the future that applies to the whole power sector. We need a series of stable policy bases on which to proceed with future power provision.

Finally, given the well-known interest of the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) in biomass and his leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on biomass, he must be aware that Rugeley B was scheduled to be converted to biomass in 2012, but that the company that took over the power station decided to pull the idea. Perhaps a reopening of that interest might be appropriate, although he must also be aware of the question about contracts for difference and how they may or may not come to the aid of biomass in future, given the budgets available.

In conclusion, I encourage the hon. Member for Cannock Chase in her pursuit of alternative uses for the Rugeley B site. If it can be given new life in a different form, that would indeed be a good outcome for the power station.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) on securing this important debate. In her speech she alluded to the fact that just over a week ago my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State accompanied her on an inspection of this major site, and I warmly endorse his determination to ensure that the planning system operates quickly and effectively to assist the local authority in reaching prompt decisions on any planning proposals that may come forward for the site.

I am conscious of my hon. Friend’s discussions with other Ministers and with the owners of the Rugeley B power station. She has also met members of the taskforce of local government and local enterprise partnerships, and trade union representatives, to discuss the future of the site should the power station close.

My hon. Friend has underlined the national and strategic importance of the site and the implications of its closure. She is doing what I would call a very good sales job in promoting the site as the asset that it is, given its size, location and connectivity, which make it an attractive location for redevelopment for a range of uses. Both she and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) mentioned the site of Rugeley A power station and I am sure that lessons can be learnt from the redevelopment of that site, where there are now homes, business parks and logistics centres, which have created thousands of jobs for the local economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase said, under this Conservative Government many more people in her constituency are in work and many fewer people are unemployed than was the case in 2010.

I will cover three specific areas mentioned by my hon. Friend. Before I do so, on planning issues, because of our formal role in the planning system, Ministers are not able to comment or advise on any particular planning applications, nor would we wish to fetter judgments to be made by decision makers in the future. However, I may say the following.

My hon. Friend mentioned enterprise zones. We have no current plans for new enterprise zones, but we would be happy to work with her local enterprise partnerships to look at what options might exist for Rugeley. I note that Cannock Chase is covered by both the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull local enterprise partnerships. As part of the growth deal round three negotiations, it will be for her local area to put forward a bid in relation to its priorities to secure investment for future growth. She might want
to consider discussing that with her local councils and local enterprise partnerships. My Department is certainly willing to have a conversation with her and those organisations in that regard.

Consideration will also be given to local development orders, which can be used to relax planning controls for particular areas or categories of development where the impacts would be acceptable and where that would promote economic, social or environmental gains such as boosting enterprise. Bearing in mind that I am short on time, I will write to my hon. Friend to say more about how those orders can be used.

My hon. Friend also mentioned transitional relief to help with a local council’s short-term funding pressures. Before 2013, local councils could not benefit from growth in business rates because money raised from rates was returned to central Government to be redistributed, but that is no longer the case. At the moment, councils may keep up to 50% of any growth in their business rates. Before talk began of the closure of Rugeley B, the council estimated that it would retain just over £4 million of its business rates under the retention scheme in 2016-17—a 46% growth since that scheme started. Although it would lose more than £1 million in business rates income following the power station’s closure, the ability to retain income from business rates will put the local authority pretty much back where it was in terms of baseline funding.

There is a safety net: in circumstances where losses are so significant that they exceed 7.5% of the local authority’s baseline funding, the Government top the local authority back up to its baseline funding, although that is not the situation currently in my hon. Friend’s constituency. There are, though, a number of other financial support mechanisms that she may want to consider. I would like to set those out—they include the support that we are offering for brownfield development and the remediation of brownfield sites, particularly for new housing development—but I am extremely short on time, so again, I will write to her about that important issue.

My hon. Friend also raised nationally significant infrastructure planning. I recognise what she said about gas-fired power stations and conversion and that the planning regime must be robust, but it must also be flexible. As she knows, we reviewed the Planning Act 2008 in 2014 to ensure that it was still delivering a streamlined, fair and faster nationally significant infrastructure planning system. Respondents to that review felt that the system was working reasonably well but suggested some practical improvements, many of which we have implemented, including the publication of a prospectus by the Planning Inspectorate setting out help and advice to applicants before submitting an application for development consent. I also welcome the Planning Inspectorate’s intention to hold a workshop in June to ensure effective pre-application discussions, and my hon. Friend talked about how that could be beneficial to her area.

I apologise that I have been too short on time to cover in more depth some of the questions asked by my hon. Friend and others, but I assure her that I will write to her about the items that I have not been able to respond to. If the coal-fired power station she referred to closes, she can certainly come back to my Department to discuss further the challenges of that site and the development that the local area may aspire to.

3.58 pm

Amanda Milling: I thank all hon. Members who attended the debate and the Minister for his comments. I look forward to following up on them and going through the issues that I have raised.

In this short time, I would like to thank hon. Members, in particular my hon. Friends from Staffordshire, who were here en masse. I add my support to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) for the dualling of the A5, because, as he rightly said, it affects Cannock Chase, too. I thank my neighbours, my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who have been incredibly supportive throughout this pretty difficult time with the power station.

The debate has demonstrated that this issue affects Members from across the UK, from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). I noticed that cooling towers seem to have a role as a navigation device, whether for drivers or for sailors. I want to refer specifically to my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who has demonstrated that his constituency is the original northern powerhouse. I thank everyone for their time this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of coal-fired power station sites.
Electoral Participation (Media)

[DAVID CRAUSBY in the Chair]

4 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the role of the media in encouraging electoral participation.

Today’s debate is very timely. With the EU referendum only a few weeks away and elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly and local elections in some parts of the UK only one week away, this issue really has become a focus.

I will give my opinion on how the media can and should be involved in electoral participation—an interest of mine that developed through the Scottish independence referendum, when the media had so much impact. That became an influence on my work as an MP, and now as co-chair of the all-party group on democratic participation. I intend to talk today about matters such as electoral turnout and how it can vary between groups in society; the role the media had in the Scottish independence referendum and the subsequent impact on voter turnout; changes in demand and how the media need to reflect those; what support politicians can give to an evolving audience; and how media of all platforms have a responsibility to their audiences.

With the general election almost a year ago, when we saw an overall increase in electoral turnout, now seems the right time to pause and reflect on the many different factors that influenced that rise, the role the media undoubtedly played in it and how we can best support efforts to encourage electoral participation.

Since 1950, when electoral turnout was 83.9% across the UK, there has been a steady decline in voter turnout, ending with a staggeringly disappointing low turnout in 2001 of just 59.4% across the UK. Although we have seen the beginnings of a rise in turnout, it is not rising equally across all sectors of society or, indeed, all parts of the UK. While I am sure there were a variety of reasons for the increased turnout in 2015, there has been an increase in media engagement of the electorate and a platform shift in not only the types of media that reach out to engage and influence but the platforms from which people seek their information.

While many Members present today may expect me to use this debate to have a pop at biased media during the Scottish independence debate, I have bigger points to make than to shame the BBC, the Daily Record or the Daily Mail. The media no longer influence the electorate just through traditional party political broadcasts or biased newspapers. It is not only a question of leaders’ debates on the telly, although they are important. The media have evolved and begun to recognise the role they can play in not only voter registration and turnout but overall engagement. As people have become more politically aware, there is a far higher demand of media. I believe broadcasters realise that and want to meet the expectations of their audiences.

Engagement in politics can be a difficult factor to measure. Even more complicated is how and why people are influenced and how the media can contribute to that. Recent findings of the Audit of Political Engagement 13 in 2016 concluded that “the public’s perceived levels of knowledge of and interest in politics have reached, respectively, the highest and second highest levels recorded in the history of the Audit tracker.”

However, that is not the case across the whole of the UK, with notable variance regionally and in relation to class and ethnicity. The audit also found that in terms of an interest in and knowledge of politics, those who ranked themselves with the lowest indicators were black and minority ethnic adults, women, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and non-homeowners.

In Scotland, we have seen an unprecedented level of electoral participation, with the percentage of people who claim they are either very or fairly interested in politics standing at 74%, compared with just 57% in the general UK population. That trend has continued to grow after the referendum.

There are so many lessons we can learn from the experience of the Scottish referendum, in which people themselves took to the issues. Information was exchanged peer to peer far more than by interaction with traditional media. Some media outlets caught up with that and embraced it, which fed a real enthusiasm for politics that we had not seen a lot of in other parts of the country. That was a good thing, and it shows that if people are genuinely engaged and interested in politics, we can get beyond the, “Oh well, it’s only politicians; they don’t really count” mentality.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that the engagement inspired by the referendum in Scotland has continued to the present day? We, as Scottish National party Members, are very much aware of that, as constituents continue to interact with us through social media, even while we are taking part in debates in the House.

Owen Thompson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is certainly something we have all had to adapt to, because there is still an expectation of availability, accessibility and the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with us. It puts a great responsibility on us, but all politicians should look to live up to that responsibility. After all, we in this place are the representatives of the people.

Voter turnout in the 2015 general election across the UK was 66.1%—a rise of 6.7%, which, on the face of it, is not too bad. At a regional level, voter turnout was 65.8% in England, 65.7% in Wales, 71.1% in Scotland and 58.1% in Northern Ireland. However, if Scotland is excluded from that overall figure, and we look across a number of years, turnout in elections has not changed very much. The average combined turnout in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was 62.9% in 2001, 62.2% in 2005, 62.6% in 2010 and 63.2% in 2015. That helps to demonstrate the difference in engagement we have seen in Scotland because of the referendum and the grassroots movement of people accessing forums in different ways, and the ways that that has been taken forward.

It is clear to many—I suspect many of my colleagues from Scotland will agree—that we need to learn the lessons from the referendum and understand and encourage all types of media to engage with people politically. We must look to and support a host of platforms to enable that, from the arts and social media to self-gathering grassroots media, which was such a factor in the Scottish
People are looking to access information in different ways. Those media that are on the ball and keeping up with things are listening and reacting, but we as politicians have a responsibility to encourage that and promote it across all levels of the media.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. In my constituency we have two excellent local newspapers: the Woking Advertiser, which is branded the Woking Advertiser in Woking, and the Woking News & Mail. They cover local and national politics in a very considered way. However, so many towns are now without a local newspaper—never mind two—and I wonder whether local radio stations should also be covering local and national politics more than they do to make up for the very unfortunate decline in our traditional local press.

Owen Thompson: I absolutely agree; this is a responsibility of all media platforms. My constituency is very fortunate to have two community radio stations—Black Diamond FM and Crystal FM—that take an active interest in politics locally and that do their bit when it comes to elections by hosting hustings and such. Coverage should absolutely be across all platforms.

Although the media, social media platforms and broadcasters must participate, politicians also have a part to play. They need to rebuild trust within their constituencies and communities and listen to how voters want to be engaged. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are helpful, but are not enough—after all, not everyone can be quite as popular as Nicola Sturgeon.

When we see huge swathes of the population disfranchised because their vote never influences election outcomes, we should be worried. When steps are taken to refuse votes at 16—even though, as a demographic, they are more engaged—we should be worried. As well as exploring how the media engage with politics, we should also consider how politics engages with people. Reforms are certainly needed.

The key message that I would like the Minister and others interested in the debate to take away is that we should all take steps—every step we possibly can—to engage all aspects of the media and encourage them to be involved in politics. The meaning of the word “politics” translates to “of, for, or relating to the citizens,” and it is high time that we all paid attention to that.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): It is good to have you looking after us this afternoon, Mr Crausby, and making sure we all behave ourselves and have a productive debate. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing it. As he said, he is involved in the all-party group on democratic participation, which does incredibly important work. We need to develop a better cross-party approach in this area, particularly on such things as voter registration; we do better together than we do separately. Political parties must have a place in getting their normal demographic supporter base to get registered and to get out, take part and use their vote on polling day. More than that, however, if we can co-operate on a cross-party basis, it...
is often reassuring for voters because they can see that it is being done from purer democratic motives, rather than just for party advantage. That can make a difference, so the all-party group’s work is in that proud tradition and is hugely to be supported and applauded.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned various surveys of democratic engagement and democratic involvement. Interestingly, the results that he quoted pretty closely match—directionally at least—what we see if we start to compare levels of voter registration. Voter registration is not a perfect proxy for democratic involvement, because someone can be registered to vote and then not use their vote on polling day, but it is not a bad one. It was very interesting to hear him mention that some BME community groups are under-represented and less likely to be registered. Incidentally, others are extremely well represented—there are some parts of the Asian community in this country whose registration rates are well above average—but as he rightly mentions, some are below average.

Equally, we have problems with people who live in short-term rented accommodation and perhaps move regularly. There is some debate about whether their reason for not registering is that they are disaffected and do not see the idea of democracy being relevant to them, or whether it is just inconvenient because the registration folk do not keep up with them as they move around—it may be a bit of both. There are some queries about that. Students can be a problem in terms of levels of registration, although interestingly, a degree of evidence now shows that quite a lot of students are registered at their parental home address as opposed to their university address, so we need to be careful about how that set of figures are taken.

The single worst group for registration is one that we often forget about—expatriates. There are between 1.5 million and 2 million Brits currently living abroad who are legally entitled to vote. At present, they lose the right to vote after 15 years, and we aim to change that in due course. However, as the law stands, there are perhaps 1.5 million people, or even more—estimates vary, but there could be up to 2 million—living abroad who are legally enfranchised, but the level of registration among that group was just over 100,000 at the last general election. Therefore, only between 5% and 10% of them are registered, at most. They are by far the least well-registered group and are therefore the least well-represented group among all the different ones that we need to get involved and bring into the fold.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the role of media is incredibly important. He pointed out that the way in which social media has changed democratic debate is important not only for us as practising politicians, but for the overall body politic—for the state and how our democratic consensus is forged, and how democratic debate takes place—and I particularly liked that. He is absolutely right that more of that is now peer to peer, which I think was the phrase he used. I venture to suggest that in the past, peer-to-peer debate was basically what people said to their mates down the pub, but the advent of social media means that Facebook groups, Twitter streams and, I dare say, even Snapchat groups of one kind or another, are now all over the place. They mean that people with very disparate interests and opinions can come together much more easily and share their points of view.

That is relevant for campaigning groups: people who have a particular interest in anything from saving hedgehogs through to democracy in Burma, and everything in between—the sorts of things that, actually, are frequently covered by all-party groups in this building. It allows them to organise nationally much more effectively, much faster and much more cheaply than they ever used to. However, we need to be careful: if someone is always surrounded by like-minded people online, or physically in the offline world, they risk finding themselves purely in an echo chamber where everybody always agrees with them. I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees that nothing is more dangerous for a politician than to hear the opinions only of people who always agree with them. That can lead to dangerous waters, including the belief that they are always right and, if not careful, they may become impatient with people who have the temerity to hold a different point of view. Part of the weft and warp of good democratic debate is that someone can disagree honestly, fervently and strongly without being a bad person. They may just be incredibly principled and happen to hold different views.

One danger of the echo chamber effect is that people become more likely to be short-tempered with one another if they hear competing views. None the less, digital media and the vastly extended scope of peer-to-peer debate is incredibly important to the way our democracy functions—not just our democracy, but every democracy.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the effect of broadcast media and we should include TV, national radio and local radio. I thank him for introducing me to Gary of “Gary: Tank Commander”, who does not make it quite as far down in the south-west as where I live in Weston-super-Mare. I am resolved to try to find him because I am told that he is very funny and has done some interesting stuff as a comedian interviewing politicians in Scotland, which is an interesting cross-over that has not been done commonly, certainly not in this country or much more widely. If it has, it has been done more along the lines of taking the mickey out of unsuspecting politicians, rather like Sacha Baron Cohen, which is different. It is potentially very interesting, but there are other areas where the broadcast media have historically done great things.

4.21 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.45 pm

On resuming—

John Penrose: The temptation to restart by just saying “Gary: Tank Commander” and is very strong. However, I remind everybody that we had just finished talking about the effect of social media and the way it has changed our democratic discourse mostly for the better, but with some caveats. I was moving on to talk about broadcast media—national TV and radio, and local radio—and the arts. The hon. Member for Midlothian was rightly taking pains to emphasise their contribution.

I think we are all familiar with the national contribution of broadcasters in current affairs and news programmes, but there are other aspects. The hon. Gentleman mentioned soap operas. Voter registration and political involvement have played into the plotlines of “Hollyoaks”, “River City” and various other programmes. Those are
examples of drama portraying what should be normal life—normal political involvement, whether that is, for example, someone standing for the local council or getting involved in a campaign to save their local theatre.

Those examples bring home to people that political involvement is part of the normal way in which the world works—what ordinary, normal people do—and reduces the distance between politics and people. As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, the two should be synonymous. The roots of the words are the same. Such examples stop politicians being seen, necessarily, as a slightly weird class of other people who have different interests and motivations from everybody else, and remind us all that politicians should be the same as everybody else. We should be the same as our next-door neighbours and live in the same world as everybody else. Drama can do that in a very powerful way.

Broadcast drama obviously has huge reach and theatre can also make a difference, as can other arts such as the visual arts. For example, Weston-super-Mare recently played host to a world-class, world-famous exhibition organised by the street artist Banksy at the Tropicana lido on the sea front. It was fascinating because much of the art produced by Banksy and some other artists featured had a political message. It was mainly the politics of protest, interestingly; none the less, it will have driven political involvement.

I was asked by a number of journalists whether I was comfortable with those politics of protest—in many cases, they were slightly left-wing political statements—as part of the art in the middle of Weston-super-Mare, to which my unhesitating answer was, “Yes. I’m very happy indeed, if only because it makes people think.” One of the things that art is supposed to do, of course, is to make people think. If it made people think and made them realise that such issues affect us all, not just politicians and a class of other people, it is all to the good.

Comedians can do the same. We have mentioned “Gary: Tank Commander”, and political comedy and satire has a long and respectable history, although it is probably wrong to call satire respectable. As politicians, we need to be careful because satire is partly, by its very nature, a distancing thing. It creates the distance that we need to collapse, so some forms of comedy can add to the problem, as well as subtract from it. We must acknowledge that comedy can be a double-edged sword.

Going back to national TV and radio, and local radio, we are all comfortable and familiar with news and current affairs programmes. More recently—this has been a huge adornment and improvement to our national political discussions—the leaders’ debates have made a great deal of difference. Although we are used to those, there is a broader approach in drama and things other than current affairs, which the broadcast media should use.

More broadly, there are other media, particularly the material used in schools. The hon. Gentleman mentioned, for example, the Rock Enrol! school materials, which are produced in the Cabinet Office by people in my team and used widely in schools across the country to teach pupils about democratic engagement as part of a broader programme of citizenship. All those materials and media are important for making democracy part of what everyone is brought up with. If people are brought up with democracy, and if it is explained to them even before they are of voting age, and certainly when they have just achieved voting age, it becomes part of their normal life in the same way as owning a tablet PC or phone might be nowadays. Like breathing, it becomes part of their life, which makes a huge difference.

There are two final groups. Civil society groups can make a huge difference, and many of them produce their own media, either written or, in many cases, online. Many civil society groups are tightly focused and deeply engaged with specific groups of voters, many of them the hard-to-reach, under-registered groups that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Operation Black Vote, Bite the Ballot and many others, for example, are incredibly effective, and if they are not incredibly effective, they are more effective than anybody else. They are leaders in their field at persuading people in those groups that it is worth while getting involved in the democratic process.

As we were saying earlier, part of the difficulty is that some groups are under-represented or under-registered because registration is inconvenient. For example, the system may not keep up with people who move house frequently and ensure that their registration moves from one house to the next. There are also groups where that inconvenience or bureaucratic friction is not the whole story. In some cases there is a high degree of distrust in democracy, in the democratic process, in politics and in politicians of all kinds and of all political persuasions. All of us, as politicians and in these various groups, therefore need to develop a poetry of politics to persuade people that politics is something that can be effective in improving their lives, rather than something for other people.

Finally, no debate on the media would be complete without mentioning the print media. It is noticeable that the hon. Gentleman barely touched on the print media, perhaps partly because it is no secret that although many newspapers are still immensely powerful and widely read, many are suffering from declining circulations. Although it will always be a huge mistake to write off the newspaper industry, it has broader problems, even though it still carries an enormous amount of weight and heft. All our comments on the broadcast media, although with some differences due to the nature of the medium itself, also apply to the print media.

Jonathan Lord: The much maligned council newspaper or magazine can also help. We have an excellent council newspaper in Woking, and it always encourages registration and participation. It explains, in a grounded, proper way, how the electoral process works and when the elections are.

John Penrose: I could not put it better myself. Those final words are a good way to finish our debate.

Question put and agreed to.
Devolution (East Anglia)

4.53 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered Government proposals for devolution in East Anglia.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Crausby. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister, who in his relatively short time in post has done an excellent job of driving the Government’s regional and devolution agenda, particularly as the Minister with responsibility for the northern powerhouse.

I come to this debate wearing two hats: one as the Member of Parliament for Peterborough for the past 11 years; and one as someone who is genuinely asking the Government to explain more coherently their rationale for this policy as it pertains to East Anglia. Obviously, we are a proud municipal entity in Peterborough. Our local authority was first incorporated in 1874, and 20 years ago we were liberated by throwing off the yoke of Cambridgeshire County Council to become, like other notable cities in England, a unitary authority as the city and county of Peterborough.

I am not ideologically against devolution in any sense, but it is incumbent on the Government to explain their position. It would be remiss of me not to draw the House’s attention to the excellent National Audit Office report published on 20 April, which was considered by the Public Accounts Committee on Monday in unison with another excellent report, produced on 23 March, on local enterprise partnerships.

Obviously, devolution is predicated on Government functions being moved to local areas and local entities. It is very much a bottom-up, not a top-down, process. That has certainly been the case in the majority of the 34 English local government areas that submitted bids following the Government’s invitation in 2014—the successful bids were announced in the 2015 autumn statement—but the policy of devolution must be seen within a wider context.

When the coalition Government were elected in 2010, we expressly set our face against regional government. We got rid of regional assemblies, having seen the mess made by the regional policy of the previous Labour Government, the rejection of regional government by the people of the north-east and, particularly, the rejection of the regional spatial strategies that had been trying to force inappropriate housing on many largely rural areas across the country. That was the basis of the Government’s position, and the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), specifically said at the time that there would be no further local government reorganisation.

It seems strange that, in what is essentially a financial statement, the Government disregarded the good work being done in places such as Manchester and Birmingham to announce, out of the blue and with limited consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders, local enterprise partnerships, local authority leaders and majority groups, three further devolution schemes in Greater Lincolnshire, the West Midlands and, of course, East Anglia. Given that the overall tone of the NAO report is that the process is a potential risk, and complex, the Government need to explain why that happened.

The policy involves 16 million people across 10 deals, and it arises from the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. I can understand why the policy is attractive to local authorities. It involves a cumulative sum of £7.4 billion over a 30-year period, or about £246.5 million per annum, but in the east of England it is only £30 million, which has to be set in the broader financial context. Currently, the three counties in the East Anglia scheme already spend £660 million in capital infrastructure funding and have already received £37 million of growth funding in the last financial year. The deal promises officially the lowest per capita funding of all the 10 devolution deals: £13 a head. That compares, for instance, with £22 a head for Sheffield, £20 a head for Liverpool and £23 a head for Tees valley—I am sure the Minister will have something to say about Tees valley.

If it were genuine devolution, I would be a bit more sanguine. I agree, of course, that it is not an ignoble aspiration for any Government to integrate and promote collaboration between key public services to improve them in sectors such as transport, business support, further education, housing and planning, although, incidentally, we are not devolving to any great extent the work of the Department for Work and Pensions, which has never been very agreeable to having any kind of subsidiarity or devolution. Also, the area of health is pick ‘n’ mix; some of the deals will have some health funding devolved and some will not.

A number of key issues cause me concern. One is about synergies. Is there really a synergy between the Suffolk coast, south Suffolk, St Neots, King’s Lynn and the city of Peterborough? I do not think there is. We should remember that the regional policy of the Labour Government was about reducing inequalities in the economies within regions and between regions, but the local enterprise partnerships that were established by the previous coalition Government were intended to take into account infrastructure and economic growth in travel-to-work areas, which, incidentally, are not coterminous with these new devolution deal areas.

I do not believe that there is any synergy. In fact, this is unprecedented. Unless we count Boardicea and Hereward the Wake, no one has ever decided it would be a good idea to have an overarching governance structure for the whole of these three counties in East Anglia. This is different from the other schemes. Of course, the Greater Manchester scheme and the Birmingham scheme effectively reconfigure the old Greater Manchester County Council and the West Midlands County Council, and they make sense. But regarding economic, demographic and social links, the East Anglia scheme does not stack up and it looks like a back-of-an-envelope calculation by someone in the Treasury.

That is an issue that concerns me. Another is duplication. Let me give just two examples. What is the point of LEPs now if some of their key functions in sectors such as skills and training are devolved to an executive elected mayor and a cabinet, with the numbers, powers, duties and responsibilities unspecified? We read that the combined authority will have an education committee. What will happen to Norfolk County Council’s education committee, or Suffolk County Council’s education committee and the cabinet functions that they discharge as local education authorities?
These are important issues and I do not believe that the Minister or the Government have addressed the potential for duplication across four tiers, and that is not including parish councils. The four tiers will be the LEP, the combined authority with the elected mayor, county councils and district councils. Quite reasonably, each of those bodies—particularly the district council and county council—is saying, “Which one of us is going to be abolished?”

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is presenting a superb case. Where would the police and crime commissioners, who have only been going for four years and who the Government now say are doing a very good job, go in all this? They are another elected tier and are doing well. Chances are that, if the elected mayor comes in, the PCC will disappear, and county council—is saying, “Which one of us is going to be abolished?”

Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point and I pay tribute—

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jackson: May I just finish the tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham)? He raised this issue very forcefully and robustly in the Budget debate in March, and I pay tribute to him for that. He is absolutely right.

Heidi Allen: I am just a turkey voting for Christmas, because following on from that point it occurred to me that there will also be a debate between MPs and the mayor. Who will be fighting for the infrastructure? I do not understand where the demarcation will lie.

Mr Jackson: That is a superb point about competing mandates, which was eloquently made in an erudite fashion by our hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk on the “Today” programme this morning. It is a very important point.

We also need to look at democracy and accountability. I repeat the point that there was very little discussion or debate with important people in local government before this deal was announced at the Budget, and I deprecate that. It is not right when we are talking about a potential expenditure of £7 billion that will affect 2.3 million people. We do not know what primary legislation will be needed, and we do not really know what the powers, duties and responsibilities of the elected mayor will be. I will develop that point a bit later.

There is also a question about resilience. One of the issues that the NAO brought out in its report was whether there is the resilience in the civil service at departmental level—between the Treasury, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Communities and Local Government—to manage this very complex issue of different deals across the country, because of the heterogeneous nature of each of the areas involved. I am referring to the Cities and Local Growth Unit in central Government, but also to local government. The NAO wondered whether there was the capacity to deal with this sustainably.

Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) knows that on the Public Accounts Committee we have seen that, in strained financial times, when we do not have a benign environment, there have been significant problems about the sustainability of big projects, whether they are projects involving fire control, the fire service and fire authorities, the police, further education in particular, or of course local government. That is the case now, so what will it be like when we have really big budgets and functions across different boundaries?

The question is this: will devolution of the “planning and organising services across institutional and geographical boundaries…lead to more integrated and efficient services”? That question was put by the NAO. One only has to look at the health economy in the eastern region—at the problems at Norfolk and Norwich University hospital, at Hinchingbrooke hospital, and at Peterborough City hospital—to see how difficult it has been to align geographical areas to clinical care and to work between acute district hospital care and primary care trusts. But we are looking to do something on a much bigger scale in the future.

Of course, I welcome some aspects of the proposal—the devolution of local transport budgets, skills, adult further education and business rate retention. However, there is a lack of specificity, as well as an ambiguity, about these proposals. The Government say that over time funding streams will be put in a single pot in sectors such as transport and local growth. However, the NAO says that “the government needs to provide a clear statement of the new accountability arrangements…aligned and coherent across government…many of the assumptions about devolution deals are untested.”

That raises great concerns about scrutiny and oversight. We got rid of the Audit Commission six years ago. We do not have a body that can look in detail at the spending priorities of the elected mayor and his cabinet. It is no good saying that we will have a scrutiny panel of, frankly, under-resourced Back-Bench MPs and small district councils to oversee these huge budget decisions and infrastructure projects. That does not really wash. We only need to look at some of the problems about cronyism and inappropriate contracts in some academy chains, and most recently the problems with the fire and rescue service in Cambridgeshire, to see that without proper accountability and oversight things can go wrong.

We need to ask questions about why there is not a proper timetable and timeline. Also, there is no clear statement of objectives. The NAO says that the Government do not have “a clear framework for how the deals will link to other ongoing-localism initiatives.”

That is an important point. The NAO also says that “The expected…pace of future devolution deals is not known at present.” I do not want to take too much longer, but it is important to put this point to the Minister. It is not good enough to rely on good will and a statement of intent, which is what most of the deals now are relying on. As I said, we got rid of the Audit Commission and despite improvements there is not an effective process for accountability system statements. It is no good the DCLG saying that it is reviewing accountability system statements and that it.
Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The need for an executive elected mayor is not the talk of the Dog and Duck in Peterborough, it is true. We have enough government and enough councillors. We do not need another tier of governance, as he has probably gathered from the tenor of my remarks.

Having said all that, the Government can rescue the situation with all the Cs: collaboration, consultation, clarity and coherence. If they can explain the role of the elected mayor, explain in a timely way how the passage towards powers and duties will work, create a timescale and show us that it is in the financial interest of our constituents to accept this new governance structure, we will be mindful of that and be prepared to be broadly supportive.

There is an alternative model, which would be to effectively have two greater local enterprise partnerships: one for Norfolk and Suffolk and one for Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and the city of Cambridge. That is a perfectly reasonable alternative model if the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government do not get fixated on population numbers, but instead go back to first principles, which is economic sustainability.

I offer my remarks with good will and a degree of cross-party support. I am not yet persuaded, but I may be in the future. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks. I hope he can specifically answer some of my queries and concerns.

Mr Bacon: I thought I would try to get there before my hon. Friend started his peroration, but I will give way.

Mr Bacon: I thought I would try to get there before my hon. Friend started his peroration. He reminded me of a meeting I had with the Italian Minister for productive activities in Rome some years ago. Curiously enough, he was not responsible for fertility in Italy, although one might have thought he was.

Because I cannot stay until the end of the debate, I felt inhibited from making a speech, but I want to ask my hon. Friend one thing. Also, I do not want to have to listen to the Minister, who is a noted Euro sceptic, torturing the English language in defending the deal. Unfortunately, I have other commitments.

We have 330 district councillors in Norfolk. There are 293 in Suffolk and a further 286 in Cambridgeshire. That is a total of more than 900. There are 228 county councillors for the area, and 57 councillors in the unitary borough of Peterborough. That is a total of nearly 1,200 councillors in the three counties, which feels a little top-heavy. There are also the 6,000 or so parish councillors. That is something like 7,500 councillors altogether. Has my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough had people queueing at his constituency surgeries—I certainly have not—demanding more elected representatives?

Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The need for an executive elected mayor is not the talk of the Dog and Duck in Peterborough, it is true. We have enough government and enough councillors. We do not need another tier of governance, as he has probably gathered from the tenor of my remarks.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Due to Divisions, this debate will end at 5.54 pm. I intend to give the two Front Benches 10 minutes each, so I will call the first at 5.34 pm. Six Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Doing the maths, they have around three minutes each, including interventions.

5.16 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this debate. Unusually, we might find ourselves in agreement on one or two issues today.

From my very first contribution in the House, I have been banging on not about Europe, but about the real
and immediate challenges facing Cambridge on housing and transport. In the last year, the problems have only become more acute. We have some of the fastest rising house prices in the country—they are even outstripping London—and too many occasions when the city has been near gridlocked.

I am sorry to say that the policy response from the Government has made the situation worse. Cambridge City Council and local housing associations have rightly been horrified by the range of Government housing proposals that will dramatically reduce the already limited amount of affordable housing in the city and undermine the only recently agreed long-term business plan underpinning the building of new affordable homes for rent. Moreover, the much-vaunted city deal plan inherited from the previous Government has morphed into the mess before us today.

The devolution deal at the heart of this debate, while much trumpeted by the Government, is not much welcomed by anyone else. It is a devolution deal for Norfolk and Suffolk, with Cambridgeshire bolted on as a last-minute add-on, with an unwanted elected mayor bolted on top of that. Let us be clear: Cambridge and the surrounding area need the freedom to make the investments needed to tackle the housing and transport challenges.

A detailed case has been developed by the local business-led organisation Cambridge Ahead, and I urge the Minister to revisit it. “The Case for Cambridge” enjoyed strong local support across councils, local MPs, all sectors of business, the LEP, the chamber of commerce and our universities, which are a unique asset. Unfortunately, instead of responding to that locally agreed and developed proposal—the very bottom-up proposal that the Government sought—the Government instead came back late in the day with a completely different solution. They basically said, “You’ve got three weeks to take it or leave it.” The reaction was rightly furious. The LEP rejected it, business leaders rejected it, Cambridge City Council rejected it and Cambridgeshire County Council rejected it. So far as I am aware, only one district in the area has any real enthusiasm.

I do not have much time, so I will jump straight to my final conclusions, although I note in passing that the National Audit Office highlighted a discrepancy in funding between regions. Why does the west of England get £27 per capita additional investment per head, while in East Anglia we are offered just £13?

As a more optimistic conclusion, may I say that we need to get more flexibility and funding into the region? I suggest that the Minister look again at the suggestions coming from Cambridgeshire and the very special opportunities in Cambridge in particular. Why can those two deals not be folded into one? No one really wants your mayor, Minister. If we have to have it, I dare say they can be safely ignored. There is a much bigger prize for Cambridge. We can be the catalyst for UK prosperity. We are already hugely successful, but that future success is at risk. Of course there are always risks with major investments—we know that, and we have explained how those can be underwritten. Cambridge is up to the task, but as it stands we do not have the powers we need.

5.19 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), with whom I agree entirely. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this debate.

Ministers have done an excellent job on devolution. I support devolution, which is an absolute natural partner to localism—I think that was the point made by the hon. Member for Cambridge—and localism is all about buy-in from local people. In Norfolk, we have an affinity to Norfolk. We love it and are passionate about it. The same is true of people in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. We have no affinity to a concept such as East Anglia. In a metropolitan area, people have a sense of belonging to a city. The idea works very well in London, Manchester and Birmingham, but the proposal for an elected mayor of East Anglia will not gain public support, and that is why it is my red line.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough mentioned, we opposed Lord Prescott’s regional assemblies. We were very anti the regional spatial strategies. According to the agreement signed by the 23 council leaders, the mayor will have some reserve powers over housing. Any change has to command public support. At a time when local government is cutting back on many third sector organisations—I can think of the citizens advice bureau in my constituency, transport for the disabled and mental health charities—it is not going to look kindly on us for putting in place a very expensive fifth tier of local government.

When council leaders say that the proposal will be cost-effective, that some of the personnel will be stripped out of existing councils and that it will not cost anything extra, what planet are they living on? This will be an opportunity for empire building. It will be a very costly tier of local government. The Government say that they will take out another tier. I am a veteran of at least three campaigns on unitary government. They are very divisive and difficult. It is far better to have collaboration and co-operation between councils. We can then move forward on that basis.

Ministers overlook the political sovereignty of MPs. We have sovereignty on our own patch to convene meetings to get things done or to stop things happening. Frankly, I do not want an elected mayor barging into my constituency and saying, “Henry, you’ve been a bad boy. You don’t want these houses or this incinerator in your constituency, but we would like you to have them. I am a regional mayor with a mandate from a turnout of all of 5%.”

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am afraid I will not because I must press on.

I put it to the Minister that there is an alternative. There are 23 council leaders, two LEPs and three PCCs. They can get together and select or elect a head honcho to carry forward the devolution process and oversee the strategic transport fund that is going to be put in place. It will be seen as an administrative arrangement, not another tier of government. It will be a Tory solution to the demand that we have devolution. If the Government
go down that route and let it work for perhaps two, three or four years, we can see whether there is a democratic deficit and people are crying out for an elected mayor and revisit the matter. But if they insist on pushing ahead with the elected mayor part of the proposals, I fear they will fail. There is an alternative, and I hope the Minister will embrace it.

5.23 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby, and a privilege to speak after my fellow Norfolk MP, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham).

When the devolution initiative was first proposed, I had an open mind. Like Councillor George Nobbs, leader of Norfolk County Council, and Councillor Alan Waters, leader of Norwich City Council, I wanted it to work. Lord Heseltine’s devolution report, which was published a little while ago, was quite clear that previous devolution attempts had failed because they were top down. He said that it would be different this time because local areas would write their own deal. That was what was promised, and it was on that basis that many councillors approached the initiative with a good conscience, thinking they could work with it, whatever their political party.

Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Councillor George Nobbs was a staunch supporter of the initial efforts. He wrote a letter to Lord Heseltine in which he said:

“Like you I have been an enthusiastic believer of devolving power from central to local government all of my adult life. However I feel that I should share with you, not just my views, but those of some of my fellow councillors, and ask for your help…You will know that there is widespread opposition to the concept of an elected Mayor, disquiet about the perceived rush to meet government deadlines and concern about a consultation to be held in July and August of all months. The financial incentives that are dangled in front of us, only to be threatened with withdrawal if there is any dissent, are in any case considered inadequate by many.”

We have to accept that if we are to have real devolution, we need real financial power for our local authorities and communities, which is not on offer in the deal. The past 35 years have seen centralisation by Whitehall and Westminster. In 1979, local authorities raised 75% of their own funding; they now raise less than 20%. The deal on the table goes nowhere near the level of fiscal independence required—a fact that so many councillors can now see. The meagre amount local authorities can raise from business rates was undermined in the most recent Budget when the Chancellor took money from them.

For cities in our region—economic powerhouses such as Norwich, Cambridge and Ipswich—there is little to no incentive for devolution.

Mr Jackson: And Peterborough.

Clive Lewis: Of course! I am sorry. How could I forget Peterborough?

Where is the control for local authorities over their own housing revenue accounts? Where is their control over the right to buy or the right to stay? Those would be the most effective ways to allow local authorities to build more of the affordable homes that are so desperately needed by so many people and that are acting as a bottleneck to economic progress.

Ultimately, if we want real devolution, we have to devolve control from central Government, which is increasing, to local government, and give local government the financial ability to do something with it. It is about empowering local authorities and local communities. As things stand, that is simply not happening.

5.26 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing this timely debate. Many concerns have been expressed and points raised, and I agree with many of them, particularly the point about police and crime commissioners. We are about to have a PCC election in Suffolk. As I understand it, the Mayor of London is the PCC for London. In a year’s time, are we going to be electing someone who will take over the functions of the three recently elected PCCs? I would like to know, because among the biggest concerns of all Members present are the layers of government.

I cannot go into too much detail—I have had to remove layers of my speech—but, notwithstanding all the concerns we have heard, we do need to be aware of the big picture. The Government have got it right—if not in all the detail then certainly in the thrust of the policy—on two points. First, let us not forget what happened in the referendum on the future of the United Kingdom. After that referendum, a promise was made to the people of Scotland and, at the same time, a promise was made to the people of England that we would get devolution—real power in local areas. The Conservative party is trying to deliver on that promise, and that is absolutely right.

Secondly, this country has a long-standing fundamental weakness: it has been completely over-centralised in London and its economy has been over-centralised in London and the south-east. We have paid a heavy price for that, with many parts of the country far poorer than London and the south-east. It would not be easy to deliver, but the key to solving the problem is infrastructure and long-term, sustainable economic growth for our region. If devolution could deliver that, it would be a victory for young people in our communities.

My final point is about rail. I think it is fair to say that the biggest economic weakness in our region is our railways. They are very poor, but we have a franchise going through. There has been talk of the reunification of the track and the operator, so that they would be run by the same body. If that were introduced, I would certainly support it, because the fragmentation between Network Rail and whichever franchisee is a problem. The regional government could then have a role, which would give us far greater strategic control over rail. That would be a welcome benefit. We must remember the potential positives, while asking questions on the key issues.

5.29 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing the debate. I am a supporter of devolution, but on the feedback I receive from Suffolk, and from my
We have contributed to the Treasury for years—we will have to do so to ensure that the devolution deal has local support and will work. There is concern that the deal is being rushed in a way that adds bureaucratic complexity and blurs the lines of accountability.

As we have heard, much of Cambridgeshire is opposed to the deal at present and the idea of an elected mayor does not currently have public support. There is concern that another layer of local government is being added and the challenge of considering removing a tier is being sidestepped. If there is to be a mayor, we need to consider carefully their role and responsibilities, and how those will tie in with the work that councils will continue to do. What happens to the police and crime commissioners? Who will be responsible for the other blue-light services? How can national and local government best work together to meet the health and social care challenge of an ageing population, which is a huge issue in East Anglia?

There are many unanswered questions. There is a need for a pause to allow us to work with local people to produce a long-term strategic plan for East Anglian devolution. We must confront the devil in the detail now, and come up with a proposal that will have public support.

5.31 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) for bringing forward this important debate. Much of what I have to say has been gone over by other Members, but I reiterate the view of my hon. Friend. Friends the Members for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous) that devolution in principle is the prize, and we should not lose sight of that prize. It is highly important that we get there.

On the NAO report to which my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough alluded, there is the retort to it that a lack of structure gives areas the ability to drive their own futures. That is an important point, because as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, we have slightly different structural pressures. The need for housing in Cambridge is acute, and that bears down on my constituency, but the partnership working that devolution offers us gives us the ability to move forward and to help each other positively and productively.

We have the benefit of living in one of the best areas of the country—one of the primary areas for health, wealth, food and energy. We are an area for bioscience innovation. We would like what is put forward to be innovative. Innovation in devolution is an exciting concept. With Cambridge University sat in the heart of our region and the University of East Anglia in Norwich leading in life sciences, and agri-tech in particular, we ought to grab such opportunities and drive them forward, because that is the innovation that will help with the health and social care issues that we will have in the future.

We have infrastructure needs in broadband, housing, roads and rail. Nothing has been given back to us, while we have contributed to the Treasury for years—we will give it £2.2 billion this year and up to £8 billion by 2020—so we would like a little more. The potential lever of £900 million is great, but we would like to know what else there is. Unlocking the potential of businesses throughout our region is the prize here. We want to drive forward entrepreneurship and access markets through measures such as enterprise zones, growth hubs and productivity plans.

Innovation can be a game changer, and I am glad to see Andy Wood’s appointment as an independent chair, because that is a huge move forward. I was pleased to learn that, only this morning, a positive meeting of leaders from across our region was held; they are starting to build a shared vision. Work is going on to look at monetary value. There are problems, but if we can have a common vision, with layers of government, business, universities and civil society working to shared goals, we could really set the scene, as a first mover.

One of our primary problems is the lack of love for yet another layer of government. We have gone over that, and I am sure that we can discuss that going forward, but I do not want us to cut ourselves off at the knees and not give ourselves the chance for discussion.

There are many concerns about the proposal; I am sure that the Minister will say whether there is a more moderated approach. Whatever the arrangements, it is important that any leader has defined powers but entertains a collaborative role and works with other local leaders to deliver.

I advise caution on the points that have been made. We must put meat on the bones of this deal to see whether it stacks up for people in our constituencies. I would like to know whether there is one deal for the combined area—Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire—or no deal. That sharp focus might incentivise us to get to the point of devolution: it should be iterative, and it should unlock potential and opportunity. As in Manchester, we should be able to come back to the table to ask the Government for more.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for their co-operation. They got the maths almost exactly right.

5.35 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) for securing this important debate.

I have listened carefully to the debate, and I hope the Minister responds clearly to the genuine concerns raised by hon. Members, many of whom are on his side of the Chamber. When the Chancellor stood up in the House on 16 March to declare triumphantly that his Government had agreed a single powerful East Anglia combined authority, headed by an elected mayor with almost £1 billion of new investment, he was of course wrong. There was no agreement in place. There was only a document signed by council leaders agreeing that they would run the proposed deals through their respective councils and perform public consultation. That was enough for the Chancellor to stand before the nation and declare that the devolution revolution was taking hold. Just days later, the East Anglia devolution agreement began to fall apart.
The Conservative-administered Cambridgeshire County Council voted overwhelmingly, by 64 votes to zero, not to accept the plans. The Minister will be aware that that is not the only deal in disarray. This is more a rebellion than a revolution. Of the 38 devolution proposals from cities, town and counties across England, only 10 have materialised into plans. Many fell at the first hurdle because they disagreed with the Government’s insistence on a directly elected mayor. As we have heard today, this is one of the main problems with the East Anglia deal.

The whole point of devolution is to move away from over-centralised governance, to award more powers to local areas, to create more accountability, to improve the democratic process and to open up a dialogue between central Government and local government about what will work best for an area to bring decision making closer to its people. Council leaders have told me, as they told my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), that they were promised that devolution would be a bottom-up process based on those principles, yet the Government have taken a heavy-handed, top-down, dictatorial approach.

The geographical area covered by this deal makes it the largest of all devolution deals; it covers the three counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire and spanning almost 5,000 square miles. No other deal comes near the expected collaboration requirements. Of the 23 local authorities, 22 have been lumped together. That is more than double the number of local authorities working together in any of the other deals. Common sense should dictate that it is ridiculous to expect 22 local authorities to work together, headed by one elected mayor, when each county has vastly different needs.

Suffolk was promised its own deal, but that was reneged on at the last minute. Cambridgeshire requested its own devolution deal, but was told that the Chancellor would not accept one-county deals. Then Greater Lincolnshire was awarded its own one-county deal. Norfolk and Suffolk asked for £75 million per annum for 30 years. Instead, they gained a county at the last moment, when Cambridgeshire reluctantly joined the deal and everyone was offered £1 billion over 30 years. That might sound good, but when one drills down, it is a modest sum of just over £30 million a year, over 22 local authority areas.

In short, this deal, like many others, is a complete shambles. It is all smoke and mirrors—giving with one hand and taking away with the other. There is huge unease at the speed with which the deal is being pushed through. There is significant pressure on local authorities to develop and complete the necessary work to set up the combined authority before they have had a chance to consult their councillors, let alone the public. Will the Minister comment on the timetable and confirm whether this proposal has been processed so quickly because of the Government’s obsession with having elected mayors in place by May 2017?

Places such as Manchester have had half a decade to progress their deals, but the councils in the east of England have been given seven months. Why will the Government not give those councils adequate time to allow the process to be democratic and fair? Having an elected mayor for a large rural area covering three counties is an unprecedented constitutional innovation. It is untried and untested, and that mayor is likely to be democratically remote. It is difficult enough for counties to get behind the idea of having one mayor covering one county, and unthinkable that one person could cover the needs and demands of three counties with diverse communities, complex internal geography, and varied urban and rural hubs.

Councils have made it clear that they do not want such an arrangement. The Communities and Local Government Committee has said that elected mayors are not an “easy fit” for non-metropolitan areas, and it believes that councils and their local populations should have the right to choose whether to have one. We heard today about some of the many alternatives, such as the one in Cornwall, but the Government continue to insist on elected mayors.

The East Anglia deal is insubstantial. Although the Government entice signatories by promising to devolve more powers at some unspecified future date, those powers are subject to negotiation with the Treasury, not enshrined in statute. Promises can and, given this Government’s track record, will be withdrawn. The elected mayor is the only statutory creation, and once elected, the mayor will be a fixture on the political landscape, even if these devolution deals, as they are currently envisaged, collapse.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, housing is critical in the east of England, but it was offered as a devolved power only as an afterthought, just two days before this deal was signed. The £175 million housing investment fund was thrown in on the condition that there was a fast-track timetable in place for an elected mayor by 2017, but that was not the only condition. In the draft deal, that £175 million is earmarked largely for shared-ownership homes—homes that we know are beyond the means of many people and will not address the issue of the affordability of housing. This Government’s assault on council housing continues. That is yet another example of how their version of devolution is actually about delegation.

There is no real fiscal devolution here. Cuts will continue to be made to local authority budgets, yet councils will be expected to support a combined authority with reduced resources and capacity. Draft deals have only been signed because council leaders who genuinely care about their areas want real devolution and want to make it work. For that, they need a Government who want the same thing, but I fear that this Government do not.

When it was in power in Scotland and Wales, Labour achieved real devolution. We did not rush things through at lightning speed, and we did not expect huge decisions to be made that would affect communities and governance for decades. We had robust public consultation, and we would not have introduced new tiers of governance without allowing time for scrutiny and due diligence. We certainly would not have conducted devolution veiled in secrecy behind closed doors, or imposed last-minute changes from the centre.

The sad truth is that the appetite for devolution among councils and the public is incredibly strong, but this Government are failing to harness that or, as noted in a recent National Audit Office report, clearly articulate what exactly they are trying to achieve through these deals. The upshot is that we, local authorities and, most importantly, members of the public, on whom such deals will impact, do not know what the Government
are trying to achieve. Yet again, we are seeing a masterclass in undemocratic process, which is leaving councils feeling like they are engaged in a Faustian pact.

Lucy Frazer: I know that several Members here are not in favour of the devolution plan that is on the table. Is the hon. Lady aware, however, that some councils are in favour of it? Her speech is a little one-sided. For example, I represent two district councils, including one for East Cambridgeshire, which is very much in favour of the deal. Some questions must be asked, and we would all like some more money, but will she acknowledge that there is some support for devolution?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I will acknowledge that there is some support, but my role is to scrutinise the Government and to express concerns, so that is what I am using my time for today.

To sum up, will the Minister, once and for all, come clean about the real purpose of the deals? How do they serve the interests of the public, rather than of the Government?

5.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (James Wharton): We have had an interesting debate, with a wide range of contributions from Members with different party backgrounds and outlooks. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) on securing it. He is greatly exercised about the issue, but that is because he is well informed about it. He has asked some important questions, as have other hon. Members, and I will try to address them as best I can in the limited time available.

I will reconfirm one point for the record, which is that any accusation that I am a European Union stooge is far from the mark. I stand here as a Minister speaking on behalf of the Government, but the EU is a matter on which the Government and I have rather different views. I have maintained my view for some time, and it continues to be my position. That feeds into the comments my hon. Friend made about intermediate body status, because there is no conspiracy, and the intermediate body status role to have at this time. I assure him that on this point there are some initial natural synergies that can be delivered through local councils working much more effectively together at both regional and local level.

Devolution is exciting. It has been offered to the country as a whole; 38 different areas have said they want to be part of it, and this Government are doing it differently from the Labour Government, who in previous attempts tried to force regional assemblies on to people, first of all in the north-east, where I am from. At the time, I was very much involved in the campaign against the regional assembly, and I was close to the detail, but I am closer still to the detail of what we are doing now and discussing today, and I can assure hon. Members that this devolution really is quite different. It is driven by people in the areas to which devolution is being offered, and it is based on geographies that they determine, through discussion, and on the powers that they want.

James Cartlidge: Will my hon. Friend confirm that at this moment in time, there is only one devolution deal on offer to anyone in East Anglia?

James Wharton: I am happy to confirm that to my hon. Friend. The Government have made a deal, and signatures were added to the document. We want to deliver on that deal and to meet the obligations to which we are committed by the deal, but we do not expect or plan to reopen discussions and to start again. Other areas want to talk about devolution and to secure deals of their own. It is very positive that East Anglia is forging so far ahead with that policy agenda, but we must recognise that if areas want to go back on deals that have been agreed and want to reinvent them before they have been enacted, we will have to look at the allocation of our time and resources to other areas that have not yet reached agreement and need attention and focus.

Heidi Allen: To be absolutely clear, I thought I heard music to my ears a moment ago—that devolution deals should come from the regions that want them. Given that all the parties that have signed a tentative document are not happy, for whatever reasons, what is stopping us from going back to the drawing board? I think what would work for us all would be Suffolk and Norfolk, and Cambridgeshire-Peterborough-Huntingdon. With that, we could find real traction and make things happen quickly.

James Wharton: I am conscious of time, but I want to be very clear: a deal has been agreed, on a geography that has been agreed, and it is not the intention of the Government to reopen discussions of geography. We will not compel any area to agree a devolution deal, and we do not have that power—the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 does not allow the Government to do so, and nor would we want to. If devolution is to last, it must be done with local agreement. When those agreements are reached, however, just as local areas expect us to meet our obligations as a Government, we expect them to deliver the devolution deals to which they have agreed.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): In principle, I am signed up to devolution, but is this issue worth considering? The first step towards delivering a deal that works for all is recognising that there are some initial natural synergies that can be delivered through local councils working much more effectively together at both regional and local level. Some of the mergers that are planned—for example, between Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils, and perhaps in the future Babergh and Mid Suffolk—may be a very desirable way of bringing about closer working in a way that also delivers something that local people want.

James Wharton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We want to see collaboration—local authorities working together. We want to see local authorities finding and driving efficiencies, so that they can focus on the services from which our residents benefit. Devolution is part of that picture—it can facilitate and encourage that process—but we want local authorities to do that regardless of the devolutionary landscape. My hon.
Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) talked about collaboration and co-operation, and rightly so. That was born of his experience of local government, of which he spoke. It is important that local areas look to see where they can best co-operate and what the right areas of co-operation are for them in their particular circumstances.

Lucy Frazer: Will the Minister give way?

James Wharton: I have to make progress. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) asked particularly about police and crime commissioners. The legislation is quite clear. It is possible for elected mayors to take on the roles currently exercised by police and crime commissioners, but only where the police forces in question are coterminous with the devolution areas. That does not mean that if a devolution agreement is for an area that has more than one local police force or crosses the boundaries of different forces, it would be impossible to go down that route, but it would require a number of additional steps, in terms of local force reorganisation, that are not currently planned for by the Government. If there were demand from the local area to do something along those lines, of course we would welcome any discussion that would help to meet the desires and ambitions of that community.

That question was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who made the very important point that we must work for local support. We must explain why devolution matters. We must explain to people that this is not about taking powers up and away from local authorities. The previous incarnation of local government mayors, created under Labour, very often took powers from local authorities into a single elected person. This is about a single elected person taking powers down from Government, away from civil servants and away from Ministers—even ones as benevolent and helpful as I can be at times. Instead, there is recognition that perhaps sometimes decisions are best made by people who understand and are from the communities most directly affected by them.

A number of hon. Members asked about the scope of the deal. Is it sufficiently ambitious? Does it cover the areas that it would want to? What does it actually mean if the area finds additional things that it wants to do? Greater Manchester is indeed a case in point. These processes are iterative. The deal, the election of the mayor and the implementing of devolution are steps on a journey, and that journey can continue to expand. Greater Manchester is now, I think, on its fourth round of asks for additional powers. We would look to—and, indeed, want to—continue to talk with areas that have agreed devolution about the further powers that they might want, and the things that they could do with those powers to improve their economy and the lives of the people who live in the communities served by—

Lucy Frazer: On that point, will the Minister give way?

James Wharton: I apologise to my hon. and learned Friend, but I must wrap up, given the time constraints. We can see that there is great interest in this process—great interest in devolution. Devolution is an important part of Government policy. We know that it must be done with local support. Deals are two-way processes. If we are to deliver deals that last, we need that local support and understanding. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues on both sides of the House to ensure that this important policy objective, which can benefit the communities that we all represent, is not only delivered, but lasts the course.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way before he ends? He has time.

James Wharton: I do not have time.

5.53 pm

Mr Jackson: It is clear that there is a broad welcome for the central concept of devolution, albeit multi-speed and multi-layer. It is clear, though, that unlike places such as Cornwall and Manchester, East Anglia is not based on established geographical and institutional arrangements and things such as coterminous local enterprise partnerships and healthcare economies.

5.54 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Digital Records in the NHS

1.33 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered use of digital records in the NHS.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and grateful to you and Mr Speaker for the opportunity to debate this matter. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) in his place.

The issue of data is of transformative significance for the NHS. The health service has so many interactions with patients on a daily basis that it creates an enormous amount of health data that have a huge number of practical applications for those who know how to analyse the data correctly. With more patients being treated, more work being done on access to drugs, and massive breakthroughs in genomics and the study of rare diseases, the NHS must use IT effectively to digitise patient records and allow clinicians to harness the power of such valuable data. That is the essence of this debate.

My involvement in this subject area began through my late constituent, Les Halpin, who was diagnosed with the dreadful motor neurone disease in 2011. Les was one of the country’s foremost statisticians by profession, and a gifted mathematician with an inquisitive brain. He quickly realised that the numbers were stacked against him—when I first met him, he was absolutely clear that he had between a couple of months and a couple of years to live, about which he was absolutely stoical—and furthermore that the money spent on new drugs was widely out of kilter with the output.

Rather than take on the treatment of and research into MND directly, as that was already catered for by a number of non-governmental organisations, Les set his sights on tackling the system more widely. Understanding that the system he wanted to change was governed by the regulatory and political world, he began the Empower: Access to Medicine campaign. As a statistician, he knew better than anyone that it is information that affects the treatment of brain tumours. Before such research can be turned into real treatment options for patients, we need to be able to use modern technology and digital records to flag where patients are receiving that treatment and look at the effects across a much larger cohort.

On 23 February, I hosted the parliamentary launch of Empower: Data4Health—my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) was present; perhaps other Members were as well—which is the next stage of this work and falls under the subject of this debate. The new campaign brings together politicians, clinicians and patients and calls for an NHS that uses state-of-the-art IT to collate and analyse health data to improve outcomes for patients. The campaign is a natural continuation of Les’s work, because it seeks to create an NHS that uses anonymised patient data to identify new treatments, effective new drugs and even repurposed drugs that can have major benefits for sufferers of rare or life-limiting diseases.

To my mind, there are three ways of deploying this IT effectively in the NHS—this is part of a wider debate, but it is worth mentioning here. First, with the right technology, data can be analysed for particular cohorts of disease sufferers to look for trends, monitor the effects of new drugs treatments and therapies and, ultimately, improve patients’ information about their own conditions, patient outcomes, and access to medicines or other treatments that are right for them.

Incidentally, we are seeing growing evidence of repurposed drugs being used to treat a variety of diseases that they were not originally intended for, with some success. For example, recent research suggests that some statins—drugs generally used to control cholesterol—can affect the treatment of brain tumours. Before such research can be turned into real treatment options for patients, we need to be able to use modern technology and digital records to flag where patients are receiving that treatment and look at the effects across a much larger cohort.

The potential offered by using IT to identify new treatments and trends could fundamentally change how the NHS operates. Indeed, the Science and Technology Committee recently reported that the value of big data to the health sector will equate to £14.4 billion by 2017. In fact, some consultants have found that efficiency savings between £16 billion and £66 billion could be generated in the NHS were the data deployed properly.

Once we start to use data, we can leverage the value of the intellectual property, which is created in a number of ways, by using it to incentivise GPs or clinicians to pursue certain treatment paths; by funding patient interest groups and other bodies; and, ultimately, by selling the IP to drug companies to speed up the development of new drugs. The whole thing then becomes a virtuous circle.

The second key benefit of IT and digital records is that they enable us to address the lack of co-ordination in the NHS. Clinicians will be able to monitor what is happening to a patient cohort for a particular disease across the country, rather than re-invent the wheel when approving treatment. Digital records will enable different teams to co-ordinate across one or a number of hospitals, synchronise appointments and ensure that all clinicians are fully informed of how their treatment is interacting with a patient. That should lead to the best possible outcomes for patients, and enable co-ordination across the health service.

Thirdly, patients will have more control over their own health information. In an age in which the use of medical self-diagnostic tools is on the rise, patients will be able to control—possibly remotely or at home—their health information.
data produced by the diagnostic machines; view them in whatever form they like; use them to inform their self-care; and feed them remotely, through IT, back to clinicians, who if necessary can modify the patient’s treatment. Treating people remotely will prevent unnecessary hospital visits and visits to clinicians.

Fourthly, once we start collecting data on patient outcomes, we will be able to drive processes within the NHS, identify things that are taking too long and work that is being duplicated, and ultimately save the NHS money on its day-to-day processes and tests. For example, we will be able to transfer huge amounts of data across different systems in the NHS. New patient tests are emerging almost weekly, which produce data that can be transferred across different parts of the NHS more efficiently. In those four ways, IT can transform the NHS.

Members from all parties, members of the public and clinicians have concerns about data privacy, and I would like to tackle that point head-on. I thought that some Members might be here to speak about their concerns about privacy and data protection. Some of those concerns are serious and legitimate; it is no use pretending that they are not. We all hear horror stories from our constituents about NHS trusts mishandling data, losing records and sharing inappropriate information. When this debate was granted, a member of the public contacted me to bring to my attention his experience of massive data breaches by one NHS trust, which is alleged to have consistently failed to adhere to data protection principles and to have hidden its failings from NHS England. Make no mistake: concerns about the handling of patient data are very real.

That member of the public highlighted that data protection breaches are regrettably already taking place. One of the purposes of this debate is to highlight the need for a national framework for digital records with built-in safeguards to protect patient privacy, and for genuine national accountability for trusts. We need to generate a debate on that subject. No patient record system is absolutely secure. Even the old-fashioned paper system is not absolutely secure, because it can leak: people can get into files, access the data and pass them on in an unauthorised way. With modern technology, we ought to be able to protect patient records.

Digital records may ring alarm bells with some patients, such as that member of the public, so it is imperative that the Government develop a comprehensive public information campaign on the enormous treatment benefits, which I have outlined, that health data can provide. We must convince the public that the benefits of the effective use of IT in the NHS far outweigh the potential obstacles and pitfalls that there may be along the way. We have the technology to keep patient data safe. A fear of errors should not paralyse progress on this issue.

There are some great examples of things happening across the country. For example, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust has done incredible work in putting together a patient registry of more than 99% of all cystic fibrosis sufferers. As I am sure all Members realise, cystic fibrosis is an incredibly rare disease. Babies born with it cannot breathe properly and need continuous treatment for the whole of their often only too short lives. The first new-generation genotypic drugs are beginning to be introduced, and by using patient data to measure their effectiveness and possible side effects we can begin to make real progress on rare diseases such as cystic fibrosis.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust operates a strict evaluation process, overseen by a committee of experts, to ensure that its registry data are used in line with patients’ consent. It is interesting that those with that debilitating disease realise the effect that IT can have and have willingly given permission for their data to be used in that way. That is an example of the importance of patient buy-in to IT patient records. Thanks to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust’s determination to promote and maintain its registry, we are seeing new treatments for particular strains of CF, which completely alleviate the dreadful symptoms that I outlined in young babies, who would otherwise die prematurely, and enable them to live a relatively normal life. Proper deployment of IT in a digital NHS would enable us to develop similar drugs for sufferers of all sorts of rare and debilitating illnesses. A shining example of what I am outlining is happening in Birmingham, where clinicians are trailblazing in this area. They are an example of what we hope will happen nationally. The University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust uses electronic patient records. Since 2011, all records have been electronic. Its commitment to innovation has allowed for some remarkable projects, such as Cure Leukaemia, which was established in 2003 to enable patients with blood cancer to access effective new treatments. In 2005, it helped to secure a £2.2 million grant to build the Centre for Clinical Haematology at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham. It resulted in the development of the second-largest adult stem cell transplant programme in the United Kingdom. The impact of Cure Leukaemia and the Centre for Clinical Haematology in Birmingham is closely linked to the distinct make-up of the west midlands and the fact that they use IT in the way that we propose. With a population of 5.5 million and the most ethnically diverse catchment area in Europe, the west midlands offers access to the broadest possible data pool for drugs trials.

Over the past decade, Cure Leukaemia has funded a network of 15 specialist nurses, who work across the west midlands and administer pioneering drug treatments to leukaemia-suffering patients. The combination of the west midlands’ unique demographic and the network of well-supported nurses has enabled us to leverage millions of pounds-worth of pioneering drugs and give patients access to clinical trials for drugs not readily available in the rest of the NHS. Cure Leukaemia’s founder, Graham Silk, is also a member of the Empower: Data4Health campaign. Graham’s hope is that, one day, everyone will be able to benefit as he has from the amazing work being done with digital records in the west midlands.

The medical community see the advantages that digital records can bring to the NHS. The Royal College of Physicians believes:

“Fully digital patient records will bring benefits to the NHS, but to do so they need to be based on standards for the structure and content. Common standards are essential to enable interoperability between digital records in different care settings.”

The RCP goes on to list the benefits that digital records can bring, and I will take them in turn.
First, digital records have the potential to improve the quality of patient care. The people at the RCP believe that, with fully digital records, it will be “easier for care professionals to bring together a person-centred view of the patient from all the disparate records held in different settings and over time. They believe digital records will improve communication between professionals in different care settings and that it will be easier to drive timely, relevant automatic clinical alerts. They believe that digital records can improve safety by reducing errors in transcription of paper documents and they are of opinion that it will be easier for patients to access their records for self-care purposes”—something I have already outlined.

The second major benefit comes in NHS quality improvement and research activities. That is very much the key theme of my speech today. The RCP states that digital records could provide:

“Much improved ability to carry out records-based research (with appropriate protection of confidential data and respect for those who wish to opt out)—my buy-in point—

“and support for the development of stratified medicine which enables doctors to provide patients with specific treatments according to individual needs. It requires the collection of genotype (information on an individual’s genetics) and phenotype (lifestyle and environmental information) from patients.”

The final benefit that the RCP highlights is the potential cost saving. With the NHS under increasing pressure, because of a variety of factors, the importance of opportunities to do more for less, while protecting patient outcomes, should not be dismissed. The RCP believes that the potential cost savings could come from reduced duplication of test orders and unsuccessful treatment, fewer errors and reduced time spent on searching for missing paper records.

I want to give a powerful example that really sums up what this is all about. Using IT and patient data to improve access to breakthrough treatments and personalised medicine is, fundamentally, about patients who are looking for answers and for some hope, not only for themselves, but for everyone in a similar situation. At this point, I want to mention a remarkable woman from my constituency, Christina Knudsen. Christina can explain her situation and her journey far more effectively than I ever could. If you will permit me, Mr Wilson, I will read the words she sent to me:

“The unusual aspect of my situation is that I am relatively young, midforties, and otherwise very healthy, sporty, have a positive mindset and have no cancer in my DNA. Where the illness originates from is a mystery (I personally believe it is from emotional stress from an unusually challenging childhood) and like many cancers, it seems to have been unprovoked. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a nationwide dataset of patients with ampullary cancer that could be used to cross-reference symptoms and treatments. This would, in my case, be a vital resource. It would not only allow doctors to help pinpoint the cause, but also make an informed decision on my treatment according to what has worked well with other patients who have suffered from the disease and who have similar attributes to me.

Ultimately, I am getting a feeling that I can turn this into something different. Perhaps I can use the situation in a positive way and be an inspiration to others. There's no point in just going downhill with it, so I am slowly thinking that I could create a new reality around my predicament. One that would depend on my surviving this as best as possible, and showing the rest of the world that you can go through this and remain strong and positive, perhaps even overcome it. Apparently no one has beaten the particular cancer that I have, so why not try to reverse the statistics and make this into a first?”

Extraordinary! We can all agree that the drive to turn the experience of such a terrible illness into something positive for others, as Christina and Les have done, is the hallmark of someone truly heroic. When we think about the obstacles that we face in getting a fully digital NHS, and the potential pitfalls along the way, we need only think of Christina and Les, and the many patients like them who will benefit.

To conclude, effective use of digitisation in the NHS heralds the possibility of a complete transformation in how health services are delivered. This is one of those rare moments in human innovation when we could make a step change and deliver much more, for significantly less, on a permanent basis. We should, therefore, seize the opportunity with both hands, without delay.

1.55 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for securing this debate on an incredibly important topic. He has covered all the points that should be covered, and I just want to make a few comments from a personal point of view, as a doctor and as an MP with a constituent who has dealt with this matter.

I was very struck by the story of Les Halpin, and I have always firmly believed that the NHS’s greatest resource is the patients. I believe in the patient expert, and that the patient expert should be top of the medical team. I agree that we need state-of-the-art IT in the NHS, although I will come to some practical concerns later. Synchronicity of appointments would be a dream—I believe that dreams can come true, so I am not saying that it is not possible. Co-ordination among services would be another, and I believe that, too, is possible to achieve in the NHS soon. Primarily, I support the idea of the patient controlling the data. I wish that more of that was in place right now, even before we have the required level of IT.

There are practical concerns for a clinician. Even as a medical student, when I was dealing with paper records, far too often I had to say to a patient—I think I have said it in every clinic I have ever worked in—“I’m sorry, I haven’t got your notes.” That is a waste of the clinician’s time and a family’s time. Whenever I gave patients a physical record of an appointment, they always produced that copy at the next appointment, even if it was a few months later or an annual check. That is why we have to take the lead from the patients.

We now have some digital records. In my field, ophthalmology, computerised records are great, but the IT can be a problem. The software is fine, but many units and hospitals do not have the hardware they need for the size of the graphic information on digital records. That is why state-of-the-art IT is a little bit of a dream at the moment.

My hon. Friend mentioned Les Halpin. I have a constituent who is the father of a little girl called Eleanor. She is part of a great charity, Eleanor’s Voice—google it, and see the tweets—and is a wonderful little girl. She is undergoing treatment for cancer, which requires many appointments at many different places. Her father is good with IT and realised that people often did not have the notes they needed and were not
co-ordinated. As a patient expert—or rather, as a patient’s family member expert—he produced a Dropbox folder. If he goes to an appointment at a clinic with Eleanor now, taking her out of her little primary school, he can say, “Don’t worry, I’ve got everything on my Dropbox. I can give you my password.” Eleanor has therefore never had a clinical meeting in the NHS that has not been useful.

We must not underestimate the practical problems with this great goal. The NHS can lead, because having one health system that so many people can access is an amazing resource—nowhere else in the world has that. Let us put the patient first and learn from the patients.

1.59 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on bringing this debate to the Chamber.

For me, data hold the key. As we move into new medical landscapes, comprehensive data sets hold vast possibilities for research and care, and we should harness and optimise their potential benefits, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) alluded to. I have been working with individuals, charities, researchers and clinicians to try to understand how to put patients at the centre of everything that is done with and for them.

Recent research by charities into patient responses shows that patients are keen for their data to be used. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds mentioned, Data4Health was launched earlier this year. At its launch, we heard from a patient, Graham, whom my hon. Friend also mentioned. Graham was backed by a clinician, a researcher and a charity, and he spoke about his journey with leukaemia and how research had helped him get the most effective treatment. We also heard from the mother of the youngest patient to be diagnosed using cutting-edge genomics about how we are moving forward. What got those patients to a diagnosis and the correct care was a true understanding of their diseases. Data are a precious gift and we must take care to ensure that everything we do with them is in the patient’s best interest.

If we can speed up data sharing in something as simple as immunisation programmes, for example, it will be more effective. Vaccination coverage is necessary to ensure success, and at the moment data collection is, as a doctor described it to me, clunky in many areas. We still have paper records. Only recently we saw how integrated patient data might have saved a young child’s life. Patient safety and good data are therefore real and ever-present issues.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable in this area. Is she aware of the campaign for the new-generation Bexsero meningitis B vaccine, which was developed by genomics? The NHS was the first in the world to allow two-month-old babies to receive that vaccine. The collection of data and the effectiveness of vaccines and drugs can put the NHS at the forefront of what is happening in the world.

Jo Churchill: Indeed, and there is a larger point than that: we also lead the world in life sciences, innovation and technology. The NHS is a critical resource; with patients’ permission, we have the ability not only to create great health for our nation, but to save money for our NHS and produce wealth for our economy. There is nothing not to like in that virtuous circle.

How much better would things be for people who go into hospital if the ambulance staff and paramedics who took them there could view their medication and understand their personal situation more fully, and therefore respond more appropriately and not waste precious time? As a doctor said to me, that is particularly important in caring for patients out of hours. Ringing other hospitals is sometimes not an option. Side effects can be worse for some patients than others, and we need to know why in order to target effective treatment. That would avoid waste and reduce the cost for individuals, their families and the system. My hon. Friend alluded to health economics studies that show potential savings ranging from as little as £16 billion to as much as £66 billion if data were deployed properly. We must grab this opportunity. The NHS needs to find cost savings, and we have an opportunity to drive the innovation that would deliver such savings.

That applies across the piece. I have just come from a debate on autism in the main Chamber, and one of the key points that was raised there was that health data are not adequate to link things up so that young children can have effective and timely diagnosis. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we had a powerful debate on meningitis in the House a few days ago, and we would benefit from data on that disease too. We also had a powerful and moving debate on brain tumours recently. Data on such issues should be linked, because the patient is an individual and how they respond to a drug or combinations of drugs is important.

Only this morning I spoke to Mike Burrows of the wonderful Salford lung study, in which a drug is put into a real-world environment and connected with databases so that all of a patient’s health needs can be tracked. The study looks at real life and can cope with all the different variables to see the effects that a drug might have on people. As we move into an environment in which co-morbidities are ever present in our ageing population, we can immediately see how someone who takes a drug for one condition and thereby receives a benefit for another will have their health enhanced.

GlaxoSmithKline is about to produce the results of that study, which will be interesting, but Mike said to me that it has been a winner for the local health service, and that is what is important. The GPs who have been involved have seen the benefits. The hardware alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham, which is so often lacking in the system, has been invested in and now, with the integration of the NHS and social care, we have the ability to optimise care for the patient, which is important. The Salford study covers a quarter of a million people, and the learning from it will be rolled out across the broader Manchester landscape as devolution takes place.

The Minister is in a unique position to see data as a solution. On many challenging issues in this data-rich system, we are information-poor. Variations lead to inconsistencies. He can implement the recommendations of the accelerated access review, spearheading how we
can best put to the uses from large-scale studies such as the Salford study, the Birmingham study mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and studies from right across London.

There is also much to be learned from some of the devolved areas. I have spoken at length about that with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is the Scottish National party's lead on health. We have a lot of medical expertise to harness in my party and right across the House, so that we can concentrate minds and ensure that we take the right direction of travel.

Work is going on across the Richmond group and in the pharmaceutical industry. In this place, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who chairs the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who chairs the all-party group on life sciences, and I, as chair of the all-party group on personalised medicine, are discussing how we can best develop a combined piece of work in this area, because collaborative approaches always give us the best results. There is a plethora of data in the system, but, as Chris Carrigan of the National Cancer Intelligence Network says, we must harness data effectively.

In this country we have some of the best science in the world. The areas of informatics and genomics will be game changers, allowing us to develop drugs in as little as five months instead of years. We need responsive systems. It is unlikely, if not impossible, that our clinicians will be able to keep up with cutting-edge research without the use of electronics. Last year, a multidisciplinary group looked at data sharing in genetics and concluded that the current arrangements are unsatisfactory.

If we understand why drugs work better on certain groups or in distinct geographical areas, they can be targeted effectively. That is particularly the case in the area of rare diseases. A young constituent of mine who has a condition called tuberous sclerosis and those who suffer from other conditions such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy, lupus or rare cancers are in cohorts that are too small to prove efficacy. If there are only a few participants involved in clinical research is well established, given, as my hon. Friend said. Confidentiality for participants involved in clinical research is well established, but most data are either aggregated or pseudonymised.

Speaking personally, if my data, particularly on cancer, can make one other person's journey better than mine, it is a gift. I have spoken to Graham Silk about that, and he agrees, as do the many people I have campaigned with. As Christina and Les say, being the first to gift data makes someone feel that they have done something really special. Even if it gives someone with a complex disease to a small amount of additional time, we have given someone else a very special gift.

It is important that the risks are moderated, but we must also consider the benefits and what we can win. Many patient groups show involvement rates of getting on for 100% when people know that their information will go to others. My hon. Friend mentioned the cystic fibrosis group, which has an involvement rate of 98%. We need strong leadership to draw the strands together, a common understanding and a national agreement to optimise sharing in a safe, transparent and trustworthy way.

The risks and benefits of sharing data have to be explored, but those who talk only of the risks will miss the benefits. I would like to see a chief clinical informatics officer. I look to the Minister to lay out his vision for standardising, resourcing and futureproofing the system; drawing together the ongoing work; and achieving the momentum needed for greater data sharing to improve both the health and the wealth of our nation.

2.12 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, despite not thinking I would. I am actually a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Education, but I was asked to stand in this afternoon for the Minister, whose PPS could not be here. Suddenly I find myself for the first time ever keeping a holding pattern for 1.30 pm was cancelled, and this one was moved forward. I only discovered that this morning by spotting on the Order Paper that there was no debate other than this one. I suspect the Minister suffered the same problem.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Given the way that my hon. Friend is handling his situation, I am sure it can only be a matter of time before he is elevated to ministerial status.
Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is very kind and generous, as always. I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

As I said, I am just sitting in for someone in the hope that at some point I might need to be released into the wild and they will cover for me. However, one thing I have found in my time in Parliament is that there is a huge crossover. One area in which I am very interested and actively involved in Parliament is science and technology. In the previous Parliament, I sat on the Select Committee on Science and Technology. In this Parliament, I chair the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, which, for those who do not know—this is a bit of a plug for it—is the oldest all-party parliamentary group, established in 1939 to help with the war effort, to bring Parliament and science together and to look at things such as how we can improve the public’s health and food security and what we can do to improve our defences. It strikes me that we are talking about things I looked at when I was a member of the Science and Technology Committee, particularly the use of big data and the use of stratified and individual, personalised medicines. This has been quite an eye-opener for me, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend is entirely right that huge amounts of data are now being generated across all services, especially the health service, with more and more advances in what we can test for and how data are stored. The effective use of IT is important not only in storing data—obviously, we must store data accurately and associate them with the correct patient records—but in making them accessible to others in future and in ensuring that their integrity is maintained. It will also allow clinicians who are perhaps viewing those data from a different angle and not fully understanding where they were collected to understand their use.

My hon. Friend spoke of his constituent, Les, who is an inspiration—I am sure that is why my hon. Friend used him as an example—and of the Empower: Data4Health campaign to promote the better use of data, which would have wide benefits. The use of state-of-the-art IT and the analysis of data can be of huge benefit to the wider patient body. Data can be used to spot trends, patterns or crossover between certain health issues, and therefore be able to develop appropriate treatments or preventive measures.

It is only by examining huge databases for the smallest anomalies that we can start to have a real impact on people with such rare conditions. Where there is only a small sample of people, it is very difficult to put them together and analyse them as a whole, particularly with the barriers and the silo mentality that exist across many of our public health services. People are fearful of sharing data or do not even know that the data exist. Anything we can do to break that down, so that we can take a helicopter view—I think that is the current phrase—to see patterns must be good. The example that my hon. Friend gave showed what could be achieved through better use and analysis of data. On my behalf and the Minister’s—I have no authority to speak for the Minister, I am speaking entirely as a Back Bencher—I wish Christina well for the future.

As I have said, the future for individualised and stratified medicine is very bright, but it is only one part. That is why the data aspect is very important. Some think that the changes we will experience as a society in the next 30 years will be equal to those we have experienced as a society over the past 300 years, whether in transport, education, or the way we interact as nations. The greatest changes will probably be experienced in the healthcare system. I truly believe we are on the cusp of a major breakthrough, and the collection, analysis and use of data from a much wider base than has ever previously been available will play a huge part in that.

Jo Churchill: I would like to say what a sterling job my hon. Friend is doing; I agree with everything I have heard so far. Does he agree that there is a big opportunity to drill down and understand more about health inequalities, which are so important in our society? When the average life expectancy in certain areas is so much more than in other areas, the use of collective data to drill down on health inequalities and understand why things happen and the concomitant effect on certain diseases is really important.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for those remarks; she is absolutely right. We have been talking about people suffering with rare conditions and about putting them together and spotting patterns, but tackling health inequality by comparing data from different parts of the country and by comparing, perhaps, people’s longer term histories is equally important. It may also help policy makers to find a way of developing a geographically stratified approach to tackling some of these health inequalities. Just moving on slightly, I think that part of why clinical commissioning groups were established was that they would allow doctors and clinicians locally to identify what was in the interests of the people they represented. Of course, using data to do that is vital, so I could not agree with my hon. Friend more.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Before my hon. Friend moves away from the subject of healthcare, does he agree that we need to concentrate much more on preventive healthcare, rather than on the palliative treatment of health issues? Often early interventions, or even action taken to prevent a condition from occurring in the first place, can be far more effective for patients and more cost-effective for the NHS than treating symptoms once they have arisen.

Stephen Metcalfe: I agree completely. Prevention is always better. Sometimes we find that we have discovered the way of preventing something after it has been contracted—that may sound a bit confused. I am trying to say that if we have enough information in advance, we might be able to tell the right people how they might prevent themselves from getting a certain condition. We could identify them, identify the risk, inform them and hope that they do not then fall into the trap as opposed to having found them with the condition and then saying, “If you had done this, you would have been able to prevent that particular condition.” My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The wider benefits to the economy are the second, very important part of this. We have talked about the huge benefits and about making the United Kingdom—England—particularly with the fantastic NHS, the best
place to develop, research, test and trial drugs, which has to be for the benefit of our constituents. If we have earlier access to new treatments, that can only be to the good. My hon. Friend used the excellent example of Cure Leukaemia in Birmingham and it sounds as though having that model rolled out across the country would be beneficial to many. I will certainly bring that particular aspect of my hon. Friend’s remarks to the Minister’s attention.

I shall start to wind up. We have to address a number of challenges to bring the ideas to fruition. When we talk about data, people get a little jittery. They think that we, as the authorities, are starting to collect information on them that they would not necessarily want collected, so the anonymising of data will be vital, as will ensuring that people understand how their data are used and how they can have access to their data and protect themselves.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I emphasise to my hon. Friend that the most important thing that should come out of this debate is not the fact that data are a good thing—we all admit that—but that we need, from the Government, a way to push this forward. I and my hon. Friends have made a number of suggestions: there should be a public information campaign, common standards and perhaps a commissioner for data—or some such post—so that on a national basis we can really give this whole thing a push. Up till now, progress has been far too slow. We need to push things forward, so that we can really gain the benefits from it.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is completely correct; that is the key. It is about making sure that the Government put in place the correct mechanism not only to protect data but to give people confidence, and that is one of the biggest challenges that we face. I will make sure that is heard loud and clear.

The other big challenge is having the correct personnel to analyse the data. A major challenge for big data as a whole—not just in the clinical setting—is to have people who understand how the data work. Big data will be worth many billions of pounds to the UK economy over the next few years, and not just in the health sector, so we need to make sure that we have the right stream of well-trained, informed people coming through.

Dr Mathias: On the point about the problems with big data, I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). Our problem is that if we are not first in this, we will be the losers.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have to be at the front of that race. One way to do that is by making sure that those who are currently in schools and colleges understand what big data are, what the benefits will be in the future and how they can have a productive, valuable and rewarding career, not just for themselves financially, but that makes a significant difference to us as a nation. The phrase “big data” slips off the tongue very easily but does not actually encompass everything that it means.

I have laid out some of the challenges and benefits. In summary—again, I am grateful for you allowing me to speak in this debate, Mr Wilson—it is obvious that the full digitisation of records will potentially solve some of the biggest problems and challenges we face in spotting patterns and helping to develop new treatments and therapies. It will help to improve patient safety and, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said, patient-focused care by putting the patient right at the centre again.

Of course, cost savings are available, and they are always required in these difficult times. Good IT can lead to good cost savings. The right way forward has to be accuracy and the accurate keeping of records, stopping doubling-up and making sure that records are in the right place at the right time for the right patient. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) gave an excellent example of a patient who had taken control of their records via—I think—Dropbox, which meant that for every appointment the patient had access to everything that was needed to make it a productive and valuable experience. That is very positive and I am sure that, as Members, we have all had reports from constituents who say that they had a wasted experience at their local doctor’s because the right records were not there. If that one small aspect is dealt with, that has to be welcome.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds made the point that with this move we will—and should—be able to achieve more for less, and that is always welcome. I congratulate him on securing this debate and thank my hon. Friends the Members for Twickenham and for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) for their contributions. I very much look forward to hearing what the Opposition spokesman has to say and, in due course, the Minister.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing this important debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It has been interesting. I am a new Member of this House and it is true, and a great pleasure, that every day brings new insight into the working of the House and its rules and procedures. I am grateful to have seen some of that today.

We have heard some valuable contributions. The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) used his practical experience as a clinician to talk about patient control data and her dream, which I share, of co-ordination on behalf of her constituents. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) emphasised the value of research and the role of charities and other non-NHS bodies in driving this agenda forward and having the time to understand diseases. I was particularly glad to hear her mention health economics in this sort of work.

The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) heroically used his experience of large data in another Department and I look forward to his accelerated political career through the Government ranks. The perspectives of all hon. Members have enriched this debate not just today, but previously. Let us hope that we can move the discussion on digital health records forward for the benefit of patients across the country.

This subject is dear to the heart of the hon. Member for The Cotswolds. He talked about his constituent’s experience and referred to four ways in which the digitisation
of data can be transformational for the health service by speeding up new developments, improving co-ordination of care, giving patients control over information about their health and driving whole processes forward. He has been a powerful advocate for his constituents. I often say that patients are assets to be utilised for their knowledge and experience, not nuisances to be ignored. The potential for people to look for hope, not just for themselves but using their experience for others, is an inspiration and at the heart of much of this debate.

I want to talk about the benefits of the data. This debate is important because the NHS, which provides a large population with universal coverage that is free at the point of use, is uniquely placed to be a world leader in innovation.

I started my career as an NHS manager in 1988 without access to a computer and finished as a manager of a patient referral service, so I know how far we have come but also how far we need to go. The NHS must be one of the last remaining organisations that still communicate with people via letter. Extending the use of technology to patient records is not just about using taxpayer's money more effectively, important though that is. The effective use of the right data has huge benefits as yet unseen and unknown, such as how such data can be used to help tackle inequalities, particularly health inequalities?

With a growing and ageing population, more and more people are living with different combinations of illnesses and conditions. None of us here knows the huge potential healthcare benefits that the wise use of data could bring to the population we serve in years to come. The principles of the Government’s proposals are worthy of our support. As members of the party that founded and nurtured the NHS, we want to find ways of delivering high-quality, personalised and cost-effective care. I assure the Minister that we will support in principle the Government’s plans to roll the agenda forward, as long as there is scrutiny and challenge in a number of areas.

As with everything, there is a vital balance to be struck, particularly on privacy, protection and penalties for the misuse of data, which the hon. Member for The Cotswolds highlighted. I hope the Minister will agree that public confidence in the integrity of the programme is pivotal to its success. I also hope he will assure us today that the Government will take on board important lessons from the shambles surrounding the roll-out of care.data. At the heart of that was lack of public trust about possible misuse of data and a perception that the Government were trying to make changes on the quiet.

This must not happen again. I agree with the hon. Member for The Cotswolds. I hope the Minister will agree with the hon. Member for The Cotswolds that we need a public information campaign that brings patients with us on this journey.

The efficient and effective use of data and technology plays an increasing role in many areas of our lives. The public, perhaps rightly, expect the NHS to catch up and to make for an easier and better-quality patient experience. It can be hard to convince a sceptical public, perhaps rightly, to move treatment forward can be readily convinced of the programme’s benefits.

In my city of Bristol, GPs collaborate on a web-based platform with well-established sharing agreements for data that includes community providers. There is good practice across the country. Bristol is a high-tech, savvy digital city, but I have learned during my time in this place that many hon. Members have constituencies that do not even have good broadband coverage. If this project helps to bring the benefits of shared platforms to people nationwide, it will be a good thing, but it will require a lot of work. If patients can be helped to understand the interoperability of patient data, that promises to improve the quality of experience for the patient, and the programme will receive widespread public support.

I hope the Minister will be able to explain what plans the Government have to educate the public at large about the benefits of this important project, to ensure that concerns that are bound to be expressed by some about privacy and security are tackled before they can multiply. There will be concern that such a major programme of digitisation with an ambitious timeline could run into glitches of the type that many governmental IT projects across different types of government have suffered in the past. What degree of confidence does the Minister have in the deliverability of the timeline and the budget overview? What guarantee can he give that it will be met and who can the taxpayer hold to account if it is not? What confidence does the Minister have in the safeguards that will be put in place to ensure the credibility of confidential data? Is he confident that the requirements of the National Data Guardian will be met?

I now want to turn to a few other concerns that I hope the Minister will address this afternoon, first about money. I have mentioned taxpayer value, as have other hon. Members, so let me turn to some elements of the financial side of this project. Like other hon. Members, I have seen the headlines proclaiming the additional money. I have mentioned taxpayer value, as have other hon. Members, so let me turn to some elements of the financial side of this project. Like other hon. Members, I have seen the headlines proclaiming the additional money. I have mentioned taxpayer value, as have other hon. Members, so let me turn to some elements of the financial side of this project. Like other hon. Members, I have seen the headlines proclaiming the additional money that is supposedly being allocated to these projects as part of the “General Practice Forward View”, but with the Department of Health struggling to remain within its expenditure limit, 80% of trusts in deficit and the well-documented pressures on primary care, will the Minister be crystal clear, not just about the money allocation he will want to tell us about, but, crucially, what pot or pots it will come from and how it will be allocated to support this work?

The Secretary of State has referred to the so-called extra investment of £45 million being dependent on uptake. Will he outline how he sees this dependency shaping up over the coming years? If digitisation of medical records is about improving patient health and genuinely bringing healthcare into the 21st century and speeding up patient care, it will be worthy of support, but we do need to know how it will be implemented.

There are serious questions about capacity and ability to deliver, not just the capacity of the Department of Health and NHS England but, crucially, the capacity of GP surgeries and other providers to deliver a credible
digitised service. How will GP practices, which are already hard-pressed by soaring patient demand, be supported to implement this project? What level of engagement in the process to shape the roll-out can GP practices expect? If the Government are keen to limit piling additional pressure on busy GPs, how will they ensure that digitisation processes do not simply add to the burdens? I look forward to reassurance from the Minister to take back to GPs in my constituency, and for colleagues to take back to theirs, because I know that the latest announcements will, with other pressures, bear heavily on their current and projected workload.

Finally, I turn to accountability, which was of concern in my professional experience during the structural changes of 2010-2015. The source of responsibility for change and delivery remains a concern to me and others and is a problem that permeates many aspects of our healthcare system. Throughout the digitisation programme, who will be accountable for its delivery? In the realigned structures of the NHS, we are well used to having difficulty navigating a complex web of accountability for various elements of various programmes. When it comes to patient data, Governments of all persuasions do not have a glowing track record. I suspect that if this project goes to plan, the Minister will claim credit, but if it goes wrong, who will carry the can?

I again thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I hope this will be the start of many more discussions with hon. Members on both sides of the House about this very important issue.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, let me say that I am really disappointed that he could not be here from the start of the debate. I know that the agenda for this afternoon was changed, but that was on the Order Paper; it was known. I am sure that the hon. Member for Bristol South for her long list of questions, which I will do my best to plough through. If I miss anything, I will happily write to her to deal with it, particularly on one or two of the more detailed questions.

I genuinely thank my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds for bringing this subject to the House. Although it perhaps is not a topic that is discussed down the Dog and Duck, many of the issues that it speaks to are discussed down the Dog and Duck—modern healthcare, research and the NHS’s role in helping to find new cures. My hon. Friend has been a doughty advocate of this subject in the House, not least in his advocacy of the Empower: Access to Medicine campaign on behalf of his late constituent, Les Halpin, who has been an inspirational figure to him and to many of us.

I also thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has made a reputation very quickly in the House on the subject of medical research as a double cancer survivor herself and as a passionate advocate of how we can accelerate innovation in the NHS and harness the NHS as a catalyst for innovation and accelerated access to new treatments and drugs. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) brings to the debate considerable professional expertise, as well as the passion with which she has spoken here this afternoon and elsewhere in the House.

The hon. Member for Bristol South gave a genuine signal of bipartisan, cross-party support for this broad agenda, which is extremely welcome. There are issues in the House on which it is entirely appropriate for the Government and the Opposition to knock seven bells out of each other. It is the Opposition’s job to oppose and ours to govern, and democracy would be ill served if we did not, but there are topics on which it is in the public interest that we seek agreement, and medical research is one of them. Indeed, in this Chamber on Monday of last week—it seems like a month ago—we had an incredibly packed debate, perhaps the most packed debate in Westminster Hall ever, on brain tumour research. The House was speaking with one voice, and I was delighted to be able to respond, surprise some and launch a working party to take forward the points that were made.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol South for her signal of support in principle. That is heartfelt because this agenda—the use of data in a 21st-century health service to accelerate the search for cures and to prevent unnecessary suffering from tomorrow’s diseases and those that we do not have treatments for today—is precariously at risk from badly communicated policy and a media, public and political discourse that sometimes misses the detail of how data are actually being used. It is all too easy to jump on a bandwagon and launch a campaign to say, “No data to be used”. That would profoundly betray those who are suffering from disease today who want their experience to help to prevent disease tomorrow, and the pioneering clinicians, doctors, academics, researchers, charities and patients who have done so much to demonstrate the important role that data have to play in research. I therefore genuinely welcome the hon. Lady’s support in principle. I respect that that means she wants specific questions answered, and I will do my best to answer them.
I want to set the scene as to how and why the debate has come to a head, why the digitalisation of the health service and the use of data in health have become so topical, and why we have reflected that through the creation of this new ministerial role in the Department of Health. As the first Minister for Life Sciences, with responsibility for all of digital health and health data within the Department, I want to say something about the Government’s fundamental commitment to securing and safeguarding public trust and confidence as the bedrock of the digitalisation of the NHS. I will then say something about the commitments that we have made to that programme and the timetable and funding for it. I particularly want to pick up on the question of electronic health records, on which my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds has rightly focused today’s debate, and how we see the electronic health record revolution in this Parliament and beyond transforming the three key pillars of the debate: individual care, system safety and performance, and research. When people ask why we need data, those three pillars are my first three answers.

I came to this agenda from the research end, after a 15-year career in biomedical research. In the past 15 years, the power of informatics—the power of applied computing—has come to transform how drugs are discovered. I am talking about individual data on the deep history of a patient’s journey through disease—their genomic predisposition, their clinical records and the way they react to different drugs—but also, on the other axis, about large-scale, anonymised cohort studies of patient experience. We can look, for example, at diabetes patients; why do 80% of UK diabetes patients respond in this way and not that way? A combination of large-scale, anonymised cohort studies and individual, in-depth personal patient histories can change, and indeed is changing, the way drugs are discovered.

I have seen with my own eyes in the industry how, in the last 10 years and even in the last five, work has very quickly come back to clinical assets and to starting the process of discovery with patients—with tissue, with data, with the clinical, human experience of disease. Understanding how different patients live with disease and respond to drugs is the starting point for research. The way the industry worked when I first joined it was that one would start with a theoretical, academic target for a possible drug and then go through an expensive 15-year process—it would now cost $2 billion—of long-term academic work followed by the pre-clinical stage and phase 1, 2, 3 and 4 trials, only to discover in about 80% of cases that the drug did not work in people. The industry is rapidly changing, to start with the experience of real people with real disease and to understand how disease takes hold in real people in real time.

One of the many benefits of this revolution is that we will reduce our dependence on animal tests. There will always be a need to involve animals in research, but we can reduce that need to an absolute minimum. The more we can start with data and an understanding of how particular patients respond, the more we can dramatically accelerate our search for both diagnostics and treatments.

As I said, I came to this agenda from the research end. Research has been significantly accelerated in this country over the past 20 or 30 years, for instance by the creation of the National Institute for Health Research and by the work of Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, in funding and setting up our clinical academic research centres. It is my great privilege to be the Minister responsible for that £1 billion-a-year infrastructure, and for the comprehensive biomedical centres that we have set up. For the past 15 to 20 years, there has been phenomenal use of data in tertiary research hospitals to drive research and improve care.

In many ways, the aim of the programme that I will discuss in a moment is to spread out the benefits of that advanced modern healthcare, and the embedding of research in clinical practice, to the rest of the national health service. For research purposes, the use of data is not an optional extra; it is an absolute fundamental. No researcher in the world would dream of trying to run a research programme without access to up-to-date data.

The programme is also about system safety and performance, and about individual care. If hon. Members have been to a GP clinic or a hospital recently, they will have quickly noticed that all the diagnostic devices and most pieces of treatment equipment are digital. Health is going digital. Conferences refer to digital health as if there were still analogue health, but health is going digital very fast, just like every other aspect of life. If the system is to give patients individual care, we have to digitalise it.

Any of us could, God forbid, clutch our chest, go down and need an ambulance. When the ambulance comes for me, I want the staff to have not a biro and a pad but an iPad. I want them to know my blood group, my allergies and my history when they get to me and when I go to A&E. Hon. Members might be amused that when I first gave a speech on this topic, I referred to a photograph outside my office in the Department of Health. It is an inspiring photograph of the NHS, there for us 24/7: a picture of a paramedic leaning out of an air ambulance over some remote island, probably in the Shetlands. A wave is breaking on the lighthouse, the poor patient lies in the heather waiting for the ambulance, and out of the air ambulance leans a paramedic holding a pad of paper and a biro. I said that when they come for me I want them to have an iPad, and the photograph was taken down within days of my speech, which was the first small sign of progress.

The important point is that we have set a target to ensure that electronic health records are used first in A&E, because that is where rapid response—getting the right drug to the patient—has the most dramatic effects. That is true across the care pathway. Most constituents say to me, “Mr Freeman, when I go from the GP to the hospital to the care home and back to the hospital, why do I have to repeat my diagnosis and my treatment history to the clinicians? Surely my patient record should follow, or even go ahead of me, through the system.” That point is very well made.

Most of my constituents desperately want individual care, so that the system knows who they or their loved ones are when they arrive. When somebody arrives at hospital after being referred by a GP, they want the hospital to know who they are, why they are there, what the referral was for and what the treatment is.
the NHS. However, it is clearly in the interest of all of us. Those of us contributing in this debate are concerned to the benefit of digital records. Will the Minister consider running a Government public information campaign showing the distinct benefits of digitalising patient medical records and how it can help the NHS? Will he also consider creating some form of post within Government to oversee the process—something like a health information commissioner—so that there is consistency right across the NHS as to how the digitalisation will be rolled out?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I will come to our plans, and to the process and timetable for setting out the national data guardian’s recommendations on how we should proceed. I would expect that one of her recommendations will be about the importance of communicating to the public and patients why data are so important. As part of the annual National Institute for Health Research Parliament day that I launched, we might have a themed event focused on the power of data and why they are so key to a 21st century NHS.

Dr Mathias: We have been talking about the speed with which the Government should be digitalising records, hence the idea of a chief of information for the NHS. I believe that the public are already ahead of the Government. That is the problem—I fear that the Government may already be too late. There are too many apps out there, too many different clinicians are doing different things and too many patients are devising their own systems. We are behind everybody else.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She knows my frustrations with the situation, and the truth is that healthcare is digitalising very fast. That is not just driven by commercial app manufacturers. As she says, many doctors are developing apps for their own benefit and that of their patients. Many patients are also developing apps. The revolution is coming. Part of our strategy is to ensure the digitalisation of the NHS, which is no mean undertaking. In fact, I would liken it to Crossrail and HS2 as a global project. It is the digitalisation of the world’s fifth biggest employer—a vast undertaking. There are a number of lessons to be learned from previous Government initiatives.

In many ways, we are catching up. The challenge is to catch up in a way that understands the pace at which healthcare is digitalising and seeks not to monopolise, but to provide an aircraft carrier—a mother ship—on which the exploding range of various digital healthcare products can land. I have mixed my metaphors in an ugly way there, but the challenge is to turn the NHS into a catalyst for leading and unlocking NHS leadership in digitalisation.

I totally accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham that, in many ways, we are catching up and trying to provide a platform for leadership in a rapidly emerging space. In response to the point that she and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds made about the need for leadership in the NHS, I can confirm that NHS England is about to appoint a chief information technology officer. A major part of that function will be to be lead champion, to explain and to be a point of patient information in the NHS.

Through the creation of my role, we have for the first time created a single ministerial portfolio with responsibility for this area. Until the post was created, every Minister in the Department had a little bit of information and digitalisation in their portfolio, which in many ways was appropriate but also meant that there was no single point of leadership. Part of my mission is to ensure that the Department brings that together.

The three great pillars that require the quiet revolution of digitalisation include research and individual care. However, I want to touch on the third pillar, which is system safety and performance. The NHS is the fifth biggest employer in the world. It is an incredible public service and an incredibly complex set of organisations. We talk of it as if it were one, but under the national health service’s magnificent initials are a whole range of GPs, hospitals and care providers, which all operate independently within a healthcare system. We are building the railway tracks for patients’ records to move along, so that we integrate them. A fundamental part of that, in addition to research and individual care, is ensuring that the NHS can deliver an essential contract with patients in a 21st century health system. We have a duty to know where best practice is and where worst practice is. We should not have to rely on whistleblowers to put themselves at huge personal risk by sighting and highlighting worst practice. The computer will do it for us.

The other day, I looked at a piece of software that was developed—for a very small amount of money, by the way—by an Oxford academic. It shows prescribing data for one important class of drugs across the whole of NHS England. There is one outlier, and it happens to be in Norfolk, which is why I took a particular interest. It is clear that there is a very small group of GPs that somebody has not got the guidance to or rung up. I am sure that as soon as those GPs have the information, their prescribing practice will fall into line with the rest of the country.

That is computing power being used to promote patient safety and efficiency. The third pillar—system safety and performance—is important, and one of the lessons from the Francis report is that we need to use data much better to identify best and worst practice. When people ask why we are doing this, I suggest that it is for those three noble purposes, which support each other. The digitisation of the system should drive patient care, system safety and research, and the same datasets run between them.

Crucially, the Secretary of State and I understand that the whole digitisation programme has to be rooted and covenanted in deep and profound respect for public and patient trust and confidence. I am not revealing a state secret by saying that I am not sure that that has necessarily been the case until now, for a whole range of reasons, but partly because Government have seen digitisation as inevitable and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham suggests, slightly overdue, and therefore not something that needs to be announced. Of course, the Government are always coy about admitting problems, but I am not coy about saying to people that we are still running the NHS, in large part, on paper and cardboard, which is a problem that needs to be solved.

Unless we describe the problem clearly, we will not carry the public with us in solving it. My magnificent local hospital, the Norfolk and Norwich, has a data
repository with 10 miles of shelving on which patient records are kept, held together by treasury tags and paperclips. I do not know about other Members, but I am not prepared to say to my constituents that that is an appropriate way to store their information, and indeed, my information, my mother’s information and my children’s information. Each hospital separately stores records of which patients came to it and when and which does not speak to a properly joined-up system. It is a national health service—the clue is in the name—and when someone clutches their chest in an unfamiliar bit of the country, they expect the national health service to know who they are. That is one of the benefits of a national health service. From the point of view of properly integrating, we need to explain to people where the current system is not able to deliver.

It is for that reason, and because we want to carry public trust and confidence, that the Secretary of State and I are shifting from what I crudely characterise as an agenda that, to the extent that it has been discussed publicly, has been called long overdue, essential for the running of the system, and something that patients do not need to worry too much about. Well, we only have to say the words “big data” and “big government” to most people in this country for them to be alert to the risks of what might be happening behind their back. I am trying to do it differently by saying to people “This is an urgent, overdue, phenomenally exciting and complex project that we are doing in the interests of patients,” for the reasons I have just set out. Public trust and confidence are essential to the project, and I am not revealing any state secrets by saying that NHS England’s care.data consultation last year did not demonstrate global best practice in consulting patients. It was a well-intentioned leaflet that was sent to every house, which of course does not mean that every person in the country read it, and for many people the wording was as confusing as it was enlightening. That is one of the reasons why the Secretary of State and I have gone to such lengths.

We have appointed the first ever national data guardian in Dame Fiona Caldicott, a widely respected expert in the field, to advise us on the right protocols and safeguards for ensuring that public and patients can have trust and confidence in the system. Dame Fiona has carried out an extraordinarily detailed piece of work, and her recommendations will be landing on our desks imminently. She has considered the whole range of issues, including consent; how many data should naturally flow in the system for it to function; which data transactions should be subject to additional patient consent; what the standards should be; and what the relationship between the various bodies should be in terms of accountability. That work is very important.

We have gone further and asked the Care Quality Commission to carry out a major piece of work on best practice in the system today and to set a benchmark so that we can hold the system to account. We have set up the digital maturity index, and this spring each clinical commissioning group has had to report, for the first time, on the level of digitisation in its local health economy, and we are building that into the CCG annual assessment framework so that people will be able to click on My NHS and see heat maps of the extent of digitisation across the country, which will help us to identify best and worst practice and to accelerate the roll-out.

We have also appointed Professor Bob Wachter, the American digital health expert, to come over and help us consider the cultural issues of ensuring that the NHS is properly training and supporting practitioners. It is about the human element, because we can have as many systems and technologies as we want, but it ultimately comes down to culture, practice and patients’ records being respected and treated appropriately by the system. I hope Members can see that we are taking seriously the need to put in place a series of measures that carry public trust and confidence.

Dr Mathias: Will the Minister ensure that there is a two-way exchange of information and transparency so that, if the NHS has my medical data, I am always offered, in a secure form such as a personal Dropbox, or whatever form I wish, everything that the NHS has on me? Every patient must be offered all the data that the NHS has on him or her.

George Freeman: Unsurprisingly, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She will know that my first parliamentary foray into this space was by championing a ten-minute rule Bill on patients’ rights to patient data. Like her, I believe that, in addition to the three noble pillars I set out, there is a fourth pillar. Not only does the digitisation of health have benefits for the system in delivering healthcare in a safer, higher quality and better way but, almost more importantly, it helps the transition of healthcare from something that, in the 20th century, was essentially done to patients by a largely benign health state—an essentially passive model of “Come to us when you are sick, and we will treat you as best we can. You can then return to normality”—to a model of healthcare for the 21st century that is all about empowering active healthcare citizenship by modern citizens. We give them the information, and we allow them to understand and take control of their health and lifestyle choices, not in a punitive way or in a way that says, “If you don’t, or if you are irresponsible, you will be ineligible,” but in a way that tries to inspire and promote a culture of active healthcare citizenship.

Putting information in the power of patients and their loved ones, in the same way as in banking and in all other important aspects of our lives, will pay huge public health benefits, with people using information and data to drive lifestyle choices. Indeed, Members are already seeing that. One of the ironies of this space is that some of the most rapid digitisation driven by patients is by the so-called “worried well”—those who take their healthcare seriously and are using Fitbits and other devices to monitor calorie intake, exercise and sleeping patterns to keep themselves out of hospital. The system should use those technologies to try to deliver better care, and we want to integrate the two so that more and more patients are able to harness such technologies to empower themselves. Ultimately, the Secretary of State and I want to get to a point where that transparency and empowerment drives the relationship with healthcare recipients, as healthcare citizens, choosing where to have their surgery and holding the system to account. Intelligent digital transparency is the greatest driver of a modern healthcare system so that every day, every hour and every week the massive diagnostic and
treatment footprint of the NHS is mapped digitally, allowing patients to know that they are actually controlling the system, which is there for them.

Some clinicians, particularly GPs, take a different view—that the sovereignty of their relationship with their patient means that their patient’s data belong to the clinician, which is an interesting point. Most patients feel that their data belong to them and that they should have access to their data. There are ethical issues, as well as the question of the appropriate relationship between clinician and patient, and in no way do I want technology to get in the way of, or to undermine, that sovereignty. Indeed, the clinicians to whom I speak say that the digitisation revolution allows them to focus their professionalism and judgment on what really brought them into clinical practice, which is dealing with their patients, while the computer does what they no longer have to do—recording and accessing in a split-second all the information the clinician needs to make their judgments. Technology can support that relationship, rather than undermining it.

Dr Mathias: In defence of the clinicians out there, I am sure the majority believe that the patients they serve are sovereign.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Minister, before you respond, may I say that you have been on your feet now for 30 minutes and the Minister’s response is usually about 10 minutes? I just want you to bear that in mind.

George Freeman: Thank you, Mr Wilson. Having arrived a little late, I was taking the opportunity to deal with the points that my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Bristol South have made. I will do my best to expedite matters for you.

I want to make the point that the covenanting of public trust and confidence is completely central for the Secretary of State and me. We want to make sure that the public have faith and confidence that we are not in any way playing fast and loose, and I hope that the measures I have announced will go some way to underpinning that.

We have also gone further. People have been concerned about the selling of their data for purposes beyond healthcare—commercial purposes—particularly those that may prejudice their eligibility for healthcare. We have not only made it clear that that is unacceptable; we have made it illegal and imposed a substantial fine and penalty on it. We need to use data but we need to use them appropriately, and we need patients and the public to know that that is our commitment.

On the commitments that we have made, we have secured funding from the Treasury for the completion of the paperless NHS 2020 project, which the Secretary of State has set out in other speeches in some detail. It is a £4.2 billion funding commitment, and in the past few months, since the completion of the comprehensive spending review, officials in the Department of Health, in NHS England and in the Health and Social Care Information Centre—which I recently announced is to be renamed NHS Digital—have been working on a complex work plan for seeing this through. It comprises 26 workstreams in six domains, and we are very committed to making sure that this is properly managed with clear milestones and clear accountability procedures. The project is complex and some things will not go according to plan. We need to make sure that we are on top of that and bringing the very best levels of management to that project.

I want to cite one or two examples of where we are profoundly leading in this space. One is a project for which I have ministerial responsibility—the 100,000 Genomes Project, in which we are sequencing the entire genomes of 100,000 volunteer NHS patients, and combining those with hospital data to form the world’s first reference library for genomic medicine. All the information is consented, and the project represents a pioneering showcase of the use of data in 21st-century health research. We have also launched a genomic medicine service in the NHS through the 13 genomic medicine centres. We want the NHS to pioneer genomic diagnosis and treatment, particularly in cancer and rare diseases. It is a shining informatic and digital data programme as well as a genetic science programme.

I also want to highlight a project that I recently saw, which goes to the other end of the spectrum: the day-to-day management of disease. It is a diabetes service pioneered, to my great joy, by Litcham surgery in my constituency. It involves patients self-monitoring their blood sugar levels, and barcode and digital transmission of that information back to the GP practice. I went to see it in use. Patients go to the consultation and the nurse comes with their data, which is used to monitor their precise condition. That leads to the use of the very latest drugs in ever-more accurate precision dosing and comparative data across all participating GP clinics, which drives up standards. It is a brilliant example of data being used to improve care and the use of novel and precision medicines in the NHS.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I alluded to that in my speech. The next stage on from that is for the individual patient to be able to access the data themselves, which I do not think they can in the example that the Minister cited. I think there have been cases where patients have hacked into the data to get the information for themselves so that they can then see what is happening to their own body and adjust the amount of a particular drug—inulin or sugar or whatever it happens to be—without having to have recourse to a nurse or even a hospital.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham. As part of this quiet revolution of patient empowerment, the clinicians I speak to actively want their patients to have the data and are encouraging them to have it. This is where the apps revolution comes into play, because that is one of the ways in which we are putting this information in the hands, laptops and phones of patients. He is absolutely right that care is improved, but we want to improve patients’ understanding of their condition and improve patient empowerment.

The other example I want to cite is an inspiring example set up at King’s College London by Professor Simon Lovestone: the case register information system in mental health and psychiatry, which is a difficult area of research, as colleagues know. It puts together patient records from across the 250,000-patient catchment area of South London and Maudsley and combines them with MRI brain scans, the digitisation of patient medical records and very complex drug histories in mental health, to build the world’s first reference database for trying to understand the causal mechanisms for complex
psychiatric disorders. It has attracted phenomenal industry co-investment alongside the NIHR centre of excellence and is a shining example of how we can use information and data to drive both research and improved care.

On electronic health records, which are important and which this debate was focused on, the ultimate goal is to have a system in which our individual health records flow seamlessly across the system in advance of patients. That is the goal of the paperless NHS. We have set out a series of specific commitments—I can write to the hon. Members here about them—for this year, next year, 2018, 2019 and 2020. They set out clear targets for how the electronic health record will be used and brought to bear—percentages of penetration in A&E, in the ambulance service and then mainstream across the service.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds makes an important point. We need to identify some early uses of electronic health records, which may not be comprehensive and universal, and put this benefit in the hands of patients as quickly as possible. One of my missions is to ensure that we get some basic but powerful uses of electronic health records in iPads, phones and devices, so that patients can see their experience beginning to improve today.

Karin Smyth: I appreciate the Minister’s enthusiasm and his great knowledge of this sphere. He is probably one of the people who has benefited in his career from the Labour Government’s reversal of the brain drain in the 1980s and 1990s, when they invested heavily in research and technology in the great institutions that he has talked about, which has led us to this point. I look forward to the timeline. He has highlighted how we have Dame Fiona Calkdott, the CQC and—forgive me; I missed the name of the gentleman from America—the practitioner who is coming to talk to us about the culture of patient data. We have CCGs reporting into NHS England and NHS England’s capability on the ground to deliver and support providers to make this deliverable. I do not wish to make a party political point on that, but the frustration shared by those of us who understand how those systems work on the ground will not be helped by having a plurality of people. Who will be in charge of the work plan with its 26 workstreams to make this happen?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is being driven by the National Information Board, which is NHS-led and involves all the key stakeholders within the service. It is a shining example. I recently spoke at its annual conference, and NHS clinicians will tell you that they are setting the protocols and programmes through the NIB. I genuinely do not believe that the establishment of Dame Fiona Calkdott and the CQC and Wachter reviews are distractions. They are intended to try to support clinical pioneers in the service.

I understand the point that the hon. Lady makes about the service being under pressure, which it is. The demand for healthcare is exploding, and NHS England has set out in the “Five Year Forward View” that digitisation and the greater use of technology is essential to reducing unnecessary pressure on the system. It has forecast that in 2020 we will be looking at £22 billion of avoidable costs from hospital admissions, from bureaucracy, and from paperwork. How many of us have had a diagnosis and received three or four, sometimes five, letters all saying slightly different things? That is incredibly wasteful and expensive.

NHS England itself has identified the fact that if that technology is properly implemented it can play a part in driving efficiency. However, I do not underestimate the extent to which that requires investment—which is why we have front-loaded it—as well as capacity and the ability to integrate. That is a challenge. When those systems are put in place in the private sector, huge numbers of people and huge amounts of resources are devoted to driving the integration properly. I would expect Dame Fiona’s review to touch on that, particularly in relation to training, and organisations’ culture and capacity.

However, things are happening. I want to share the data. More than 55 million people in England now have a summary care record. That is 96% of the population. As to how many are aware of that, it is an excellent question. How many of us have obtained access to our summary care record? That is important. Eighty-five per cent. of NHS 111 services, 73% of ambulance trusts and 63% of A&E departments now use the summary care record, and by April next year more than 95% of pharmacies will have access to it. By 2018 clinicians in primary care, urgent and emergency care, and other key transitions of care context will operate without paper, using the summary care record.

Several colleagues have touched on the question of apps today. We have clearly set out, through the National Information Board, a commitment to ensure that there are high-quality appointment-booking apps, with access to full medical records, from this year. NHS England and NHS Digital are working with GP system suppliers and third-party app developers.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. May I just respectfully say to the Minister, you have now spoken longer than the Member who moved the motion for the debate. You turned up an hour late and have now spoken for 40 minutes. I just want you to bear that in mind. The debate does go on to 4.30, but I respect point out that Ministers who have been present for the full debate usually speak for just 10 minutes. Hopefully you will bear that in mind, and are reaching the end of the speech.

George Freeman: I was trying to signal my respect for the questions that have been raised by giving comprehensive answers, but I will try to wrap up.

There is a major programme of work on apps, led by the NIB. That is to create a framework in which approved apps can be launched on the NHS Digital system. They need to be approved, so that patients have trust and confidence that they are verifiable and appropriate and can fulfil the claims they make. Ultimately we see NHS Digital as a major platform for sponsoring and developing those apps. We are not alone in that. There are stunning international examples. Estonia launched its electronic health record in 2009 and it is worth having a look at what it is doing. The US Veterans Association provides an integrated in-patient and out-patient electronic health record for VA patients. I will be in Washington in 10 days to look at that system again. Denmark is doing...
some extraordinary work, with more than 45% of patients now contacting their GPs digitally and using digital technology.

In accordance with your strictures, Mr Wilson, I will cease to set out the Government’s programme. I shall happily write to all those who attended the debate—particularly in response to the questions raised just now by the hon. Member for Bristol South about GP funding and what streams funding is coming through, as well as any other questions that I have not had the chance to answer. Once again I apologise for being late; I had no idea that the timing of the debate had changed. I hope that I have addressed the points that were made.

3.23 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful for the opportunity to discuss what has, as I anticipated, turned out to be an incredibly important subject. Clearly, digital records will be transformational in the NHS and will hugely benefit patients; they could enable the NHS to do much more for less and make possible the quicker development of more drugs, particularly for terminal and rare diseases. The effect could be that drug companies would want to remain here to develop and research their drugs—they would have an environment in which they could do that.

I believe—this is where I started in the debate—that some of what the Minister has told the House this afternoon reveals amazing progress in the NHS, which a public information campaign could show. I bet that very few people know that their local pharmacy could have full electronic access to their patient records, so that they could go in and say, “I’ve got this problem,” and the pharmacist could answer, “I am able to access your patient records if you give me your NHS number.” I assume that is how it works. The pharmacist could then look at the data and say, “You have been on a particular drug, and for your condition you should go and see your GP;” or, “There is another drug that would suit you better.” That sort of decision making would keep more patients out of their GP surgery and A&E and would have a distinct impact on the NHS, because it would reduce costs. The whole tenor of the debate has been to show that the NHS can be transformed by better data use—as the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), said—by being able to store data properly and get access to them at a later date.

The Minister will know that I have come to this issue from Empower’s access to information campaign, and the idea of its being possible to use the data across a particular cohort of patients. I used the example of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, 98% of whose patients are on a data record base. It can use the data to begin development of the drug for the next strain of cystic fibrosis. That is the ideal way in which the system should work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. The debate will go on. Perhaps once the Caldicott report is published, and when the Government have set out how they may go about the public information campaign and the new Information Commissioner is in place, it would be appropriate for the House to have another, similar debate. That could perhaps be on a more mainstream day, when more Members could participate. The subject is so important that we should not leave it here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered use of digital records in the NHS.

3.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Monday 11 April 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Companies House Public Targets

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Baroness Neville-Rolfe) has today made the following statement.

I have set Companies House the following targets for the year 2016/17:

**Public Targets**

- To e-enable 96% by volume of all Companies House transactions
- To achieve an 85% take up of our transactions
- To maintain an availability of our digital services of 99.9%
- To reach a compliance level for the filing of accounts of at least 94.5%
- To achieve a 3.5% reduction in average costs per company
- To achieve a customer satisfaction score of at least 82%.

[HCWS665]

TREASURY

Bank of England Appointment

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The Chancellor has announced that Sam Woods has been appointed as the next Chief Executive of the Prudential Regulation Authority.

Sam will succeed Andrew Bailey on 1 July 2016, who has been appointed the Chief Executive of the Financial Conduct Authority. He will build on Andrew’s work in delivering a strong, secure and globally competitive regime for all financial services.

[HCWS666]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Council Tax Support

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): On 2 December 2015 the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones) announced the appointment of Eric Ollerenshaw OBE to lead an independent review into local council tax support schemes.

The review was charged with meeting the requirements set out in the Local Government Finance Act 2012, to look at whether the schemes are efficient, effective, fair and transparent.

The review follows the reform of council tax benefit to give councils the power to design their own schemes according to their local needs. It has looked at how this change has been implemented, what it has meant for local areas, and whether it should be part of the universal credit payments in the future.

The review has now concluded and its final report has been submitted to me. The independent report recognises the successful implementation of LCTS schemes by local government.

I have placed a copy in the House Library.

[HCWS667]
The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): In November 2013, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) announced that it would investigate the serious allegations made against RBS’s global restructuring group, regarding the treatment of small and medium-sized business customers.

In a letter from Tracey McDermott—acting chief executive of the FCA—dated 12 April 2016, the FCA states that it has now received the draft final report from Promontory Financial Group, who were appointed by the FCA to undertake the review.

There are a number of important steps to be taken by the FCA before the report is finalised, and the FCA remains committed to completing the review as soon as possible.

I have placed a copy of the FCA’s letter in the House of Commons Library.

[HCWS670]

National Infrastructure Commission Reports

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): Today I announce the publication of the Government’s response to three reports by the National Infrastructure Commission on pressing infrastructure challenges facing the country.

“Smart Power”, published on 4 March, sets out a plan to ensure that supply and demand are balanced as efficiently as possible in the energy system, and the Government welcome the report as an opportunity to transform the future of the UK’s electricity sector:


“Transport for a World City”, published on 10 March, sets out priorities for future large-scale investment in London’s public transport infrastructure, and the Government welcome the report as an opportunity to support London’s continued growth through strategic, long-term investment in infrastructure:


“High Speed North”, published on 15 March, is a plan to transform the connectivity of the northern cities, and the Government welcome the report as an opportunity to help drive forward the Northern Powerhouse:


The National Infrastructure Commission was announced in October 2015, to provide expert independent analysis of the long-term infrastructure needs of the country. The commission has been operating in shadow form since then.

At Budget 2016, the Chancellor confirmed that the Government have accepted the commission’s recommendations in its recently published reports. Copies of the documents will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government have recently consulted on the structure, governance and operation of the commission, and propose to introduce legislation to put the commission on a statutory footing.

[HCWS671]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I am pleased to announce the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is continuing support for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). I am also pleased to inform the House that the Secretary of State for International Development has agreed that the Department for International Development (DFID) will also continue to support WFD.

The FCO will provide £3.5 million to WFD in 2016-17 and plans to provide a similar level of funding in 2017-18. DFID will provide up to £6.5 million to WFD over the next two financial years. Continuation of funding will be subject to WFD’s performance.

WFD is uniquely placed to deploy UK parliamentary and party political expertise to help developing democracies. This funding will ensure WFD is able to continue to implement high-quality programmes to strengthen Parliaments and political party structures.

Ministerial Correction

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): During the estimates day debate on 1 March I said that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had contributed $215,000 to a memorial to the battle of New Orleans, Official Report, column 868. However, this must be corrected, since the FCO has not yet made the donation to the memorial. The FCO has been allocated $215,000 from HM Treasury to support the project, but will disburse the funds only once the project is more advanced and sufficient funds to cover the full cost of the memorial have been secured, beyond those of the existing donors. In addition, I said that the State of Louisiana had made a donation, but it has not done so.

[HCWS669]
CABINET OFFICE

UK Cyber Security Strategy: Annual Report

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): In 2010, the national security strategy identified cyber as a tier 1 threat to the UK. In November 2011, we published the UK national cyber security strategy.

From 2011 to 2016, the Government funded a £860 million national cyber security programme to deliver the strategy’s vision of “a vibrant, resilient and secure cyberspace”. The objectives of this programme aimed to:

- Make the UK one of the most secure places in the world to do business in cyberspace.
- Make the UK more resilient to cyber-attack and better able to protect our interests in cyberspace.
- Help shape an open, vibrant and stable cyberspace that supports open societies.
- Build the UK’s cyber-security knowledge, skills and capability.

We have presented regular reports to Parliament on progress against the strategy’s objectives. Today I am publishing the final report for the programme.

The report summarises progress during 2015-16 against the strategy’s objectives, reviews the impact of the programme since it was established, and looks ahead to the new 2016 national cyber security strategy and programme.

There has been significant progress towards reaching these goals. As a result of programme initiatives:

- We have enhanced national capabilities to protect and defend ourselves against those who would do us harm.
- Businesses of all sizes and sectors are now better protected.
- We have a greater share of the international cyber security market.
- Our online Government services are increasingly secure.
- We are actively tackling cyber-crime.
- We are playing a leading role in international cyber security.
- We are actively building our cyber skills and knowledge.

In partnership with business, the academic community and international partners, we have built a solid foundation for the future. We are grateful to partners for their collaboration and efforts. The Government cannot deliver these goals on their own.

Against a backdrop of increased threats we have improved the UK’s effort to enhance cyber security. But there is more to do. The 2015 national security strategy confirmed that cyber remains a tier 1 threat to the UK’s economic and national security. As a result, the Government will publish a new national cyber security strategy this year, which will define our vision and ambition for the future. The Government will further increase investment in cyber security to £1.9 billion over the next five years.

We will continue to report progress to Parliament.

[HCWS672]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

European Union: Rights and Obligations of Membership

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I have today laid before both Houses a paper on the rights and obligations arising under EU law as a result of UK membership of the EU. This paper represents the second and final part of the report that the Government have published to meet the requirement of section 7(1) of the European Union Referendum Act 2015. The first part, “Alternatives to membership: possible models for the United Kingdom outside the European Union”, was published on 2 March 2016. Both parts of the report are now available to read together on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS673]

Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 18 April. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (defence) on 19 April. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (defence) will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meetings will be held in Luxembourg.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Colombia, migration, Eastern Partners and the EU regional strategy for Syria/Iraq/Daesh. An informal lunch will take place with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Filippo Grandi, and a joint dinner between Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers will cover Libya.

Colombia

Ministers will have an informal session with Colombia’s High Commissioner for Peace, Sergio Jaramillo. This is an opportunity for an update on the Colombia peace process, progress on negotiations, and Colombian plans for post conflict implementation. The UK has been a strong supporter of the peace process and recently steered a resolution through the UN Security Council, securing unanimous approval for a UN role in monitoring and verification.

External aspects of migration

Ministers will exchange views on the external aspects of migration, as part of the EU’s ongoing efforts to reduce irregular migration into Europe. This is in line with the March European Council’s commitment to tackle the migration crisis through a comprehensive strategy.

Lunch with UNHCR, Filippo Grandi

The lunch will focus on the global refugee crisis. Given Grandi’s remit, and the proximity of the FAC to the World Humanitarian summit (23-24 May), there is likely to be some discussion of the summit, and reform of the global humanitarian system more broadly.

EU regional strategy for Syria/Iraq/Daesh

We expect the FAC to include an update from Mogherini on progress towards reviewing the EU’s regional strategy for Syria, Iraq and Daesh, which was adopted by the
FAC in March 2015. The recent attacks in Brussels and Paris demonstrate Daesh’s resolve to attack Europe within our own borders. EU Interior Ministers have agreed measures to combat terrorism, especially the threat from Daesh. The EU must also do all it can to defeat and degrade Daesh in its heartland in Iraq and Syria, which includes political transition in Syria.

**Eastern Partners**

Ministers are expected to exchange views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

**Libya**

The EU will play an important role in providing immediate support to a Government of National Accord (GNA). We will encourage the EU to develop its options for support based on the needs of the GNA in co-ordination with the UN. The FAC will also cover options for a possible common security and defence policy (CSDP) mission to support the Libyan GNA.

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**FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL (DEFENCE)**

The Foreign Affairs Council (defence) will be preceded by the European Defence Agency (EDA) steering board and will meet in ministerial format. There will be no political decisions made on the EDA budget at this meeting; this will be addressed at the autumn steering board. The agenda will cover the implementation of key taskings and next steps, which includes: the policy framework for defence co-operation; hybrid warfare and the preparatory action for CSDP-related research.

The FAC(D) will receive an update on the development of capacity building for security and development (CBSD). Ministers will discuss the joint EEAS/Commission communication “Countering Hybrid Threats” and look at how to implement the actions proposed, including how to enhance work with NATO in this area. Ministers will also be asked to agree Council decisions on the revised EUTM Mali mandate and the establishment of a new EUTM in the Central African Republic.

[HCWS674]
Written Statements

Monday 18 April 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Steel Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):

On 11 April I provided an oral statement to the House regarding the UK steel industry and the steps that the Government are taking to support it.

We have secured assurances from Tata that it will be responsible sellers of its remaining UK steel operations and will allow reasonable time to find a buyer. My colleagues and I have already been in contact with potential buyers making it clear that the Government stand ready to help. We have also appointed EY to act as financial advisors on behalf of the Government. Commercial confidentiality means I cannot go into detail about ongoing discussions. However I will update the House as soon as it is appropriate.

On 11 April, Tata formally launched its sales process providing a summary information memorandum to interested parties. In the next stage of the process, Tata will release more detailed information to those parties that have expressed an interest and which have signed up to the relevant confidentiality provisions.

This is also understandably an uncertain time for Tata’s customers and suppliers. The biggest reassurance I can give is the public commitment we have made—that the Government are totally committed to supporting and facilitating the process of finding a buyer for the business, as evidenced today by the information we are providing for Tata’s sales document.

Many questions have been raised recently regarding compensation for energy intensive industries. We have paid out over £200 million to energy intensive industries since 2013 to compensate them for energy policy costs. Under our new scheme, launched earlier this year, covering compensation for the renewables obligation and small scale feed-in tariff costs, we have so far paid over £23 million to 12 companies, including Tata. We are continuing to rapidly work through applications and will be making further payments over the coming weeks. Our overall package of compensation and exemption will save the steel industry hundreds of millions of pounds over this Parliament.

We continue to make strong progress in Europe. The duties imposed on rebar in January 2016 were 99% down on January 2015. This week the Government will again be at the forefront of efforts to tackle unfair trade practices. Today I will attend the OECD high level meeting on steel in Brussels, which will look to agree actions to tackle global excess capacity. This will be attended by non-OECD countries. It is an ideal opportunity to press China and other countries to take fast and effective action in this area.

On Thursday, the Minister of State for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise will speak at the European Steel Day conference in Brussels, organised by EUROFER (the European steel trade body), where she will continue to work with industry and European partners to deliver on the Government’s commitment to provide industry with all the support they can.

The Government are committed to doing all it can to ensure a sustainable future for the UK steel industry.

[HCWS675]

TREASURY

Economic Assessment

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): The Government’s document “HM Treasury analysis: the long-term economic impact of EU membership and the alternatives” has today been laid before Parliament.

The document provides rigorous and objective economic analysis of the long-term impact of remaining a member of the EU, compared to the alternatives.

Copies of the report are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office. It is also available on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS676]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon):

The Cabinet Manual states, “In 2011, the Government acknowledged that a Convention had developed in Parliament that before troops were committed the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter and said that it proposed to observe that convention except where there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate.”

The Prime Minister repeated this commitment in relation to Libya in Parliament on 16 March 2016. The convention relates to conflict decisions rather than routine deployments of the UK armed forces around the world. The exception to the convention is important to ensure that this and future Governments can use their judgment about how best to protect the security and interests of the UK.

In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised. The Prime Minister, the Attorney General and I have set out the Government’s interpretation of the convention on a number of occasions.

We cannot predict the situations that the UK and its armed forces may face in future. If we were to attempt to clarify more precisely circumstances in which we would consult Parliament before taking military action, we would constrain the operational flexibility of the armed forces and prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of those forces, or be accused of acting in bad faith if unexpected developments were to require us to act differently. This Government have demonstrated their commitment to the convention by the debates they have held in 2013, 2014 and 2015, and their respect for the will of Parliament on each occasion.
The convention does not apply to British military personnel embedded in the armed forces of other nations as they operate as if they were the host nation’s personnel, under that nation’s chain of command, while remaining subject to UK domestic, international and host nation law. This is in line with international practice. To do otherwise would risk undermining the usefulness and viability of these exchanges. I have committed to increased transparency by publishing an annual update to the House on embedded personnel, the last of which was on 17 December 2015.

After careful consideration, the Government have decided that it will not be codifying the convention in law or by resolution of the House in order to retain the ability of this and future Governments and the armed forces to protect the security and interests of the UK in circumstances that we cannot predict, and to avoid such decisions becoming subject to legal action.

We will continue to ensure that Parliament is kept informed of significant major operations and deployments of the armed forces.

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Written Statements

Wednesday 20 April 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Police and Crime Commissioner Elections

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The Cabinet Office wishes to report the entry into force of the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Local Returning Officers’ and Police Area Returning Officers’ Charges) Order 2016. The order sets the maximum recoverable amounts for the services and expenses of police area returning officers and local returning officers. The order is the final piece of legislation which, taken together, confirm the arrangements for the police and crime commissioner elections on 5 May 2016. [HCWS683]

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Energy Bill: English Votes for English Laws

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I am pleased to announce the publication of updated analysis of the Energy Bill for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The memorandum provides an assessment of amendments made at Lords consideration of Commons amendments (LCCA) and tabled for Commons consideration of Lords amendments (CCLA), ahead of CCLA. The Department’s assessment is that none of the amendments change the territorial application of the Bill.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/energy/documents.html and I have deposited a copy in the House of Commons Library. [HCWS680]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Readmission Agreement: Jordan

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Government have decided not to opt in to a Council decision (12137/15) authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (hereafter referred to as Jordan) on readmission.

EURAs ensure reciprocal procedures for the identification, documentation and return of persons illegally entering or remaining in EU member states. We decide whether to participate in EURAs on a case-by-case basis, depending on the priority we attach to the country concerned in terms of numbers of immigration returns and the degree to which we enjoy a good bilateral relationship with that country.

Jordan is not an immigration returns priority for the UK (there were only four enforced returns from January to September 2015), and our returns process is excellent; Jordan is a country to which we return on EU letters (this is easier because we do not need to obtain a travel document if we have strong supporting evidence of nationality). We would not enjoy an operational advantage if we were to change our bilateral arrangements for conducting returns to Jordan.

[HCWS681]

Police Advisory Board for England and Wales: Triennial Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): On 5 February 2015, I announced in Parliament, through a written statement, the commencement of a triennial review of the Police Advisory Board for England and Wales. I am pleased to announce the completion of the review.

The Police Advisory Board provides independent advice to the Secretary of State on general questions affecting the police.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the Police Advisory Board are still required and that it should be retained as a stakeholder group. This is an administrative change in its classification that better reflects the way the body is constituted and provides advice. The Police Advisory Board is, therefore, no longer classified as a non-departmental public body. The report makes a further five recommendations that will be implemented shortly.

The full report of the review of the Police Advisory Board can be found on www.gov.uk and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. [HCWS682]
Written Statements

Thursday 21 April 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Police and Crime Commissioner Elections: Indemnity for Returning Officers

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I have laid a minute setting out the Cabinet Office’s proposal to indemnify returning officers for the police and crime commissioner elections on 5 May 2016 against uninsured claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties. We will also provide a certificate confirming that we will bear any employee liabilities of the returning officer which would otherwise be covered by insurance procured under the Employers’ Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969. An indemnity was previously provided by the Home Office to returning officers for the 2012 police and crime commissioner elections and the Cabinet Office regularly provides indemnities for UK parliamentary and European parliamentary elections. HM Treasury has approved the indemnity in principle.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

Cabinet Office officials have been in discussion with HM Treasury officials and lawyers on the scope of indemnities of this kind and to ensure consistency between indemnities provided in respect of these and other polls. Thus it has not been possible to lay this minute before now. As a consequence, there is now a special urgency as the elections will take place shortly.

[HCWS685]

DEFENCE

Atomic Weapons Establishment Contract

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I am announcing the successful completion of a review of the Department’s contract with one of its key suppliers, AWE Management Ltd (AWEML), a joint venture between Lockheed Martin Inc., Jacobs Inc. and Serco. The contract is for the management and operation of the AWE sites at Aldermaston, Burghfield and Blacknest.

As with all major commercial programmes, this contract is kept under regular review to ensure it continues to meet the Ministry of Defence’s requirements in terms of performance, affordability and value for money. As a result of the review, the contract with AWEML has been improved. It provides the opportunity for higher performance incentives, as well as reductions if targets are not met. The duration of the contract is unchanged, running through to 2025. It will also now be a qualifying defence contract under the terms of the Defence Reform Act 2014 and single source procurement framework.

The core commitment in the AWE management and operation contract remains extant—to provide and maintain the nuclear warhead stockpile for the UK’s nuclear deterrent, efficiently and effectively without compromising safety or security, for as long as the Government require.

[HCWS689]


The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The supplement to the 2016 report of the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body (AFPRB) making recommendations on the pay of service medical and dental officers has been published today. I wish to express my thanks to the chairman and members of the review body for their report. The AFPRB’s recommendations are to be accepted in full with implementation effective from 1 April 2016. Copies of the AFPRB supplementary report are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS692]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights and Democracy Report


The report focuses on significant human rights country and policy developments overseas in 2015. It sets out how the Government’s three human rights themes (democratic values and the rule of law; strengthening the rules-based international system; and human rights for a stable world) operate in practice, and includes reports on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s 30 human rights priority countries: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.


[HCWS684]
HOME DEPARTMENT

Action Plan: Anti-money Laundering and Counter-terrorism Finance

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Today, the Government are publishing an action plan that sets out the steps that the UK will take to strengthen their response to money laundering and terrorist financing, and to protect the safety of its citizens and the integrity of the UK financial system. Copies will be available on www.gov.uk and in the Library of the House.

This action plan will tackle all forms of money laundering, with a particular focus on the illicit funds supporting and generating serious and organised crime, which deprives people of their security and prosperity; terrorism, which poses a direct and immediate threat to our domestic security and overseas interests; and the laundering of the proceeds of overseas corruption into or through the UK, which fuels political instability in the source countries.

This Government have already taken significant action to tackle these damaging crimes and to improve the reputation of the UK, including of our financial and professional services industries. The National Risk Assessment on Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (NRA), published in October 2015, was candid and robust in its assessment and set out our current understanding of the risks to the UK and the gaps in our response. The action plan addresses the gaps identified.

The Prime Minister’s Anti-Corruption summit next month will galvanise the international response to issues including corporate secrecy, Government transparency, the enforcement of international anti-corruption laws, and the strengthening of international institutions.

This action plan sets out changes that amount to the most significant reform to our anti-money laundering regime for over a decade, since the commencement of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

We will:

Enhance the law enforcement response

- Consult on tough new powers to tackle money laundering, including unexplained wealth orders (UWO) to require those who are suspected of money laundering to explain the sources of their wealth; the provision of a linked forfeiture power for use where the answers provided are unsatisfactory, or where the subject of the UWO fails to respond; the provision of a power to designate the highest risk entities and require additional regulatory measures to be carried out on them by the regulated sector; and the closing of loopholes that can be exploited by terrorists to raise and move funds.
- Deliver new capabilities and support to take on the most sophisticated ‘high-end’ money laundering cases, and to ensure that operational partners have, and are able to use, an appropriate and effective suite of tools to counter terrorist finance.
- The Government have already established a cross-agency taskforce, recently announced by the Prime Minister, to investigate all evidence of illegality that may emerge from the data relating to Mossack Fonseca, the law firm based in Panama.
- Improve the effectiveness of the supervisory regime

Undertake a wide-ranging review of the supervisory regime to develop radical options for reform aimed at ensuring we have an effective and proportionate system. Engagement has already begun with stakeholders and the public call for information is included within the action plan.

Increase our international reach

- Promote more effective information sharing across international boundaries.
- Place new NCA International Liaison Officer posts in selected jurisdictions.
- Training will be delivered to, and expertise shared with, key overseas partners to combat terrorist finance.
- Work with international partners to tackle money laundering and terrorist financing threats upstream, and develop multilateral approaches in preparation for the Prime Minister’s Anti-Corruption summit in May 2016.
- Develop a stronger partnership with the private sector

Radically reform the suspicious activity reports (SARs) regime (the statutory regime under which persons in the regulated sector must report suspicions of money laundering or terrorist financing to the National Crime Agency), make better use of public and private sector resources against the highest threats, target the entities who carry out money laundering instead of individual transactions, and provide the National Crime Agency with a suite of new powers, including one to oblige SARs reporters to provide additional information when requested.

Make the Joint Money Laundering Intelligence Taskforce (JMLIT) a permanent feature of the UK’s anti-money laundering regime, which brings together the financial sector, law enforcement agencies and the Financial Conduct Authority to share information to prevent, detect and disrupt money laundering and terrorist financing activities.

Consult on proposed new powers to provide the financial sector with ‘safe harbour’ for the sharing of information on financial crime.

The reforms to our domestic anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime set out in the action plan, coupled with the international leadership being shown by the UK through the Prime Minister’s Anti-Corruption summit, will lead to greater disruption of money laundering and terrorist financing activities, the prosecution of those responsible and increased recovery of the proceeds of crime, and a greater protection of the UK financial system.

Section 40 (4a) of the British Nationality Act 1981

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): David Anderson QC, Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has completed the first review on the operation of section 40(4A) of the British Nationality Act 1981. His report will be laid before the House today.

I am grateful to David Anderson for his considered report. He continues to provide important independent scrutiny of UK counter-terrorism legislation.

The report makes no recommendations, but sets out the evolution of the power under review and provides observations on the power, and on deprivation more broadly. The Government’s positions on the issues raised in the report are a matter of public record.

The report provides the basis for future reviews which may have the opportunity to consider examples of the operation of the power which, as was intended, is only likely to be used in a small subset of the most serious cases.

The next report is required to be produced and laid before the House after 28 July 2019.
Refugees and Resettlement

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Following my statement on 28 January, the Government have continued to work to provide support to refugee children. We have always been clear that in order to provide the best help to the greatest number of those in need, we need to support the majority of refugees to stay safely in their home region.

That is why we recently doubled our aid for the Syrian crisis to £2.3 billion, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. This support has reached hundreds of thousands of people in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. To galvanise international efforts we co-hosted the “Supporting Syria and the Region” conference in London on 4 February, securing pledges of more than £11 billion, the largest amount ever raised in one day for a humanitarian crisis. These commitments will create an estimated 1.1 million jobs for refugees and host country citizens by 2018. By the end of the 2016-17 school year, 1.7 million refugee and vulnerable children will be in quality education with equal access for girls and boys.

Today I am able to announce the results of work with UNHCR and informed by a roundtable with NGOs, local authorities and devolved administrations to provide a resettlement route to the UK, specifically designed for “Children at Risk” from the middle east and north Africa region. On the UNHCR’s recommendation the scheme will not target unaccompanied children alone, but will be extended to all “Children at Risk” as defined by the UNHCR. This broad category encompasses unaccompanied children and separated children—those separated from their parents and/or other family members—as well as other vulnerable children such as child carers and those facing the risk of child labour, child marriage or other forms of neglect, abuse or exploitation.

Through this category we will resettle the most vulnerable children, accompanied by their families, where the UNHCR deems resettlement is in the best interests of the child. We will commit to resettling several hundred individuals in the first year with a view to resettling up to 3,000 individuals over the lifetime of this Parliament, the majority of whom will be children. We will also review the scheme at the two-year mark. This unique initiative will be the largest resettlement effort that focuses on children at risk from the MENA region and will be over and above the commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees under the Syrian resettlement scheme. It will be open to all at risk groups and nationalities within the region, with the best interests of the child at the heart of the scheme. The UNHCR is fully supportive of the launch of this new initiative and the UK’s commitment to assist vulnerable refugee children at risk through further resettlement efforts which uphold the principles of child protection.

The Government are committed to making a full contribution to the global refugee crisis, in particular by helping children at risk. We firmly believe that we can make the biggest difference and add most value by supporting children and their families in the conflict region while providing a route to the UK for the minority of vulnerable or at risk cases where resettlement is judged by the UNHCR to be in the child’s best interests.

At the same time we need to shut down the illegal migration routes to Europe, exploited by human traffickers who encourage people to risk their lives to make perilous journeys. The success of the EU-Turkey migration agreement is a vital opportunity to end the misery and lethal risk that smugglers and organised criminals are causing on a daily basis.

Following discussion with the European Commission and the Greek Government I can today announce that the UK will be offering 75 expert personnel to help with processing and administration of migrants in reception centres, act as interpreters, provide medical support and bolster our existing team assisting the Commission to ensure effective and efficient co-ordination. We will also provide vital equipment and medical supplies. This is an additional to the UK maritime contribution, with three Border Force vessels assisting the Hellenic Coastguard to conduct search and rescue missions, and a Royal Navy vessel as part of the NATO mission in the Aegean.

The teams we send to Greece will include experts in supporting vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied children and those trained to tackle people trafficking. This will help ensure that vulnerable people, including children, are identified and can access asylum procedures as quickly as possible. This is in addition to the work undertaken by the Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland, to visit hotspots and assess what more can be done to ensure unaccompanied children are protected from traffickers.

To increase support to refugees in Turkey the Government are contributing £250 million to the initial £3 billion Turkey refugee facility. This is expected to provide immediate humanitarian support as well as funding for schools, hospitals and housing. We are also working with the Turkish Government to identify what expert support would best assist their immigration and asylum services in handling migrants returned under the EU-Turkey agreement.

We continue to take action within Europe to assist vulnerable migrant children. The UK is the largest bilateral contributor to the humanitarian response to the crisis in Europe and the Balkans with a total contribution of £65 million. This includes nearly £46 million to provide life-saving aid to migrants and refugees including food, water, hygiene kits and infant packs, and protection for the most vulnerable, as well as support to organisations helping Governments build their capacity to manage arrivals in Greece and the Balkans. The efforts of the partners we fund are targeted to reach the most vulnerable— including children.

It also includes the £10 million refugee children fund the Department for International Development (DFID) has created to support the needs of vulnerable refugee and migrant children specifically in Europe. The fund will support three specialist and mandated organisations UNHCR, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to work with host authorities to care for and assist unaccompanied or separated children in Europe and the Balkans. This includes identifying vulnerable children, providing for their immediate support, referral to specialist care, and helping find solutions such as family reunification.

It is important to use the tools available to help children reunite with family wherever possible. The Government are committed to meeting our obligations under the Dublin regulation. We haveseconded additional
resource into the European Asylum Support Office totalling over 1,000 days of expert support to Italy and Greece to implement and streamline the Dublin process, including to quickly identify children who qualify for family reunion. And we continue to work with the French authorities to address the situation in Calais, including through a permanent bilateral standing committee to improve co-operation on Dublin transfers, particularly family reunion.

The recent secondment of a senior asylum expert to the French Interior Ministry to improve the process for family cases has already resulted in a significant increase in the number of children being reunited with family in the UK. In the last six weeks 24 cases have been accepted for transfer to the UK from France under family unity provisions, more than half of whom have already arrived in the UK. Once an asylum claim has been lodged in another member state we have demonstrated that transfers can take place within weeks.

We will do all we can to ensure that children in Europe with a right to be reunited with their family in the UK are supported to do so. However, the Government remain of the view that relocation schemes within Europe risk creating unintended consequences or perverse incentives for people to put their lives into the hands of traffickers. Instead we are committed to providing safe and legal routes for the most vulnerable refugees from Syria to resettle to the UK. Under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme we are committed to resettling 20,000 vulnerable refugees by 2020. In the last quarter of 2015 we resettled 1,085 Syrian refugees under this scheme over half of whom were children.

[HCWS687]

JUSTICE

Civil Legal Aid

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): On 18 February the Court of Appeal handed down judgment on an appeal in a judicial review challenge to the domestic violence evidence requirements under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO). I would now like to inform the House of the steps the Government are taking to respond to the Court’s concerns.

Legal aid is a fundamental part of our justice system, but resources are not limitless. Our overarching approach to legal aid reform is to reduce the burden on the taxpayer of paying for legal aid, while ensuring that it is targeted at the highest priorities. In line with this approach, LASPO removed legal aid from most private family matters while making a clear exception for victims of domestic violence. In such cases, the applicant is required to supply specific evidence of domestic violence, which is set out in regulations.

In this judicial review, the Court of Appeal found that the regulation frustrated LASPO’s purpose in two specific areas. First, in that they required evidence to have been obtained within a two-year period before the application for legal aid. Secondly, because they lacked provision for victims of financial abuse.

We continue to believe that victims of domestic violence in private family disputes should receive legal aid where evidence is provided, and the Court of Appeal has agreed that the Lord Chancellor has the power to make arrangements in regulations to allow this. But there are areas where we need further information—for example, the number of individuals who have evidence over two years old. We also need to more fully appreciate the issues in play in cases of financial abuse, on which there is only limited research available.

We have begun work with domestic violence support groups, legal representative bodies and colleagues across Government to gather data and develop our understanding of these issues. Our findings will be used to inform an evidence-based solution to the Court’s concerns, with the aim of drawing up replacement regulations.

In the meantime we are taking immediate action, through interim regulations laid before Parliament today, to change our arrangements. We are more than doubling the original time limit for evidence—increasing it from two to five years, and we are introducing a provision for the assessment of evidence concerning financial abuse. We are expediting implementation of these changes so they will come into effect on Monday 25 April in order to make sure that victims of domestic violence can receive the support they need as soon as possible, and to give certainty to those considering applications for legal aid. We believe that these arrangements address the Court’s concerns while work continues to find a sustainable longer-term solution.

[HCWS690]

Inquests on Deaths of Service Personnel Overseas

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): My hon. Friend, the Minister for Defence Personnel and Veterans, and I wish to make the last in our series of quarterly joint statements on the progress of coroner investigations into the deaths of UK service personnel who have died on active service overseas. As in all of our statements, we wish to express our continuing gratitude to all those members of the armed forces who have served or are now serving overseas for their bravery, professionalism, and commitment to service. Our thoughts are especially with the families and loved ones of those who have given their lives in this service.

This statement provides information on the inquests conducted by the Oxfordshire, Wiltshire and Swindon, and other coroner areas in England and Wales as at 13 April 2016.

Additional, supplemental, tables have also been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, which give the status and details of all current and previous cases, including whether there has been or will be a service inquiry (formerly known as a Board of Inquiry).

The Ministry of Defence’s Defence Inquests Unit continues to work with coroners (including the cadre of coroners specially trained to conduct investigations and inquests into the deaths of service personnel), with the aim of ensuring that investigations are thorough and that inquests are timely and effective. Under section 12 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 investigations may now be held in Scotland, where appropriate.
Since 2007 our two Departments have provided funding for the additional resources required by the Oxfordshire and Wiltshire and Swindon coroner services, as service personnel who have lost their lives overseas have been repatriated to RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire and RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. Coroners have thus been able to conduct investigations into these deaths as well as their local caseload.

We are sincerely grateful to all those who support and assist bereaved families during this process, particularly coroners and their staff who unflaggingly conduct their investigations with families at their heart, and the Chief Coroner who continues to provide leadership and oversight of coroner services.

Current status of inquests

Since our previous statement on 10 September last year, the inquests into the deaths of the five servicemen who died in the Lynx helicopter crash on 26 April 2014 have been held by the Oxfordshire Coroner. A total of 629 inquests have therefore now been held into the deaths of service personnel on active service in Iraq or Afghanistan, or who have died in the UK from injuries sustained while on active service. There are three cases where the death of an injured serviceman did not lead to a formal inquest, although two of these were taken into consideration at inquests into other deaths that occurred in the same incidents. The third death was of a serviceman in Scotland who made a partial recovery but later died from his injuries, and a fatal accident inquiry was not held.

Coroners’ investigations which remain open

As at 13 April 2016, there remain only two open coroner investigations into the deaths of service personnel in Afghanistan. The first relates to the death of Lance Corporal James Brynin on 13 October 2013. The Senior Coroner for West Sussex opened the inquest on 10 March 2016, and subsequently adjourned the hearing pending a police investigation into the death. The Coroner hopes to reconvene the hearing in September this year. The second is that of the death of Sapper Adam Moralee on 5 March 2014. This death is currently subject to a police investigation, and it is not known when this investigation and any subsequent action may be concluded.

An investigation is also open into the death of Private Jamie Sawyer who died while serving on the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus. The Senior Coroner for Birmingham is currently responsible for the investigation of the death, which is on hold while a prosecution takes place in Cyprus.

With the exception of the two inquests mentioned above, which are not expected to be completed for some time, all operational inquests relating to Iraq and Afghanistan have now been completed, and this will therefore be the last of our series of statements on this topic. Our sympathy and condolences go out to the families and friends of Lance Corporal Brynin and Sapper Moralee, and we mean no disrespect to their memory in taking the decision not to provide further updates.

Table detailing inquests into service deaths (WMS tables (updated) April 2016.docx) can be viewed online at:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): The Government have today published a consultation paper proposing new fees for proceedings in the first-tier tribunal (immigration and asylum chamber) and upper tribunal (immigration and asylum chamber).

In the spending review the Government announced that we were investing £700 million in Her Majesty’s Court and Tribunal Service (HMCTS). This will transform our courts and tribunals, reducing complexity in language, processes and systems; helping people reach the best resolution for them; minimising the steps that people need to go through to obtain justice; and improving access to justice. We will invest in better facilities and use technology to reduce paperwork, so that we create a courts and tribunals service fit for the modern age.

At the same time, we must reduce the burden on the taxpayer of running our courts and tribunals. In meeting our spending review settlement, all parts of the Ministry of Justice must contribute to the national effort to reduce the deficit and restore the Government’s finances to surplus. The courts and tribunals service cost £1.8 billion in 2014-15, but only £700 million was received in income. This leaves a net cost to the taxpayer of around £1.1 billion in one year alone.

Our consultation proposes increasing fees in those immigration and asylum proceedings where a fee is payable so that the fee meets the costs of those proceedings in full. We have previously consulted on plans to raise fees for proceedings in the first-tier tribunal (immigration and asylum chamber) in order to recover around 25% of the £84 million annual costs of that chamber. Having re-assessed the Ministry of Justice’s financial position following the spending review, we need to go much further.

In the light of the challenging financial circumstances we face we have already had to take difficult decisions. We have implemented enhanced court fees, above the cost of the proceedings to which they relate, for money claims; possession claims; general applications within civil proceedings; and divorce petitions.

In these financial circumstances, we have concluded that it is no longer reasonable to expect the taxpayer to fund around 75% of the costs of immigration and asylum proceedings. We therefore propose increasing fees in the first-tier tribunal from £80 to £490 for an application for a decision on the papers and from £410 to £800 for an application for an oral hearing. We also propose introducing a new fee of £455 for an application to the first-tier tribunal for permission to appeal to the upper tribunal.

We also believe that the same principles should apply to appeals to the upper tribunal (immigration and asylum chamber) so the consultation also seeks views on introducing fees, set at full cost recovery levels, for these proceedings. The consultation proposes a fee of £350 for an application to the upper tribunal for permission to appeal, where permission has been refused by the first-tier tribunal, and a fee of £510 for an appeal hearing where permission is granted.

We are mindful of the fact that some applicants will face difficulties in paying these fees, so to make sure that the burden of funding the system is shared as fairly as
possible we will continue to exempt from fees those in particularly vulnerable positions. This includes those who qualify for legal aid or asylum support; those who are appealing against a decision to deprive them of their citizenship; and those children bringing appeals to the tribunal who are being supported by a local authority. We will also extend our exemptions to protect children being housed by the local authority and the parents of children receiving local authority support. In addition, we are consulting on further extensions to the exemptions scheme in this consultation to make sure we continue to protect the most vulnerable.

Higher fees are never popular but they are necessary if we are, as a nation, to live within our means. These proposals would raise around an additional £37 million a year, which is a critical contribution to cutting the deficit and reducing the burden on the taxpayer of running the courts and tribunals.

Full details of the Government’s proposals are set out in the consultation document which has been published on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS691]

**PRIME MINISTER**

**Senior Salaries Review Body**

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): The 38th report of the Senior Salaries Review Body is being published today. This makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service, senior military officers and the judiciary.

We understand the need to ensure that we are able to recruit, retain and motivate staff with the right skills and experience. However, pay restraint continues to be a key part of our plans to finish fixing the public finances. Senior public sector workers, like everyone else, will have to continue to play their part to ensure we deliver security for working people across the country. Moreover, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that 200,000 public sector jobs have been protected thanks to our average 1% pay policy.

**Senior military officers**

The Government have accepted the recommendation of a 1% increase to base military salaries for all 2-star officers and above with effect from 1 April 2016. The Government have accepted the recommendation that there is no change to the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

**Judiciary**

The Government have accepted the review body’s recommendation of a 1% salary increase for the judiciary.

**Senior civil service**

The report makes clear the need to take a more strategic approach to senior civil service reward, including better targeting of resources and greater focus on the total package. We welcome this analysis which will inform the civil service workforce strategy.

The Government have accepted in full the recommendation of the Senior Salaries Review Body to introduce an in-year contribution award scheme for up to 10% of staff within current cost limits. This will provide a closer link between pay and performance by enabling departments to provide instant financial recognition for outstanding contribution.

We recognise the concerns of the Senior Salaries Review Body on the pay overlap between delegated grades and the bottom of senior civil service pay band 1. The Government believe that individual departments are best placed to assess the pay position of individuals within their own senior civil service cadre, and indeed the needs of their own delegated grades, and to decide how to prioritise the resources available to address any pay issues.

We have therefore accepted in part the recommendation on raising minimum salaries. The Government accept the increase in minima for pay bands 2 and 3. For pay band 1, a £2,000 increase in the minimum salary would restrict the flexibility that departments have asked for to enable them to target the resources available. Instead, the Government will prescribe an increase of £1,000 and ask departments to give serious consideration to raising salaries by more based on their individual business needs.

Similarly, the Government have accepted in part the recommendation on a flexible framework for base pay awards, but do not support an across the board budget of 0.94%. Instead, as well as raising staff to the new pay band minima, departments should have the flexibility they have asked for to target the remainder of the 1% award to meet their own business needs.

This package of proposals for 2016-17 provides the right balance between necessary pay restraint and the need to recruit and retain people of the right calibre. It gives departments flexibility to target pay increases within the 1% average award, enables them to reward outstanding performance and will help them to recruit and retain people in business critical roles.

Very senior NHS managers

The report recommends that the Department for Health determines what level of pay increase is appropriate for this year. Such very senior managers are mainly employed by national arm’s length bodies.

The Government have decided to request arm’s length bodies to target the use of the 1% pay award to address both specific local recruitment and retention issues, and reward individual performance.

We will also proceed with the roll out of the new arm’s length body executive and senior manager pay framework, as set out in our evidence to Senior Salaries Review Body.

We are grateful to the chairman and members of the review body for their work on this year’s report. Copies have been laid in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS693]

**Staff Counsellor for the Security and Intelligence Services**

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I have appointed Julian Miller as staff counsellor for the security and intelligence agencies. He will start in May 2016. He was deputy National Security Adviser in the Cabinet Office from 2010 until his retirement in 2015. Previous posts included Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary, Chief of the Assessments Staff in the Joint Intelligence Organisation and director strategy and resources in the Ministry of Defence.
Julian Miller succeeds Desmond Bowen, who has served as staff counsellor since April 2009. I would like to thank Desmond Bowen for his service over the past seven years and the support and guidance he has provided to the staff of the security and intelligence agencies during his tenure.

The position of staff counsellor for the security and intelligence agencies was created in 1987. It is a non-statutory appointment. The post holder is available to be consulted by any member of the agencies regarding matters of conscience about the work of their service, or a personal grievance or other problem which has not been resolved internally. Staff in certain other Departments closely involved in intelligence work are also able to consult the staff counsellor on matters of conscience about their work, provided that such matters arise from or are related to the individual’s access to intelligence.

[HCWS694]
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Nuisance Calls: Calling Line Identification

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): My hon Friend, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Baroness Neville-Rolfe), has made the following statement:

On 12 January 2016, the Government published a consultation seeking views on a proposal to amend the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 to make it a requirement for direct marketing callers to provide Calling Line Identification (CLI). This followed a commitment by the Government to impose such a requirement, subject to consultation, during the passage of the Consumer Rights Act 2015, and forms part of the Government’s strategy to tackle the problem of nuisance calls and to protect the vulnerable and elderly in society who are most impacted by this issue.

I am today publishing the Government’s response to the consultation, a copy of which will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The overwhelming majority of respondents to the consultation were in favour of the proposal and agreed that it would improve consumer choice and would make it easier for the regulator to take enforcement action against those who breach the rules. The consultation can also be found here.

I am therefore also laying before Parliament a statutory instrument amending the 2003 Regulations so as to implement the proposal. The requirement to provide CLI will come into force on 16 May 2016.

The Government are clear that there is no silver bullet to the problem of nuisance calls, but we are committed to working closely with regulators, industry, consumer groups and others to raise awareness and develop practical solutions to this complex issue.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

[HCWS699]

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Joint Transport and Environment Informal Council

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Today my noble hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth) has made the following statement:

I attended the Joint Transport and Environment Informal Council in Amsterdam on 14 and 15 April. The main focus of the meeting was on the future of European transport, the challenges in the transition to a zero-emissions economy and the steps that should be taken in the EU to develop a sustainable and smart transport and mobility system.

On 14 April, Environment Ministers were invited to discuss “Green Mobility” and the possibilities of hastening and scaling up the transition towards cleaner fuels and zero-emissions mobility. I outlined the UK’s approach to the future development of new car CO2 emissions regulation that promotes a quicker transition to low emission vehicles. In parallel, Transport Ministers were invited to discuss “Smart Mobility” and asked in particular to offer reflections on the proposed Amsterdam declaration on connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs), where Department for Transport officials offered support. Discussion focused on the ways Europe could adopt a more co-ordinated approach to ensure the technologies would be developed with inter-operability in mind and the main challenges with respect to legislation, co-operative intelligent transport systems, liability, data protection and privacy.

Following lunch, I participated in a joint visit to an Innovation Expo showcasing more than 200 projects and innovative designs on various topics. I then attended a joint Transport and Environment interactive session on Innovating for the Future where Ministers were invited to explore future scenarios for smart and green mobility, and discuss their priorities for achieving these future scenarios.

The following day, Transport and Environment Ministers were invited jointly to discuss the follow up to COP21 in international aviation and shipping. The focus was on how both Transport and Environment Ministers could best work together, and how Europe could contribute to negotiations at the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Overall,
there was positive momentum during this discussion, with Ministers recognising the link between international aviation and shipping emissions and the long term goal set out in the Paris agreement. In the context of the negotiations to agree a global market-based measure in ICAO, Ministers also recognised the importance of achieving carbon neutral growth of international aviation from 2020 and the inclusion of a review mechanism to increase ambition over time. There was strong support for progress in the IMO to agree a global system to collect data on fuel consumption of ships and subsequent development of a work plan to identify international shipping’s fair share of global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Transport Ministers also met to discuss how the transport sector is, or will be, affected by border controls in the Schengen area. This session touched on transport security presenting member states with the opportunity to convey their condolences following the recent tragedy in Brussels and also to exchange views on transport security measures.

 văn to the work it is progressing with the European Investment Bank to help farmers manage global price volatility and manage risk. Any other business items

Germany introduced the AOB item on combating food fraud in the EU, which was an update on a joint project undertaken by Europol and Interpol. There was support for the paper by 13 member states, including the UK.

Austria, supported by 12 other member states, tabled an item on the negotiation of the association agreement between the European Union and Mercosur. The Commission highlighted the benefits of new trade deals and noted a new impact assessment is being prepared.

Luxembourg introduced an item on the 38th Conference of EU Paying Agencies where it was concluded that audit procedures needed to be stabilised and longer term simplification needs to continue. The UK intervened, echoing calls for more proportional sanctions and simpler audits.

Lithuania presented the outcome of the political forum on rethinking the food supply chain. It concluded that national laws should be used to strengthen supply chains.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
April Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): My hon. friend, the Minister of State for Farming, Food and Marine Environment (George Eustice), represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 11 April in Luxembourg.

Two fisheries items were presented. Firstly, by the presidency, on the framework for the collection, management and use of data in the fisheries sector. Commissioner Vella, DG Environment, presented the second item on the proposal on the conservation of fishery resources and the protection of marine ecosystems through technical measures. Most member states, including the UK, welcomed moves to increase regionalisation and to simplify the legislation. The UK and Denmark mentioned the need to allow enough flexibility to take account of the development of new technologies and techniques.

Moving on to agriculture, Commissioner Katainen, DG SANTE, explained that there are opportunities for agriculture in the fund for investment and innovation for 2015-2018 in particular through the European fund for strategic investment (EFSI). member states generally welcomed the further financing options and were keen to explore how EFSI could be used.

Commissioner Hogan, DG Agriculture, updated member states on the market situation support measures. During this agenda item four related AOBs were addressed: the crisis in the dairy market; the modification of the implementation rules to be provided for the planned support scheme for the fruit and vegetable producers with regard to the embargo established by the Russian Federation; the extension of the final date for submission of aid applications; and pigmeat exports to the Russian Federation.

There was a full round of interventions from member states who maintained their existing positions on the market crisis. The UK, Denmark and Sweden stressed the need for longer-term solutions, many of which are already under way such as the opening of new markets with international trade deals. The UK also referenced

TRANSPORT
Vehicle Emissions

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I wish to inform the House that the Government have now concluded the Vehicle Emissions Testing Programme and we have published our findings.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport informed the House on 10 November that we had established this important programme following the revelations that Volkswagen had been using software in their cars which caused the engines to behave differently during emissions tests compared to real world driving. Not only has this caused disruption and distress to the 1.2 million Volkswagen Group users in the UK, it showed a lack of regard for the serious health consequences of nitrogen oxides (NOx) emissions and caused significant damage to the trust consumers have placed in car manufacturers across the country. It was vital that we immediately started a UK investigation into whether other manufacturers were using equivalent prohibited devices and more broadly to better understand why emissions results in the real world were significantly different from those tested under laboratory conditions.

Our testing programme was designed to test a range of the best-selling passenger diesel cars. We selected an independent and representative sample of vehicles to test in a variety of conditions using the latest technology. We appointed Professor Ricardo Martinez-Botas, of Imperial College London, to provide independent academic oversight of the work.

Importantly, the tests have not detected evidence of test cycle manipulation strategies as used by the Volkswagen Group from other manufacturers. However, tests have found higher levels of NO emissions in test track and
real world driving conditions than in the laboratory for all vehicles, with results varying significantly between different makes and models.

Although the progressive tightening of European emissions standards has substantially reduced harmful pollutants from vehicles, existing laboratory tests designed to ensure these emissions limits are met have been shown to be inadequate. However we have already secured a tough new real driving emissions test in EU legislation. From next year, vehicles will have to meet emissions limits in real driving conditions across a wide range of typical operating conditions. This will improve consumer confidence in manufacturers. The results from our testing programme further confirm that the UK was right to push for the early introduction of these tough new limits.

Even before the introduction of the new limits, we are urging manufacturers to introduce new technologies to reduce emissions sooner than the new EU regulations require. Some manufacturers have announced that they intend to make changes to vehicles already in use, to improve emissions, and will offer this to customers on a voluntary basis. We welcome this and encourage action from other manufacturers.

We will continue working to ensure that the new rules for real driving emissions and type approval are robust, deliver the expected outcomes and that manufacturers behave consistently. In addition, this year the Department for Transport will be establishing a new programme of market surveillance testing which will seek to ensure that products entering our markets fully comply with the law.

I am appearing at the Transport Select Committee’s inquiry into vehicle type approval this afternoon where I will be happy to explain these findings further.

I have placed copies of this report in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

[HCWS700]
**BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS**

**Higher Education Student Support: England**

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): Today I am announcing that the Government will extend student support in England to an additional group of students.

This decision follows a ruling of the Supreme Court on 29 July 2015 that it was unlawful to refuse an individual student, Ms Beaurish Tigere, a loan solely on the basis that she was not settled in the UK. Most students secure support by virtue of their having such status. Ms Tigere did not, but had as a matter of fact been resident in the UK from an early age and had completed her primary and secondary education here.

The Government have consulted on the creation of a new category of eligibility for student support based on long residence in the UK to implement the Supreme Court’s judgment in respect of students in a materially identical position to Ms Tigere. I am grateful to those who responded to the consultation which closed in January 2016. The comments we received were taken fully into account, and helped us to refine the initial proposals.

Settled status will remain the most common route for students to become eligible for student support, but those with a period of long residency in the UK will now also become eligible.

Student support will now be available for those persons who are:

- under 18 years of age and who have lived in the UK for at least seven years prior to the first day of the first academic year of their course; or
- aged 18 years and above who have either spent at least half their life in the UK or at least 20 years in the UK prior to the first day of the first academic year of their course.

In all cases, the students would also need to demonstrate three years’ ordinary lawful residence in the United Kingdom immediately preceding the start of their course, and meet other relevant eligibility criteria, to be able to access student support.

We are planning to lay amending regulations shortly so that this change can take effect for the 2016-17 academic year.

We also plan to make identical changes to the regulations setting out the residency rules for advanced learner loans and the postgraduate masters loan for the academic year 2016-17.

These changes will enable students who have lived in the UK for a long period of time to continue their studies.

Higher education is a devolved matter and therefore the devolved Administrations will need to consider how the Supreme Court’s ruling affects their funding systems.

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**TREASURY**

**UK Bilateral Loan to Ireland**

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to the bilateral loan to Ireland as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 March 2016.

A written statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was issued to Parliament on 15 October 2015, *Official Report*, column 22WS.

**Countesswells Development Limited: UK Guarantee**

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): The UK Guarantees scheme was announced in July 2012 with spending cover provided through the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012, receiving Royal Assent on 31 October 2012. The scheme provides a sovereign-backed guarantee to help infrastructure projects raise debt finance. Guarantees for up to £40 billion in aggregate can be offered under the initiative.

The Government are confirming that they have approved the provision of a guarantee for up to £86 million to the Countesswells project for the construction of over 3,000 homes on the Countesswells site in Aberdeen.

The Government will report to Parliament on the financial assistance given in line with the requirements set out in the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012.

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**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Hillsborough**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The determinations and findings of the fresh Hillsborough inquests are being announced today. The jury are responding to 14 questions as part of a general questionnaire and responding to two questions in an individual questionnaire related to each of the 96 people who lost their lives in the tragedy. The questions in the general questionnaire and the individual questionnaire are listed below. It is my intention to make a full statement to Parliament tomorrow.

Question 1: Do you agree with the following statement which is intended to summarise the basic facts of the disaster?

“Ninety-six people died as a result of the Disaster at Hillsborough Stadium on 15 April 1989 due to crushing in the central pens of the Leppings Lane Terrace, following the admission of a large number of supporters to the Stadium through exit gates.”

Answer “yes” or “no”.

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[HCWS701]
Question 2: Was there any error or omission in police planning and preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission in police planning and preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April 1989 which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 3: Was there any error or omission in policing on the day of the match which caused or contributed to a dangerous situation developing at the Leppings Lane turnstiles? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission in policing on the day of the match which may have caused or contributed to a dangerous situation developing at the Leppings Lane turnstiles? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 4: Was there any error or omission by commanding officers which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission by commanding officers which may have caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 5: When the order was given to open the exit gates at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium, was there any error or omission by the commanding officers in the control box which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. When the order was given to open the exit gates at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium, was there any error or omission by the commanding officers in the control box which may have caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 6: Are you satisfied, so that you are sure, that those who died in the disaster were unlawfully killed? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 7: Was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 8: Were there any features of the design, construction and layout of the stadium which you consider were dangerous or defective and which may have caused or contributed to the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Were there any features of the design, construction and layout of the stadium which you consider were dangerous or defective and which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 9: Was there any error or omission in the safety certification and oversight of Hillsborough stadium that caused or contributed to the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission in the safety certification and oversight of Hillsborough stadium that may have caused or contributed to the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 10: Was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday FC (and its staff) in the management of the stadium and/or preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday FC (and its staff) in the management of the stadium and/or preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April 1989 which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 11: Was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday FC (and its staff) on 15 April 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed at the Leppings Lane turnstiles and in the west terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. Was there any error or omission by Sheffield Wednesday FC (and its staff) on 15 April 1989 which may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed at the Leppings Lane turnstiles and in the west terrace? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 12: Should Eastwood & Partners have done more to detect and advise on any unsafe or unsatisfactory features of Hillsborough stadium which caused or contributed to the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question is “no”, please answer the following question. Should Eastwood & Partners have done more to detect and advise on any unsafe or unsatisfactory features of Hillsborough stadium which may have caused or contributed to the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 13: After the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the police which caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. After the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the police which may have caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

Question 14: After the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the ambulance service (SYMAS) which caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

...
If your answer to the question above is “no”, please answer the following question. After the crush in the west terrace had begun to develop, was there any error or omission by the ambulance service (SYMAS) which may have caused or contributed to the loss of lives in the disaster? Answer “yes” or “no”.

The questions in individual questionnaire are:

Question 1: What was the medical cause of the person’s death?

Question 2: Please state the time of death for the person. This should be stated as a bracket between (i) the last point in time when it can be established that the person was probably alive and (ii) the point in time by which it can be established that the person had probably died.

[HCWS702]
The Public Administration Select Committee’s report “Who’s accountable? Relationships between Government and arm’s length bodies” highlighted the complex system for the administrative classification of arm’s length bodies. In their response the coalition Government acknowledged these issues and committed to addressing them through a review of the classification system.

Today’s report endorses the guiding principle that the classification of a public body should be determined by the degree of freedom it requires and recommends changes to the current classification framework. From now, new bodies should be set up within this framework and existing bodies will adapt to it overtime. The Cabinet Office guidance on classifications has been updated to ensure that these changes are applied consistently.

The summary of findings and recommendations outlined in the report follow extensive engagement with Government Departments, public bodies and others, as does the accompanying guidance.

Copies of both the report and the guidance have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS705]
at the European Council on 17-18 March 2016, was noted; as was the ongoing work to tackle irregular migration from Africa to Europe, including through the action plan agreed at the Valletta summit on migration on 11-12 November 2015.

Lunch with UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Over lunch, Ministers exchanged views with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Filippo Grandi, on global challenges posed by mass migration, and on implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement on migration.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers exchanged views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership countries and on preparations for the forthcoming EU-Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting on 23 May.

Topics discussed included reform programmes in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and the work of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the OSCE Chair-in-Office to de-escalate the recent violent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh.

EU Iraq/Syria/Daesh strategy

Ministers agreed to Ms Mogherini’s proposal to discuss counter-Daesh at the May Foreign Affairs Council and to agree Council conclusions. This would complement a planned discussion on Syria. In response to my call for a detailed assessment of progress, Ms Mogherini also agreed to task the EEAS and Commission to produce an assessment of implementation of the EU’s Syria/Iraq/Daesh strategy to help prepare for next month’s discussion.

Libya

The EU welcomed the arrival of the presidency Council in Tripoli on 30 March, and expressed its support for the Libyan political agreement which considers the Government of National Accord (GNA) as the sole legitimate Government in Libya. The EU reiterated that it has a package of immediate support totalling €100 million to the GNA, making clear that areas of support will be defined and prioritised in close co-ordination with the GNA and the UN. Council conclusions on Libya made reference to a possible civilian CSDP mission to support the Libyan security sector, and consideration of enhanced support that could be provided through EU Operation Sophia, for example through potential capacity building for the Libyan coastguard.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

- The Council approved the agenda of the 41st session of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP)—EU Council of Ministers, which will take place in Dakar (Senegal) on 28-29 April 2016.
- The Council adopted a decision extending the mandate of Fernando Gentilini as the European Union special representative for the middle east peace process until 28 February 2017.
- The Council adopted a decision extending the mandate of Peter Burian as the European Union special representative for central Asia until 28 February 2017.
- The Council adopted a decision extending by 24 months, as of 31 January 2016, the validity of national permits for entry and stay granted by member states for the temporary reception of certain Palestinians.
- The Council adopted a decision supplementing the statement of reasons for its restrictive measures against Bank Saderat Iran.
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL (DEFENCE)

Countering hybrid threats

The Council adopted conclusions, welcoming the publication of the joint communication on countering hybrid threats, underlining the need to mobilise EU instruments to prevent and counter hybrid threats to the EU, its member states and partners, such as NATO.

EU-NATO co-operation was highlighted as essential, with EU tools well placed to complement those of NATO to support member states and allies. Member states will reflect on the document further before considering next steps, including implementation.

Central African Republic

The Council adopted conclusions that approved the establishment of a new military training mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), to contribute to the country's defence sector reform as led by the UN.

The mission, based in Bangui has a mandate of two years. EUTM RCA will build on the work of the EU military advisory mission (EUMAM RCA), working towards a modernised, effective and democratically accountable Central African armed forces.

Capacity building in support of security and development

The Council discussed the EU’s efforts to find options for funding instruments for capacity building in support of security and development in order to enable partner countries and regional organisations to prevent and manage crises themselves. Defence Ministers noted that a public consultation was currently underway on the wider initiative. The European Commission also detailed progress towards a security sector reform framework, the adoption of which was anticipated in mid-2016.

EDA steering board

Defence Ministers also met in EDA steering board format. Ministers were updated on the implementation of key tasks and next steps, which included: the policy framework for defence co-operation; hybrid threats; preparatory action for common security and defence policy-related research; and the European Commission’s upcoming European defence action plan.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs: post-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council was held on 21 April. My right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister and I attended on behalf of the UK.

The Council began with an adoption of the A items, including the formal adoption of the passenger name records (PNR) directive, which the Government welcome. I have always been clear of the importance of PNR and strongly believe that this directive will enable all members of the European Union to work even closer together to tackle terrorist threats.

The Commission then presented its smart borders proposals and communication on “stronger and smarter information systems for borders and security”. On smart borders, the Council agreed to work towards achieving political agreement by the end of the year. Given that the UK does not participate in the borders aspects of Schengen, we will not take part in these measures.

On the information systems communication, the focus was on improving interoperability of data systems. The majority of member states agreed with the position I set out, prioritising improving data quality in existing systems and ensuring that appropriate data sets could be easily “washed” against each other. I also emphasised the need to further strengthen co-operation between member states on two important areas: first, non-Schengen states, including the UK, need to be able fully to share important removal and entry ban data with Schengen states; second, the need for more proactive and systematic sharing of criminal records data of people convicted of offences relating to terrorism and serious organised crime.

Member states also agreed on the need to ensure the right quantity and quality of information is provided to EU systems, such as the second generation Schengen information system—SISII. I supported these calls, while noting that provision of this information remained a matter for member states.

The presidency reiterated the importance of the political commitment to data sharing and concluded that the next step would be the development of a “roadmap” on improving information sharing, which it intended to present for adoption to the June JHA Council.

The Commission then introduced its communication on security. The Commission stressed that this would not in any way affect member states competence for security matters and highlighted the need for effective implementation of existing initiatives, including on tackling firearms, and for better data sharing and threat analysis.

I welcomed the focus on making better progress on practical initiatives and underlined that responsibility for national security lies solely with member states.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the Commission communication on the reform of the Common European asylum system, in particular options for changes to the Dublin system.

There was considerable opposition to any radical change to the Dublin system and no consensus on the preferred option for change. Views among member states were diverse and several opposed relocation being a part of any new system. The Immigration Minister set out the UK’s clear view that the existing principles of the Dublin system should be retained and shared the concerns of many others about relocation: any crisis relocation mechanism must be kept separate from the existing Dublin system. The Government do not support relocation as it is the wrong response to the migratory pressures the EU faces. It undermines the important principle that asylum should be claimed in the first safe country and does not address the causes of illegal migration.

After lunch, there was a progress report on the proposed European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK’s position in relation to Schengen we will not participate in this measure. However, we support the efforts by member states to improve management of the external border of the EU. The presidency would now open “triilogue” negotiations with the European Parliament and reaffirmed its intention to reach agreement with the Parliament by June, in line with the deadline set by the European Council.
Discussion then turned to EU-Turkey migration. The presidency reaffirmed the need to speed up the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement of 18 March. The Commission stressed that they were working on securing guarantees for non-Syrians returned to Turkey.

A number of members states stressed the need for strong security checks on individuals coming to the EU. Frontex highlighted its role in returning 325 irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey on 4 and 8 April. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) reiterated the request for longer deployments and stated that they needed 50 or 60 people to facilitate relocation from Greece and Italy.

The Immigration Minister announced a new package of support for Greece, in particular 75 personnel ready to be deployed. The UK would also launch a new scheme to resettle children at risk from the middle east and North Africa. Several hundred would be resettled in the first year with a view to resettling up to 3,000 by the end of the Parliament.

The Immigration Minister set out that making the EU-Turkey deal work was vital and the inadmissibility procedures needed to be applied appropriately to avoid undermining the agreed approach. The EU needed to ensure that it was possible to return all nationalities to Turkey. Helping to develop the Turkish asylum system was also a top priority.

The presidency concluded that there was agreement to increase the quantity and quality of pledges to EASO and Frontex, and that attention would need to be given to the possibility that migratory routes may shift, especially towards the central Mediterranean.

The priorities for me now include acting upon the series of important recommendations coming out of the consultation that I have just completed. I will be undertaking a series of visits to developing countries working to address this issue, looking to support efforts—particularly where rates of violence are extremely high—and to learn where innovative approaches are seeing dramatic reductions in violence. The UK has some way to go before we see our international goal of eradicating violence fully achieved too, and I see a critical part of my role as drawing together the best evidence from experts tackling this. Thank you to all of the ministerial colleagues and parliamentarians working alongside me on this critical agenda.
**Observations from the Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans (Mark Lancaster MP):**

The Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans announced on 18 January 2016 that, as part of the Government’s prosperity agenda, the MOD is committed to releasing land to contribute towards 55,000 new housing units this Parliament. Kneller Hall is one of the first 12 sites to be announced for release.

Kneller Hall is the home of the Corps of Army Music and the Royal Military School of Music, the facilities in which they are currently housed are ageing, inefficient and not fit for purpose. The site is not designed for its current use. To bring the site up to standard for its current use would cost at least £30 million. The commandant of the Royal Military School of Music has confirmed other sites would provide far better and greatly improved training facilities for his people.

The residents of Twickenham and its surrounding boroughs are not alone in their strength of feeling and, indeed, in their drive to want to retain a local Defence presence. However, the simple fact is that these plans are not directed at individual communities, regiments or bases. This is about ensuring that Government funding is in the right place to ensure the continued defence and security of the United Kingdom.

This is very much a two-stage process. The first stage is establishing that there is not a military use for the site, but the second stage—the future—is for the local community to decide. The MOD will engage with the local community and the local planning authority to decide the best future for the site, which will not be released before 2018.

**EDUCATION**

**School hall for East Markham Primary School**

*The petition of residents of the Newark constituency.*

Declares that East Markham Primary School should have a hall provided by the County Council; further that the petitioners believe that the education of the children at the school is suffering for a variety of reasons including that there is no indoor PE or indoor drama facility, there is overcrowding and that the school has no ability to put on plays, concerts or performances for groups larger than around 30 people; and further that a local petition on this matter was signed by 186 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Nottinghamshire County Council to provide a school hall for East Markham Primary School.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robert Jenrick, Official Report, 17 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 1299.]

**Observations from the Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):**

The provision of a school hall would fall under the responsibility of the local authority as it is a local authority maintained school.
On 9 February 2015, the Government announced £4.2 billion for capital investment in the condition of our schools over the period 2015-16 to 2017-18. This is in addition to the £5.6 billion that had already been announced for the current spending period, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

As well as providing funding directly to schools for their immediate priorities, much of this funding is allocated at local authority level so that investment decisions can be taken locally. Since 2011-12, Nottinghamshire County Council has been allocated some £39.8 million of capital support for investment in the condition of its maintained schools. In addition, a further £6.2 million was announced for 2015-16, and the same amount has been indicatively allocated for each of the 2016-17 and 2017-18 financial years. From 2015-16, we have used the information we have collected through the property data survey in allocating funding for school condition needs. This provides bodies responsible for school buildings (e.g. local authorities) with a fair share of funding according to their needs.

The school also has the option of becoming an academy and joining a multi-academy trust, which could make it eligible to benefit from the Trust’s capital allocation. We would therefore recommend that the school continue to discuss its concerns with Nottinghamshire County Council. Now that the next three years of schools condition allocations have been announced, we trust that they will be able to give greater assurances in developing a plan to address the school’s investment needs.

The Department for Transport (DfT) is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for their roads (under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984) therefore they are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. They are also responsible for ensuring that their actions are within the law, and are accountable to local people for their decisions and their performance.

Local highway authorities can introduce 20 mph speed restrictions through 20 mph zones, which need to have specified types of traffic calming features at specific minimum frequencies or they can introduce 20 mph speed limits. The Government’s Strategic Road Safety Framework recognises that these speed restrictions can be useful in the right locations but that these are local decisions which should be made in consultation with local communities.

The DfT provides guidance for local authorities in Speed Limit Circular 01/2013 – ‘Setting Local Speed Limits’ which is at:


Traffic calming, is also a matter for local authorities. The DfT has published guidance on the design of traffic calming measures is in Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/07 ‘Traffic Calming’ which is available on the DfT website at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-transport-notes

Any concerns should be taken up with the local authority. Ministers and officials have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities except where specific provision has been made in legislation.

TRANSPORT

Speed limit in Southampton Itchen

The petition of residents of Southampton Itchen,

 Declares that there should be a reduced speed limit in residential areas of 20 mph where local residents request it from their local authorities, in particular in Southampton Itchen; further that many residents fear someone will be seriously hurt or killed if action is not taken to reduce the speed limit; and further that the case for reducing the speed limit is even more serious on roads where there is no off road parking and where cars cause blind spots and significantly increase the risk to pedestrians.

The petitioner therefore request that the House of Commons urges Southampton City Council to listen to the people of Southampton Itchen and implement a programme of 20 mph speed limits in residential areas where residents request them.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Royston Smith, Official Report, 15 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 922.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):

The Department for Transport (DfT) is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures.

Third crossing (Lowestoft)

The petition of residents of Waveney,

 Declares that the decision to build a new crossing over Lake Lothing in Lowestoft is agreed with all possible speed; further that there is significant local support for a new crossing; and further that the new crossing would positively impact upon the local economy in Lowestoft and the surrounding area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to confirm funding for the project in order for construction to begin as soon as possible and be completed by 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Peter Aldous, Official Report, 08 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 247.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Robert Goodwill):

The Chancellor confirmed funding at the spring Budget of £73.4 million for the third crossing at Lake Lothing in Lowestoft. This represents 80% of the estimated scheme cost of £91.7 million, with Suffolk County Council taking responsibility for meeting the remaining 20% and any increases in costs beyond that. Funding
for the scheme will come from the £475 million Large Local Major schemes fund that was included in the spending review 2015. This funding is part of the Local Growth Fund.

Now that funding for the scheme has been agreed Suffolk County Council can commence with the required statutory processes and the Department for Transport expects Suffolk County Council to further develop the business case for the project. Funding is subject to final business case sign off before construction can begin.

It is the responsibility of Suffolk County Council, as scheme sponsors, to complete the delivery of the scheme to the desired timescales.
Petition

Thursday 14 April 2016

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

The petition of residents of the UK,
Declares that the EU and the US should stop negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; further that the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada should not be ratified; and further that an online petition on this matter was signed by 330 residents of Harborough.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure on the EU and its Member States to stop negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and not ratify the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Edward Garnier, Official Report, 26 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 240.]

Observations from the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry):

The importance of free trade

The Government support trade liberalisation and continue to encourage EU efforts to negotiate a number of bilateral free trade agreements, including the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) which was agreed last year and EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) which is still under negotiation.

Increased trade and investment are two of the main drivers for growth, which is the best way to ensure British workers can enjoy better living standards. Businesses which export are more productive, resilient and pay higher wages.

CETA

CETA is an important step in delivering our trade agenda. It will deliver jobs and growth for the UK, with independent analysis suggesting the deal could be worth up to £1.3 billion per year to the UK economy. The negotiations for CETA have now ended. The European Commission recently announced the completion of the CETA legal review, and the text of the agreement is currently undergoing translation into all EU languages. More information about CETA, including the text of the agreement, is available on the Commission’s website: http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policyin-focus/ceta/.

TTIP

A trade and investment agreement between the EU and US is an opportunity to create the largest free trade area in the world. It would bring huge economic benefits on both sides of the Atlantic, increasing trade and investment, creating jobs, reducing prices and increasing choice for consumers. Independent analysis shows that an ambitious agreement could give an annual boost to the UK economy of as much as £10 billion each year. This translates to additional disposable income of about £400 per year for an average UK household. That is why we are pushing for a broad agreement that eliminates the vast majority of tariffs on trade between the two markets and reduces other unnecessary barriers to trade such as duplicate regulatory tests and customs delays.

There continues to be extensive consultation on TTIP. The European Commission has run four online public consultations to get stakeholder views on various elements of the deal. The Commission is holding regular meetings with an advisory group, as well as civil society groups throughout the negotiations.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) also holds regular meetings with organisations representing those with a particular interest in TTIP. These meetings help to inform the Government’s approach to the negotiations and include representatives from business representative bodies, the Trades Union Congress and non-governmental organisations such as War on Want and Friends of the Earth.

Petition

Wednesday 27 April 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Child Support Agency

The petition of Mr Craig Bulman,

Declarations that the petitioner received unacceptable treatment from the Child Support Agency (CSA); further that the petitioner incurred significant losses and damages including loss of job as result of this treatment; further that the CSA has admitted to acting in an inappropriate manner towards the petitioner and awarded a consolatory payment of £5,000 in April 2012; further that this payment does not suffice to cover loss of earnings or impact on the petitioner’s health and life; and further that the petitioner is unable to access legal aid or other legal assistance to challenge the value of this payment, which the petitioner believes is against his rights under Article 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is integral to upholding the rule of law.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure on the Child Support Agency to re-examine the case of Mr Bulman and award a much higher compensatory payment for the loss, harm, injury and damages caused as a result of their unacceptable treatment of the petitioner.

And the petitioner remains, etc. — [Presented by Mr Alan Campbell.]
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 27 April 2016

DEFENCE
Air Cadet Organisation and Gliding

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Air Cadet Organisation and Gliding on Wednesday 13 April 2016.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Does the Minister wish to check the note that has been passed to him?

Mr Brazier: Thank you, Ms Vaz. I failed to say how much I have enjoyed speaking under your chairmanship for the first time. The note says that cadets are assisted through squadron and wing HQ budgets. Similar to when they attend annual camps in mainland UK, food and accommodation are free to cadets.


Letter of correction from Julian Brazier:

An error has been identified at the end of my winding up speech in the debate on Air Cadets Organisation and Gliding on 13 April 2016.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Brazier: Thank you, Ms Vaz. I failed to say how much I have enjoyed speaking under your chairmanship for the first time. The note says that cadets are assisted through squadron and wing HQ budgets. Similar to when they attend annual camps in mainland UK, travel and accommodation are free to cadets.